

Forging a New Path: Campus Fine Wines discusses shifting their businesses during the pandemic



Campus Fine Wines is owned by two couples, Howard Mahady and Natalie Butler, and Andrea Sloan and Vin Scorziello; Howard and Andrea both brought years of experience in the wine industry to the local liquor shop. Campus is the place to go to find the coolest bottle of wine you didn't know about, whether your budget is \$10 or \$50. I caught up (remotely) with Andrea to talk about their store and their decision to only offer curbside and delivery during the pandemic.

Justin Hutchins (Motif): Describe Campus Fine Wines.

Andrea Sloan: Campus has been on Brook Street in Providence since 1974, but we bought it in July 2012. We focus on organic and natural wine and grower champagne, but we're a full neighborhood liquor store, so we also have the usual lineup of beer and spirits and everyday-bargain sections.

JH: Can you talk about your decision to move to curbside and delivery only, and your choice to remain that way even while other stores opened up?

AS: We had been watching this pandemic since January, when it was just a blip in the twittersphere. That's when we started ordering gloves, bleach, Lysol, etc... Perhaps that sounds like paranoia, but we

were reading what epidemiologists were saying, and it just sounded dire... So we were mentally prepared to close, and we honestly thought that we would be ordered to close, which never actually happened. We went to credit/debit only in the beginning of March, and then decided that we would close to the public before the pandemic was declared. We decided to do this because we couldn't justify putting our employees, ourselves or our customers at risk, especially when so little is known about this disease. We also lost Vin's (Andrea's husband) mom the day before the pandemic was officially declared in the US, so this isn't abstract for us, and the no funeral, no closure ("no days off cuz you're essential!") thing is really not fun. So we would like to avoid other people having to go through that same thing, if possible.

We also stay closed to the public for the same reasons we closed at the beginning: the safety of our staff and our community, especially when mask-wearing has become political, which is just extraordinarily stupid, but not at all surprising. But there's also the financial aspect; if one of us gets COVID, we have to close and quarantine for a minimum of two weeks. We don't know about anyone else, but that would be hard for us to weather.

JH: Give me an idea of what you had to do to run the business in the current format.

AS: We had to trust that our customers would not abandon us. And thankfully they have not! Then because our staff is so tiny, we reduced our hours and days that we're open to Tuesday through Saturday, noon - 6pm. There are only five of us here, and life is too damn short to work seven days a week, 12 hours a day.

Because we're curbside/delivery only, we really had to up our e-comm game, which meant creating an e-comm site. So there's been a lot of loading product and notes and praying that the inventory is accurate (narrator: the inventory is not always accurate). And we took advantage of 0% financing at a local Ford dealership and got ourselves a van, so we were able to increase our delivery capabilities substantially.

JH: What has the response been from your customers?

AS: It's been pretty fantastic, and we've even gotten new customers because of our business model during this crisis. The only people who give us grief (and some do, loudly, from the sidewalk) tend to be maskless and unfamiliar to us, which is why we stay curbside/delivery only.

JH: Campus is a very brick-and-mortar store, in the sense that it is rooted in the community. Have you found new ways to stay connected to the community? And how have you adjusted while being closed to the public?

AS: Probably not new ways, but we try to keep up with the newsletter every week, just for some sense of normalcy. But it's not easy, and it's frankly impossible to act like anything is normal. Instagram is generally our go-to for posting new items and sharing any bits of news. And we still chat in our doorway!

JH: What climate would allow you to feel comfortable opening your doors to the public again?

AS: That's difficult to say. We think our local government is doing a pretty good job at managing this pandemic, but there are some serious ignoramuses at the federal level, and we're just not sure how we're supposed to trust the info that trickles down. Then you have well-managed, science-appreciating

countries that re-opened only to shut down again. We're not infectious disease experts, but we think we're going to see a second wave, and we'd rather not rock the boat now.

JH: Tell us about the process of choosing wine for your store, and how you have adapted without tastings or trying new wines from sales people and suppliers.

AS: We do request things to try, and we've always sought out and asked for wines from producers and importers we know and trust, so it's not all that different from before. No tastings is a challenge, and there's not one of us here who is comfortable doing some Zoom video thing, so it's going to stay no-tasting for quite some time. But we do try to taste as many new items as we can as they come in so that we can accurately describe and confidently sell them. Unless it's some teeny tiny production allocated thing, which we rarely get to taste anyway!

JH: Campus Fine Wines is very active in social issues. In a time where many businesses are politically and socially neutral, why do you feel it is important to take the stands that you do as a business?

AS: As a society we've been trained to accept this notion that regular people aren't supposed to share political opinions (that's for the talking heads on TV!) and that "responsible" media isn't supposed to differentiate between truth and lies (that would show bias!), so that leaves us all at the mercy of the loudest yellers who are usually collecting hefty paychecks for their opinions. The rest of us are supposed to "stay in our lane." Why does Tucker Carlson get to express opinions but we don't? We have no intention of ceding our 1st Amendment rights to cable television and YouTube personalities, and our platform is just as or perhaps more valid than theirs; no one pays us for our opinions, but we know what's right. You either side with humanity or you don't. If you don't, there are plenty of other shops out there. And right now, more than ever, silence really does equal complicity.

JH: Can you explain the philosophy and choices you make in choosing wine, and why you think that is important?

AS: We try to support producers and importers with whom we already have relationships, and we generally go for real wine from real people. The industrial, corporate producers will be just fine without us, so we'd rather support the little guys, who tend to take a more ethical/responsible approach to farming and doing business.

JH: Say I'm getting into wine, and I want to explore wines in the natural category. How do I navigate all these crazy labels and even different colors?

AS: Haha, yeah it is a little nutty out there ... well, first, it's usually not super cheap. You *can* find natural wine under \$20, but it's not all that common, so be prepared to spend a little more, especially with the tariffs still in place. You want to know your importers, from old-school, like Louis/Dressner, to Jenny & François, Selections de la Viña, SelectioNaturel ... and then talk to your trusty retailer! People email us all the time now for recommendations, and that's a really good option when no one can do tastings. But natural wine is not all funky, murky, barnyard situations. We have plenty of flawless wines that are naturally made, so you don't need to have an out-there palate to enjoy them.

JH: Tell us the easiest way to get cool wine from you with the way you are currently operating.

AS: The e-comm (campusfinewines.com) is the easiest, but if you don't see what you want or you want more guidance, send us an e-mail or give us a call.

JH: Lastly, what's your go to wine of the moment?

AS: Well it's hot right now, so rosés and muscadets are no-brainers. We just got a fun Pipeño from Selections de la Viña, 2019 Estacion Yumbel Pipeno, 100% Pais from 150 year old vines, fermented and aged in 60-year old pipas (vertical, large barrels made from the native beechwood tree called Raulí). This is a chillable, lively, old-school, Chilean red that's perfect for summer.