

The World's Greatest Wine City

New York City is the capital of many things: finance, art, fashion, "everything" (if you ask a New Yorker). It's also the world's wine epicenter. Writer Ben Cheever tastes his way down Broadway; Peter Hellman reports on the best wine lists and shops.

Web-Exclusive: [Google Map of 20 Great Manhattan Wine Shops](#).

BY BENJAMIN CHEEVER

In New York City, shoppers speak in tongues. Not because they're crazy, and not because they were born again, but because, more often than not, they were born somewhere else. They come to the same place, but they do not become the same. This sort of diversity (coupled with extreme proximity) has helped make New York the cultural and economic capital of the world. It's also what has made New York the wine capital of the world. Or that's my theory, at least—and one I decided to test by taking a stroll down Manhattan's most iconic avenue, Broadway, believing that there I could drink (or at least admire) superb wine from every corner of the globe.

My trek started in the far, far north of Manhattan at **PJ Wine**, whose motto is, "Extraordinary wines. Exceptional prices." This famous Inwood outpost with some of the best wine prices in town is located on Broadway near 204th Street, across from the Dyckman Farmhouse, the oldest Dutch Colonial-style farmhouse still actually standing in Manhattan.

PJ doesn't evoke the distant past, unless by distant past you mean the 1950s. There's a plate-glass window, a linoleum floor and aluminum carts for shoppers to pile their treasures into. When I arrived, all the wine consultants were busy planning a tasting. I was given the beautifully colored 2006 holiday catalog to read while I waited. As big as a place mat and 51 pages long, with maps of the wine world throughout, the document did as much to educate as it did to sell wine.

When wine director and senior wine consultant Dominique Noel was finally available, I asked him to recommend a wine that cost \$100. "\$100?" he repeated, "\$100 is good." One wine he said he would recommend without reservation was the 1995 Viña Real Gran Reserva Rioja from Spain. (PJ specializes in Spanish wine.) "It is clear, medium ruby in color with only the slightest hint of brick in the rim," he read to me from the catalog. It was also from one of the finest, oldest vineyards and could be consumed immediately or aged for five to 10 years. There was one disappointment: It cost only \$36.

With money still in my pocket, I took the subway way downtown. Or rather, I took it downtown about 100 blocks, to the Upper West Side.

Peering into the window of **Martin Brothers Wines & Spirits** at 107th and Broadway, I realized what I'd missed at PJ Wine—an impressive setting. A great wine shop should give a contact high. Martin Brothers does. In fact, it looks like a billionaire's private library, stacked with wine instead of books. There are acres of varnished wood, and each bottle is gorgeously displayed. Mike Martin, the proprietor, beams at customers from behind his counter.

The "brothers" are Mike's uncle Roberto and father Orlirio, who fled Castro's Cuba in the 1960s. By 1985, the two had transformed their bodega into a liquor store. Mike later turned the wine and liquor store into a serious wine shop. "We have wines from New Zealand," he told me. "We have wines from Hungary and a really nice selection of Greek wines, too."

"What's the most expensive bottle I can buy?" I asked, fingering the change in my pocket.

"There are two. One is a 1959 Mouton for \$1,950. That's one thousand nine hundred and fifty dollars. And I have two bottles of an 1870 Château Lafite. They'd cost you 12 grand."

Mike, 35, told me he was ecstatic about the expansion of the wine world, though he hedged when I asked him to name his favorite wine region or country. Then he broke down. "I always say it's important to try wines from all over the globe, but for me, all roads end in Bordeaux."

When I reached **Gotham Wines & Liquors**, between 93rd and 94th streets on the west side of Broadway, there was a truck parked in front. Half the sidewalk was blocked with cases of wine. Inside, customers

moved among the workers who were rushing about, shifting cases, filling shelves. Gotham's owner, Costas Mouzouras, was striding the plank floors like a captain at the helm of his ship. I asked if it was possible to actually buy all the best wines in the world. He paused for a moment. "Yes," he said. "At this store, yes."

"We go from \$4 to as much as you can afford," he said in response to my next question.

"How much would that be?"

"As much as you can afford," he said and laughed. "There's never a limit."

He told me he sold a lot of Italian wines, though that week's featured wines were from all over—California, France and South Africa. I did see a bottle of 2001 Barolo from the highly regarded Piedmont producer Beni di Batasiolo for \$35 that I considered taking along as I made my way downtown, but I decided I didn't want to get too weighed down—not just yet.

My next stop was **Vintage New York**, on the other side of Broadway at 93rd Street. The first Vintage New York opened in Soho seven years ago; this Upper West Side branch, which sells New York cheese as well as wine, has been in business for the past four years. The wood at Vintage New York was blonder than at Martin Brothers, but I found that same pleasant library, even churchy, atmosphere I had come to expect in a good wine shop.

I found Vintage New York's manager, David Wilson Sewell, deeply committed to his wines but not self-righteous. Wherever you go, he said, the best wine is local. Which means drinking New York wine in New York. "All wine is local. It just depends on where you're drinking it," he said.

Doubting Thomases skeptical about the quality of New York wines can taste before they buy at a bar in the back. I was particularly keen to try the 2003 Lenz Merlot and the 2005 Channing Daughters Chardonnay, both wines from highly regarded Long Island producers.

Afterward, I needed to take a rest and have a bite to eat. I'd planned to meet a friend at Owest, at 84th and Broadway; however, the restaurant wasn't open for lunch, the woman who answered the door said. But then, we were in New York. If you go the whole day and nobody shuts a door in your face, then you're probably not in New York.

So we lunched instead at Docks Oyster Bar & Seafood Grill a few blocks away. I ordered a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. Yes, yes, I know that's not a wine you'd expect to drink at an oyster bar, but I was in the mood for something red. It was the 2002 Jewel Cabernet, and it was red and adequate but by no means dazzling.

After lunch I took the subway down to 72nd Street and Broadway and walked over to **Beacon Wines & Spirits**, where I found that unlike its suffering cousin the independent bookstore, the independent wine store is thriving. Still, manager Billy Kim did sound a note of concern. Not about his store, which gave every sign of robust economic health, but about the wine industry at large. Billy told me he feared the mass production of crude crowd-pleasing wines, sold in great quantity and at lower cost.

"Usually when big corporations make the decisions in winemaking, it's not about the philosophy of winemaking; it's all about profits at the end of the fiscal year," he said darkly, though he spoke with great warmth of the proprietors of small vineyards.

He also joined the chorus of voices I'd heard up and down Broadway about wine's new geographic frontiers. For example, Billy told me he thought Portugal was particularly promising. Beacon offers 20 different Portuguese wines, and Billy led me through a maze of dark-wood wine displays to the section devoted exclusively to Portuguese reds. "I've never been disappointed by a Portuguese red," said Billy.

Since the wine shop sits on Broadway directly across from Fairway, the über-supermarket, many of Beacon's customers arrive lugging bags of groceries. They often reveal their dinner plans, and Billy or another member of the staff will recommend an appropriate wine. And yes, it's likely to be something Portuguese. Like the 2004 Quinta do Vallado, a well-made red from the Douro region (\$16). "It's got the acidity of an Old World wine that works well with food but is also very pleasant to drink," Billy said.

From Beacon, I walked south to Columbus Circle and into **Columbus Circle Liquor**, a small shop tucked away at 57th and Broadway. General manager Phill D'Ancona seemed pleased to meet me; in fact, he seemed generally pleased with life. "I'm doing a story," I told him.

"Yes, yes," he said, "Good. Good."

"I understand you have some rare wines; in particular a cult Loire producer?" I asked.

"Huet?"

"H...u...e...t."

"Ahhh!" he said in recognition. "Huet Vouvray."

"Do you still carry it?"

"Sure! Sure! You want to see?"

I did, and I was taken to a rack stocked with Domaine Huet Vouvray. Behind the display was a sign explaining that the wines were organic.

"So Huet's wines are organic?" I asked.

Phill laughed. "These wines are fantastic. They just happen to be organic. I don't really subscribe to the organic theory. Lafite is not organic." According to Phill, he has been in the business for 17 or 18 years. "You like the wine business?" I asked.

"The business?" he repeated and then answered his own question. "The wine part is fun. I'm also in the music business. The wine part is fun. The music part is fun. The business? Ehhh!"

From 57th Street, I shot way downtown to **Warehouse Wines & Spirits** at 735 Broadway, which is just below Astor Place. There was an Italian flag in one window and a number of bottles priced at \$3.99. Inside were wines from Mexico and Japan. The manager said he could not speak with "the press." So "the press" headed south once more.

But there were no wine shops to be found. So I took a jog over to West Broadway, where I found two rather exceptional stores.

Soho Wines & Spirits has been at its present location (461 West Broadway) since 1978 and Vic Masullo has been working there the full 29 years. "We used to have starving artists with no money; now we have investment bankers who have more money than they know what to do with," he said.

Vic could think of only one part of the world that doesn't produce wine: Central Africa. There are Algerian wines, Moroccan wines and South African wines. "There's no wine from the Congo, as far as I know," he said. There is also wine from Canada, Brazil, Uruguay, Mexico, and India. "Even the English make wine now," Vic mused. The English always drank wine, of course, but they used to let the French make it for them.

Since I was almost at the end of my road and had room in my backpack, I bought a bottle of the 2004 Oriol Il Gattopardo Nero d'Avola for \$25 that Vic particularly liked. (This smoky, juicy Sicilian red is one of several wines produced by a group of international winemakers under the Oriol label.)

I headed south once more to **VinoVino** at 211 West Broadway. VinoVino has been in business for a little more than a year. It's a stylish little store with a welcoming wine bar. I found a bottle of Sine Qua Non the Papa, a California cult wine made by superstar producer Manfred Krankl, for \$299. "This is a big, huge, huge, huge wine. Really hedonistic," manager Melissa Sutherland told me. We talked about wine diversity. She agreed that wine is a notable exception to global sameness. "It's not like you go into a wine store and you see wines by Gap. There's something deeper and more dimensional in the grape," she opined.

I decided to add one more wine to my backpack, so I spent \$55 on a bottle of 2001 Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona Pianrosso Brunello di Montalcino, which had garnered high praise from the press (Robert M. Parker, Jr. gave it 93 points). I've been in love with Brunellos for years, and though I've never been to Montalcino in Tuscany, where they are made, I can imagine the stony hillsides on which the Sangiovese grapes are grown.

I walked the rest of the way to Battery Park, at the tip of the island, but not a single wine store caught my attention. It had been a long, long journey. From one end of Manhattan to the other, and also right around the world.

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