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A Wine Shop Thrives for Decades in its Upper West Side Terrace

Posted by Jeff Mirabella on January 20, 2022 @ 2:00 pm · 1 COMMENT

A photo of the storefront from the early 1970s hangs on a wall in A Wine Shop by Sam Dorsett.

By Sam Dorsett

Vino is regional, soil, climate, atmosphere, and traditions affect a wine's taste. Is something wine-experienced scent. For the past 50 years, a similar concept has been at work on the Upper West Side.

The result isn't a wine, rather, it's a wine shop – one that has grown successfully by embracing the terrace of the neighborhood.

A Wine Shop is located at West 100th Street and Columbus Avenue (more on the 68-47 square mismatch later). From the start, in 1969, my great grandparents wanted to reflect the diverse nature of the community," says Joseph Brown, the fourth generation of the family to run the business, along with his father, Steven.

For example, the store's broad inventory reflects the neighborhood's kaleidoscope of tastes, culture, and cuisine. The shop boasts thousands of wines and hundreds of liquors. Vintages from France, Spain, and other further regions are well represented, of course, but so are unexpected wine regions, including Morocco, Lebanon, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Lanaiac, Kipraki, and Bella and Bergamotto are among the Asian Indian regions represented at A Wine Shop.

"It's unique, a neighborhood store big enough to cater to many different tastes," says Brad Rogers, a Fifth Avenue salesperson. "Younger people looking for natural wines, organic wines, orange wines, along with an older group who want traditional varieties."

Still, the heart of the relationship between store and community is something more than an experience inventory.

"Upper West Side people like a broad range of prices, items, and they like a lot of customer attention," said Patricia, a long-time customer and long-time O'Neill employee. "The shop is very Upper West Side."

Paula, another customer, echoed the sentiment. Happily buying a bottle of Don Perignon for a birthday celebration – her own – she let the Rag know, "My friends know I'm a regular here and they get special service, and this store has very good service." (Happy birthday, Paula.)

Customer service is important, but, frequented O'Neilers for their prices. Gently rocking a baby carriage while assuming the shelves, he added quietly, but for details the baby, "The store reflects the neighborhood vibe. It's inviting."

There's a reason for that. Several, really. The staff, like the community they serve, is diverse. Some of the employees have been with the store for years, some for more than two centuries. Today, O'Neilers emplaoyees hail from close to home and around the world, including Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Trinidad.

A O'Neilers employee, Maggie, Dalton, and Brad Rogers a combined 100 years of service and experience with the company.

And once they come to O'Neilers, employees tend to stay. Dalton, a salesperson who prefers her last name not be used, has been with the shop a decade. Her colleague Brad Rogers has worked there 15 years.

The camaraderie born of those long tenures is something the neighborhood appreciates. Brad, who lives in Washington Heights, and Dalton, who lives uptown, agree, "Like the neighborhood, it's friendly. People seem to like each other." Or regular, Kate calls the staff by their first names and says her trust in the shop is so strong that she doesn't bother comparing prices with other wine stores.

Bart Hopkins, who worked at O'Neilse for 27 years, notes that "The Upper West Side has a very sophisticated palate, and often ahead of the rest of the country."

The neighborhood's collective palate drives another practice central to the O'Neilse experience: The salesperson are also the shop's buyers.

"We have a sensed interest in selling wines we feel people would like to drink," says Hopkins. (Notice that word just, not simply drink.) "I feel connected to the wines... look at them as my children."

David Wiener, a member of the board governing the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, at the Bed-Stuy Restoration Plaza, 1363 Fulton St. (photo by Jeff Mirabella)

Meeting the needs of a community that on review David Wiener describes as "full of artists, highly educated people, life-long learners" is also why O'Neilse appropriate pan-continental from organizations like the Wine & Spirits Trade and the Institute of Culinary Education.

"We specifically want to engage the curiosity of our customers and deconstruct the snobbery of wine," says Oscar Garcia Shmaiko, who heads the shop's Retail the Latest Series Series. The program features talks and tastings of wines chosen for their distinct craftsmanship, quality, and value. As he puts it, "Sharing interests makes customers friends of O'Neilse."

An ongoing dialogue between shop and community? That's terrior in action.

Christian, a regular who's lived just a few blocks from O'Neilse for 45 years, says the shop is "a staple, one of the few places that has remained."

A place that has remained, it stores whose offerings, staff, and way of doing business mirror the diversity and sense of history that define the UWS. This explains a lot about O'Neilse's staying power.

Still, there's another explanation the mismatched name (O'Neilse, Inc. and West 100th Street). We had to ask. Yih, my great grandfather, Sam, just thought it sounded better than 68" and Street, wrote a gifs.

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Jim thank you for insight and your immediate support for local solutions. Without small business we would be in a very different community. Without small business, small business lobby, small business lobby, small business lobby