



Gnarly Vines set up shop in Brooklyn's burgeoning Fort Greene neighborhood



Downtown LA's BottleRock



Chicago's Red & White makes a splash in Bucktown

RETAIL ON THE FRINGE

By Jean K. Reilly

launching a new wine store in an edgy neighborhood is a daunting proposition for even the most seasoned veterans.

These days, more and more brave souls are opening fine wine shops in fringe neighborhoods, places that were once served only by liquor shops lined with bullet-proof glass. We talked to some adventurous retailers in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles about what made them decide to open a shop where they did and what their experience has been on the frontier of fine wine. >>>

VINO FINO

MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS / HARLEM, NEW YORK CITY

Just below a long stretch of housing projects that mark the southern edge of West Harlem sits tiny Vino Fino, a pocket-sized wine store with an eclectic collection of value-oriented wines. The shop is owned by Jorge Alberto Alvarado and run by his entire family. Most buying

decisions are made by Alvarado's son, Jorge Antonio. The father is a first generation immigrant from Ecuador while the son, a graduate of the Fashion Institute of Technology, sports the radical hairstyle, uber-trendy clothes and multiple facial piercings of the design-hip crowd. He also has the easy confidence of today's twenty-somethings who were told repeatedly as children that they could do anything and grew up to believe it. With no prior experience in the wine business, no formal training and nary a single winery visit under his belt, Jorge Antonio is not the least surprised to find himself running a wine store.

Why did you think you had a good place for a fine wine store?

>>> It was near home (*laughs.*) And we were tired of going to 112th Street to get wine.

What has the neighborhood reaction been?

>>> “FINALLY!” The neighborhood was enchanted. People would say, “it’s so fantastic you’re open, it’s so great.”

Tell me about your customers.

>>> They’re well-educated. Probably 60% are associated in some way with [nearby] Columbia University. They want something different, not Sauvignon Blanc or Chardonnay; they’re open to something new.

What are some of the things that have contributed to your success?

>>> We have customer service that people come back for. Some people are already intimidated to come into a wine shop, you don’t need to make them feel like they don’t know anything about wine. You catch up with them and find out what’s going on with their lives. We contribute to local charities, local theaters and the local church. We try to bring more friends to the shop when we can. We do two to three tastings per week with live music. The music definitely brings in people who might otherwise have walked by.

What advice would you give to someone trying to open a new wine store in an up-and-coming neighborhood?

>>> License. License. License. It took us 22 months. Be friendly. Don’t be afraid of obscure grapes, don’t play to what everyone wants and don’t underestimate your customer. If you’re willing to teach your customer, they’re willing to learn.

RED & WHITE BUCKTOWN, CHICAGO

Nathan Adams and Sean Krainik supply Chicago’s Bucktown with wines from small producers and lesser-known places. Long a working-class neighborhood with a large immigrant population, Bucktown is now seeing an influx of white-collar residents. Adams and Krainik came armed with 14 years of experience in the wine restaurant sectors and a close connection to the local area.

Why did you think you had a good place for a fine wine store?

>>> We had a working knowledge of the neighborhood; we’ve lived here for 11 years each. Everyone agrees this neighborhood is on the brink of turning. Plus we got lower rent and a better long-term lease deal.

What has the neighborhood reaction been?

>>> 100% positive across the board. We’ve already built a local following.

Tell me about your customers.

>>> Young professionals and first time families; about 25% are Latin. We wanted to be a neighborhood shop and not a box store. We picture the early 1920s when you had your local grocer and your local tailor and you worked with them your whole life.

What are some of the things that have contributed to your success?

>>> We do a lot of work with the local BYOB restaurants. We understand their cuisine and they send people to us. The wines that we choose are not things you’re going to see all over the city. We’re also working a lot more with organic and smaller production wines. We are building one-on-one relationships with each patron. When they come in, we know their names, we know their kids and we know what they like to drink.

What advice would you give to someone trying to open a new wine store in an up-and-coming neighborhood?



The facade of VINO FINO in West Harlem

>>> Make sure your business plan is air tight, make sure your margin is as picked over as possible and run a tight ship. Negotiate your lease. Make sure you have enough cash to start out with. You have to make sure that you can pay for your stock 30 days down the road. People don’t take into account that high-end wines don’t turn quickly. Inexpensive wines move. Do everything you can yourself. We had friends come in and get it going. That saved us a crazy amount of money.

POPULAR PICKS: RED & WHITE

- BURLENBERG PINOT NOIR, MARCEL DEISS, ALSACE, \$52
- IDENTITY CRISIS WHITE SYRAH, BABCOCK, SANTA BARBARA, \$18
- TEMPRANILLO, PROTOCOLO, LA MANCHA, \$9
- CHARAMBA, QUINTA DA AVELEDA, DOURO, \$9

BOTTLEROCK DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES

BottleRock is a combination wine bar and wine store in downtown Los Angeles (with another location in Culver City), long a ‘don’t walk alone at night’ area that has recently been energized by the addition of new sports and entertainment venues. Owner Fred Hakim, a veteran of LA’s off-premise market, hired Ernie Roth to design the space, who chose a lime green theme and employed many materials composed of recycled wine bottles and corks. The result is a super-chic décor, appropriate for design-conscious Los Angeles.

POPULAR PICKS: VINO FINO

- SIERRA CANTABRIA, RIOJA, \$15
- HIGH NOTE ELEVATED MALBEC, MENDOZA, \$16
- PETIT BOURGEOIS SAUVIGNON BLANC, HENRI BOURGEOIS, LOIRE, \$14
- VIOGNIER, VILLAGGIO, SICILY, \$11

Why did you think you had a good place for a fine wine store?

>>> Downtown is an up-and-coming area in L.A. The Staples Center opened two years ago so we have good walk-in traffic.

What has the neighborhood reaction been?

>>> It's been very good. I was really surprised to see that 50%-60% of our business is destination.

What are some of the things that have contributed to your success?

>>> We have 1,000 different SKUs. We will open any bottle as long as the consumer buys two glasses (at the wine bar). We taste a lot of wines and only take the wines that really 'wow' us. Craft beer is another segment of our business. We sell boutique, small production beers from around the world, many in large format.

What advice would you give to someone trying to open a new wine store in an up-and-coming neighborhood?

>>> The primary thing it takes is passion. Every business takes passion but with this one you really have to enjoy it. And you have to respond to the neighborhood and the economy as they change. And patience; it took us two years to put BottleRock Downtown together.

POPULAR PICKS: BOTTLEROCK

- RIESLING KABINETT ÜRZIGER WÜRZGARTEN, MÖNCHHOF, MOSEL, \$20
- MALBEC/BORDEAUX BLEND, CLOS DE LOS SIETE, MENDOZA, \$18
- CAHORS, CHÂTEAU LA CAMINADE, \$26
- CRÉMANT D'ALSACE ROSÉ, ALLIMANT-LAUGNER, ALSACE, \$21

GNARLY VINES

FORT GREENE, BROOKLYN

Gnarly Vines is located in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Here, trendy new restaurants and gut-renovated brownstones vie with public housing and run-down bodegas. The store

has a sleek, edgy look that owner Brian Robinson describes as "a warehouse space with a little bit of a raw gallery feel."

Why did you think you had a good place for a fine wine store?

>>> I just wanted to work where I live. There are a number of bullet-proof glass stores but at the time I opened there was just one wine store here and I thought there was room for another.

What has the neighborhood reaction been?

>>> Overwhelmingly positive. The store is in the section of Fort Greene that is the most remote from transportation; people are hungry for local businesses, so they're fiercely loyal. Soon after I opened, two elderly African American women came in and they were struck with the décor. One of them said, "Can you imagine 30 years ago a place this beautiful on Myrtle Avenue?" They had tears in their eyes. I had tears in my eyes.

Tell me about your customers.

>>> Demographically they are very diverse. I would say my clientele is open-minded and adventurous. I tried a 3-liter bag-in-box of Côtes-du-Rhône and Fort Greeners got it right away. They understand the benefits of finding wines that are flying under the radar. And that's my orientation in buying. I don't think good wine, spirits or food can be made on a large, industrial scale.

What are some of the things that have contributed to your success?

>>> It's very important to support the local organizations. The immediate neighborhood was overwhelmingly supportive, so I take care of the people who take care of me. We have a knowledgeable, down-to-earth approach. In too many shops, people push the wines they like. What's important is what the customer likes. He's the one drinking it.

What advice would you give to someone trying to open a new wine store in an up-and-coming neighborhood?

>>> You have to keep your costs low and the way to do that is to do a lot yourself, to be in the store. I think it's important to stick to the basics and run a good shop.



Gnarly Vines, Brooklyn, NY

POPULAR PICKS: GNARLY VINES

- VIÑA BORGIA, CAMPO DE BORJA, \$7.50
- DOMAINE SAINT-VINCENT SPARKLING WINE, NEW MEXICO, \$10
- FROM THE TANK CÔTES-DU-RHÔNE, VIGNERONS D'ESTÉZARGUES, RHÔNE VALLEY, \$40/3L BAG-IN-BOX
- VINHO VERDE, FAMEGA, PORTUGAL, \$7

ADVICE FOR THE WINE RETAIL PIONEER

- > Know your neighborhood.
- > Drive a hard bargain on your lease. In the current economy landlords can be very flexible.
- > Be sure you know which permits you need and how much time it takes to get them.
- > Consider a temporary alternative use of the space while you are waiting for your permits.
- > Be realistic about how much help you can afford and what it will cost you.
- > Pick a design scheme appropriate to your neighborhood. If a professional designer is not in your budget, consider tapping design-savvy friends for advice.
- > Review your projected margins. Check that they are competitive for the area yet high enough to cover your costs.
- > Make sure you have sufficient cash to carry you through your first few months. Remember that in most states distributor credit is limited to 30 days and if you go beyond that you will have to pay COD.
- > Get to know your customers.
- > Invest in your local community.