

WESTCHESTER'S GREAT WINE SHOPS

An oenophile's guide to some of the best-priced, best-stocked wine stores

By Jean K. Reilly and Saxon Henry



Rochambeau Wines & Liquors

For some, Westchester is a one wine-shop county. Zachys's tony Scarsdale address and its many years of attention-grabbing advertising have helped create a certain aura around the well-known store. But we set out to uncover some of the quieter treasures in Westchester wine retailing. We conducted an unforgiving examination of the availability of rare wines, the accessibility of knowledgeable staff and each shop's pricing policy. We visited eleven wine shops: We found the following among the best and unearthed a few surprises along the way.

But what Westchester wine inquisition can begin in any other locale than Scarsdale?

ZACHYS WINE & LIQUOR

Many people say they shop at Zachys because the sales staff is most knowledgeable, more knowledgeable than anywhere else. To test this theory, we posed some moderately difficult questions to several unsuspecting salesmen.

"Do you have any French Sauvignon Blancs?" we asked.

"No, France doesn't really grow Sauvignon Blanc, except in Bordeaux," we were told.

The correct answer: "Yes, we have Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, and other Loire Valley Sauvignon Blancs over there."

Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé are very common French wines made from the Sauvignon Blanc grape and Zachys has a large selection of them. Not surprisingly, we found the tendency of the sales staff to give faulty advice to be annoying. At other shops, these questions sent the clerk scurrying for the wine buyer or the owner, who always provided a knowledgeable answer.

The good news: Zachys's reputation for snobbery is undeserved. We, for example, didn't perceive the slightest bit of difference in the way we were treated when we asked about Dom Pérignon—or when we inquired about eight-dollar table wines.

More good news: With 5,000 items in inventory, Zachys has the largest selection in the county.

The disappointing news? Prices. We found non-sale items to be five to 10 percent above the average, excluding the numerous items included in the shop's frequent 16 percent-off sales. And, despite the tendency toward high markups, Zachys offers one of the stingiest case discounts (five percent on a single case) among the 11 stores we visited.

But make no assumptions when it comes to pricing on high-end wines at Westchester wine shops: We found there to be little consistency in the pricing policies for top-notch wine both within each store and from one store to another. For example, the shop's price of \$49 for the 1997 Lynch Bages was the lowest we found. Yet, another vintage of the Lynch Bages, the 1989, was priced at a whopping \$239 at Zachys, while a number of competitors sell it for \$165 to \$175.

George McGough, sales manager of Zachys Wine and Liquor in Scarsdale, in The Fine Wine Room.

PHOTO: JEAN K. REILLY



SUBURBAN WINE & LIQUOR STORE

Suburban sports a super-store atmosphere with roomy aisles that make for easy browsing. While the shop has a few rare California wines and some vintage French collectibles, it specializes in mid-priced wines from a number of countries known more for value than prestige. The offerings of Chilean, Spanish and Australian wines are particularly impressive. Some crowd-pleasing favorites include the Sauvignon Blanc from Chile's Casa Lapostolle (\$8), Borsao (\$6) from Campo de Borja in Spain, and the Australian Shiraz from Black Opal (\$11). Other discoveries made by these value-hound buyers included the Dallas Conte Cabernet Sauvignon from Chile (\$10) and the Joel Gott Zinfandel from California (\$16).



Suburban Wine & Liquor Store

BEST-BET SHOPPING GUIDE

BEDFORD WINE MERCHANTS

Village Green
Bedford
234-6012

ROCHAMBEAU WINES & LIQUORS

389 Broadway
Dobbs Ferry
693-0034

SUBURBAN WINE & LIQUOR STORE

383 Downing Drive
Yorktown Heights
962-3100

VARMAX LIQUOR PANTRY

16 Putnam Avenue
Port Chester
937-4930

ZACHYS WINE & LIQUOR

16 E. Parkway
Scarsdale
723-0241

We found the wine director, Jeff Weissler, to be very friendly and knowledgeable, if perhaps not quite as impressive as the Varmax and Rochambeau cognoscenti. Jeff's sidekick, Mathew Kaess, who doesn't look old enough to buy wine, also surprised us with a well-informed steer. When we asked about the Dom Pérignon, he tactfully suggested the Grande Dame, which is in the same price-range, but is considered by most wine experts to be a significantly superior product. You could have knocked us over with a screwtop.

Owner Henry Ponzio chooses to place an emphasis on education, with weekly classes and frequent in-store tastings. Frontline prices are truly average, but Suburban has far and away the best loyalty program. Customers who purchase 50 different wines earn the right to receive a permanent discount of 10 percent on individual bottles and 20 percent on full cases.

VARMAX LIQUOR PANTRY

A broad selection, ease of shopping and a knowledgeable wine staff all combine to make Varmax an appealing destination. Varmax's prices were some of the lowest in our survey, and their appeal to the budget is enhanced with a ten-percent discount on as few as six bottles.



Roger Maxon (left) owner, and Marc Chasanoff (right), wine director, of Varmax Liquor Pantry in Port Chester

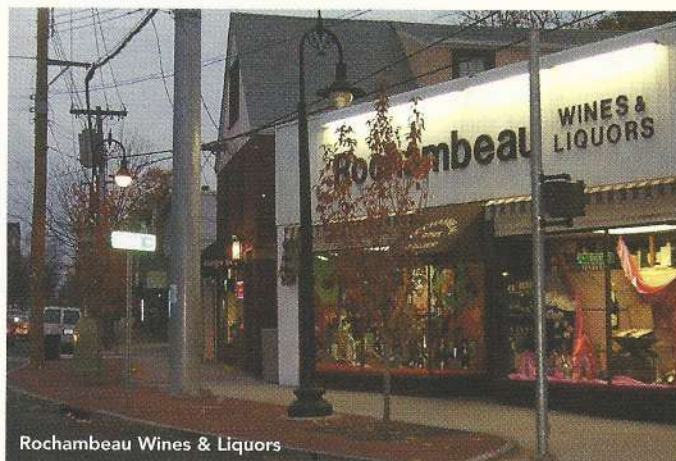
Marc Chasanoff, a sophisticated wine buyer with definitive opinions, has collected an impressive breadth in value wines, along with a few pockets of noteworthy items, including the Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand (\$23), the Côte-Rôtie from Michel Ogier (\$35) and a half-bottle of Beerenauslese dessert wine from radical Austrian winemaker Alois Kracher (\$20).

While not able to rival its neighbors in the breadth of Bordeaux, and with only a smattering of older bottles, the unusual premium bottles lie more in the way of recent Burgundies. Some highly regarded producers that oenophiles will

applaud include Domaine Henri Gouges, Domaine Jean-Marc Boillot, Jean-Noël Blagnard and Jean-Marc Blain-Gagnard.

ROCHAMBEAU WINES & LIQUORS

Rochambeau is a small shop with a look that reflects the colonial history of Dobbs Ferry. Despite an impressive collection of old and expensive Bordeaux, the atmosphere could not be less intimidating. Jeff Wooddy, the wine manager, is a wine geek's wine geek. Without actually conversing you into a trance, he spouts recommendations and evaluations at the slightest provocation. We were told that the large Burgundy collection was the product of the owner's Burgundy



buying disorder. We hear that there are treatments for this rare condition, but we hope none of them work because we appreciate the selection, which includes the Sauzet 1996 Puligny Montrachet "Les Folatières" (\$79), the Fontaine-Gagnard 1996 Chassagne Montrachet "Les Morgeots" (\$45) and the Bonneau du Martray 1997 Corton-Charlemagne (\$90). Rochambeau is also a haven for those who seek out family-size bottles, with magnums, jeroboams and other big boys stashed on the upper shelves.

In every category, the prices are the lowest we found. Other stores that carry a number of high-end wines had some average prices and a few that were unforgivably higher than the competition's. At Rochambeau, the fair pricing applies to all categories. However, if you are buying wine at a 15 percent case discount elsewhere, you will

achieve greater savings because Rochambeau gives little or no discount on cases. But the combination of knowledgeable help and consistently fair prices make this the best place in Westchester to shop for single bottles.

RULE #1: SHOP AROUND (ESPECIALLY IF YOU ARE OUT TO SPEND BIG BUCKS)

Before heading to the store, you may want to take a look through recent auction results on winebid.com. We were able to find nearly all of the expensive wines mentioned here for five percent to 40 percent less than the best retail price. Without leaving your computer, you can then check the price with several local stores that have Web sites, including Zachys, Bedford Wine Merchants and Suburban. While auctions are a wonderful playground for bargain hunters, keep in mind that it is worth paying a small premium to buy an item from a reputable retailer who will replace the bottle if the wine is off. Wines you buy at auction are sold "as-is."

BEDFORD WINE MERCHANTS

This small store on the Village Green in Bedford is truly a boutique wine shop, which special-

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COMING IN MAY

beautiful home & garden issue

beautiful home—an insider's look at a stunningly designed westchester residence

beautiful garden—a peek at a backyard that should have neighbors green with envy

county centenarians

100 years old and still going strong

hunting antiques in the county

a guide to the best stores to buy antiques

cars, cars, cars

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Great Wine Shops

izes in hard-to-find California wines. Many retailers make this claim, but Bedford Wine Merchants lives up to this billing with many bottles that rarely see the light of retail fluorescent. So how has Bedford Wine Merchants managed to obtain such a collection of unob-

RULE #2: FIND THE RIGHT GUY

It's unrealistic to expect to find any wine store swarming with true wine experts, but most stores have at least one, and he [no, we're not being sexist here, we actually found no wine gals] is usually worth seeking out. A good wine merchant will be able to recommend new wines that will suit your personal taste if you merely take the time to tell him the names of several wines you like. More importantly, perhaps, he will be able to recommend wines that will push you to expand your wine horizons without making you run to the nearest spittoon.

tainables? According to owner Arthur Wunderlich, by being among the first to recognize the greatness of some of these California wines at a time when the concept of fine wine was limited to French wine. Despite the presence of such an elite collection, we found the staff at Bedford Wine Merchants to be the most uniformly friendly of any we visited. Moreover, their prices on the types of wines most of us drink on a day-to-day basis are very much in line with other stores.

The collector's items at Bedford Wine Merchants often sport stiff markups, but include some impressive names, such as Williams Selyem 1997 Allen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$167), Turley 1998 Central Coast Duarte Zinfandel (\$119) and the Dalla Valle 1996 'Maya' Cabernet Sauvignon (\$643).

In its offerings of vintage Bordeaux, there are some bargains to be found at Bedford. For instance, the 1989 Cos D'Estournel, a stupendous wine, is a mere \$110 per bottle if 6 bottles are purchased, compared to \$136 at Suburban and \$189 at Zachys. **W**

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