



SPECIAL SECTION  THE NEW COCKTAIL EXPERIENCE



A
WHOLE
New
WORLD OF WINE

By Christina Staalstrom

*August Sebastiani,
President of
3 Badge Beverage*

NOT SINCE PROHIBITION HAS THE DRINKS INDUSTRY FACED SO MANY CHALLENGES AND DISRUPTIONS AS SEEN OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS DURING WHAT WILL FOREVER BE KNOWN AS THE COVID-19 CRISIS.

The landscape has changed, forcing the wine market into unknown territory. In an industry where social interaction is key, and consumer buying decisions are so often experience-driven, there is an immediate need to redefine how business is done. From the way consumers first learn about wine to that initial sip, the questions of *how, why, where, and how often* are not as obvious to even the most seasoned wine professional.

Historically, progressive change follows times of turmoil. We have seen both the wine retail and restaurant businesses come together and seize opportunities to reinvent themselves as never before.

“Our industry has certainly shifted into the digital age over the last several months. There is no turning back,” says Scott Jove, vice president sales and marketing for Shaw-Ross International Importers. “Consumers have always been eager to learn more about wine, and the internet provides a platform for producers to tell their story in their own words.”

We’re seeing digital content being developed and delivered at a new rate for the industry. Inboxes are flooded with invitations to participate in meetings, sales pitches, virtual seminars, cocktail classes, winery visits, and happy hours. Jove feels it opens up opportunities not explored earlier due to geographic and physical barriers. “Consumers can participate in the comments and find themselves exchanging with winemakers, bartenders, and celebrities alike—a mix of compelling digital assets and live online interactions is the way to a consumer’s palate.”

Italian wine producer Mezzacorona has long had a presence on the U.S. market and concedes that while the current environment certainly has broadened the options for engaging with consumers, “wine is incredibly sensory-oriented and inherently social, and it is difficult to replace physical gatherings and interactions.” This holds especially true for sparkling wines, although toasting with a glass of Rotari, may not be the same without the

obsession with home-cooking. Sheltered-in-place and working-from-home, the family dinner at home have become a thing of the present. What that means to each individual is different, but we are drinking more often at home, and those habits are not going to change on a dime.

Thankfully restaurants quickly realized that the “take-home” market was an opportunity to get

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human touch, the hope is that as more customers enjoy restaurants again, they are willing to treat themselves to a bottle of wine.

We should also consider that Americans may not be running back to restaurants right out of the gate because the whole country seems to have found an

your dish into people’s homes and allowing restaurants to sell alcohol as part of a food delivery package has introduced a whole new, at times more elevated, way to “take-out.” By adding wine or a cocktail, the meal, once again, becomes more like an experience than just dinner.

August Sebastiani, President of 3 Badge Beverage, says, "There's a continued focus on at-home cocktailing. Whether a more convenient ready-to-drink cocktail or an involved production of multiple ingredients, we definitely see a surge in that space." Like many suppliers, they are supporting their sales partners by increasing digital and social media efforts alongside producing "drinks-to-go-pouches that help bars and restaurants sell to customers where available."

As for wine offerings, where permissible, restaurants have included their wine menu as part of their take-out strategy, and small bottle formats prove to be the ideal pandemic size. A 375-ml bottle is easily shipped for virtual tastings and offers an apparent take-out substitute for the by-the-glass offering. Whether or not this trend will continue is too soon to tell, but Americans are drinking, and that is good for our industry.

We asked Sebastiani what he would say to a winery launching a product in this landscape. "As we are launching two in the upcoming months, we would say that there are opportunities right now to sell new products and brands. While the general landscape of the on-premise industry has its challenges, we are seeing retail buyers who have increased business and are still curious and interested in learning about and tasting new brands (from a safe distance)."

As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, and that has been true for everything we've seen over the last few months. Now let's see what greatness lies ahead.

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