



# Massachusetts Beverage Business 10.2008

Article By: Fred Bouchard

**ERIC BROEGE** • 44 • Owner, Buyer •  
Vintages, West Concord and Belmont

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*Still a painter and musician, Eric Broege is today a discerning buyer for his two small shops, one in formerly dry Belmont Center. Eric defends his passion for individualistic wines of distinctive terroirs (mainly in Italy, Spain, France) with strong opinions, articulate explanations and a simple, bold business plan.*

**NOTHING for EVERYONE** The big liquor store that has everything for everybody is kind of going away today. **One advantage of a small retail business is to hack away at the mountain of what’s not good, and to reassure your customers – usually not seeking what they find in other places – that whatever you sell is of good value and pure expression.** A few such shops around Boston, I think are BRIX, Vin Divino, Wine Bottega. If you have a small space, every inch is valuable. Our Belmont shop, with 600 square feet, has over 700 facings. **I don’t have room for anything I don’t want or wouldn’t recommend.** We ignore entire categories like Australia and South America. **Better have people come in and say, “I hear you have a reliable store. Sell me a good \$20 white to go with roast chicken.”** I expect we can fill such requests.

**PERSONAL SELECTION** Part of this is totally personal. I want to take pride in what I’m doing here, as a sort of wine curator. I want to develop a reputation as a good store. It won’t necessarily be paid in dollars right away, but has real meaning. You go into a restaurant and the food is what’s on the menu and the wine is what’s on the list. You don’t question it: you place trust in the chef and wine director. If I decide not to sell Shiraz, who’s to question it? But I do have to sell wines at different prices, even if I can’t have 200 facings in the \$10 to 12 range.

**VARIETAL CHARACTER** When we’re looking for flawless examples of varietal character, it’s hard to find many we can sell for that price. Muscadet is a sterling exception (Domaine de la Fruitière, Château Thébaud); Dolcetto (San Fereolo) and Cortese (Colli Tortinesi) are others. But such wines can be edgy and the real character can be off-putting. Lotsa minerals? Sour cherry? Not for everyone. The big four varietals in that price range are nearly always indifferent, bland and innocuous. Look at Pinot Grigios: some taste of the real deal (mineral) and some like dishwater. If somebody’s selling an oaky wine for ten bucks, I ask, “How’d the oak get in there?” If somebody says, “Sell me a \$15 Cab that tastes like Silver Oak,” I say, “Please go bug the guy down the street.” A wine may say one thing on the label but taste like something else entirely. This San Fereolo Dolcetto di Dolgiani is made by Nicoletta Boca, a woman with strong convictions about Dolcetto. It tastes something like a cabernet

with a bitter ending. If the label read 'Cabernet' it'd fly out the door at \$12, but it's something else, unique. I buy wines like this from importers like Adonna and Ideal, who buy directly from the farmer [ie, cut out middlemen brokers].

**SUBTLE COGNACS** Most of our business is wine; the rest is cheese, beer and spirits. We carry single malts, Cognacs and brandies. As with wines, I steer clear with Cognacs from brands that are expensive and must be obvious for people with little knowledge, preferring the understated and subtle. We have a serviceable selection for wine customers who want something excellent and individual for \$50 to \$75; spirits collectors will seek elsewhere. What do I like in a Cognac? I don't like them sweet and alcoholic. Cognacs have to be balanced: not so hot that your eyes water and not so sweet as eating toffee. I also wonder whether people look at the label, think "hmm, this is supposed to be good" and just knock it back. Do they think about what they're tasting?

**HOT COGNACS** I carry Tesson and Pierre Ferrand. Products that are not mass-produced are best for my store. Alfred Tesson [owner of Château Pontet-Canet] produced Cognac for big companies but decided to bottle some of his own. It's easy to sell grapes, but if you're committed to making high quality products, that's the way to go. Some of their bottlings are non-vintage blends that have all the components that make Cognac great – complex, smooth, aromatically compelling. [financial times 12/05 reported Tesson 'launched its own small but perfectly formed portfolio of lot-numbered Cognacs'.] When I've carried Hine, Remy, Martell, they don't sell, but these do. (Likewise, I'd go through 20 cases of Rijckaert's Côtes de Jura Chardonnay sooner than one of Kendall Jackson.) Ferrand owns all estate properties; they are pure, fine and honest (no caramel coloring); they're not showy, but elegant. Ferrand offers some very old vintages, 1914, mid-'50s. I'm also fond of the Pierre Ferrand Cognac-barrel-aged rums from Trinidad, Panama, Barbados, Guyana, which I never see in bars and restaurants.

**BIG and SMALL** Rinaldi, a favorite Barolo, is carried by Enomass (Vinifera), a tiny distributor with some good products. A lot of the wine business is set up in such a way that we're supposed to buy wines that help distributors move product. **My idea is that I'm in business to help my customers, not distributors.** If you see the [fill in any name here] guy every week, you're gonna buy what he sells, not necessarily what you really want. I say, "If you have no wine in your book that I want, then I don't want to see you." Since I don't run their business, or make their selections, I don't feel obligated to support an operation that isn't in the best interests of my business. **My obligation is to put the best products in my customers' hands,** not those that are in the best interest of my wholesaler.

**WHY BOTHER?** Two good reasons to buy a wine: 1 It tastes like what it is. 2 It sells at a good price. **Most shops buy stuff I would never put in my stores. A lot of wine that's produced should not even be made, and a lot sold should never be drunk.** If you're selling a wine that is not so good, I don't care if it's a one-on-five, or I get a trip to Chile, don't show it to me, I won't sell it! **To people who come in and say, "You don't carry my brand of chardonnay – don't you care about me?" I reply, "I don't carry that brand because I do care about you!"** It's ludicrous for retailers to think they're doing people a favor by buying only brands customers recognize.

**HUNT for REAL VALUE** A lot of good wines sit ignored in distributors' books because they don't follow fad and fashion. Big and small distributors have true gems; we're always hunting for them. Selvapiana, a great Rufina Chianti producer, was an excellent buy when Ideal carried it, but nearly doubled in price when Winebow picked it up (yes, a rising Euro had something to do with it). **So it's on us small retailers to sniff out whether such wines are still a good value** like Fattoria di Vetrice. I'm gratified to see that Gambero Rosso has been giving higher ratings recently to wines that are not just well-made (many achieve that now) but speak of upholding traditional autochthonous varieties. They used to praise wineries for simply raising standards of quality in outlying areas (Sicily, Mezzogiorno); now they seek out those who best represent their regions.

**VARIETAL AUTHENTICITY** In Belmont, one of the 14 cabinets is white Burgundy; in it are 20 French and 16 other window-opening examples. You give someone a taste of Walter Hansel's Russian River

Chardonnay one week and they may like it, but Marc Colin's Saint-Aubin the next and they may hate it. But our new world selections must serve as ambassadors – give a clue to what that varietal really is, hint at where it originates, give some semblance of that uniqueness. Another example: Edmunds St. John makes as good a replica of Northern Rhône syrah as I can find in California – elegant as pinot noir, not heavy and inky, but perfumed with pepper and blackberries, suave, light on its feet. Similarly, our California Bordeaux styles are not port-like – those low-acid, over-extracted wet dogs that just lie there – but graceful and, above all, balanced.

**GET a JUMP ON REVIEWS** Over time, your palate can go in a thousand different directions when tasting; it's key to be able to recognize a wine's quality – whether it's your personal preference or just a great example of what it is and that you can recommend. Since I don't wait for the wine advocate to come out to make my selections, I can secure quantities [before the dam breaks]. I'm not leaning on that crutch, and don't have customers hounding me for 95-point this or 90+ that.

**The NEW SPAIN** The first time I went to Spain was with Eric Solomon, so I got a great overview of Ribera del Duero and Priorat. My original understanding of Spain was the traditional alchemy of oak and grape, medium-bodied, a little oxidized. Eric promoted and then created with unconventional growers a fresher, richer fruit character, closer to Bordeaux. I respect his vision and was glad for the learning curve toward The New Spain. Our immersion in Italy with its vast variety of ancient and modern techniques, and tasting widely – such as verticals that go back 30 years with Borgogno and Conterno – helped me re-evaluate Spain with its long-aging wines.

**NO UNIVERSAL YARDSTICK** Viñas Lopez de Heredia produces the wine that they make, handfuls of tradition going into the bottle; it'd be hard to replicate without their conviction. I'd have to choose them over Artadi. [I ask: "Why Viña Bosconia over Pagos Viejos?"] It's hard to say, it's more unique; there's nobody in the world trying to create a wine like that: pale in color, long-aged, modest of body. The downfall of wine writers is that they tend to hold up a universal ideal for wine, a computer model of a high-scoring wine: saturation of color, extraction of fruit, assimilation of new oak. It's like they're touting a single way of looking at great wines, which all must have a checklist of these component parts, even if their fruit and tannis are a little different. And a lot of wines are made that way, constructed to formula, while dismissing some things that the wine has to offer.

**MYSTERY FACTOR** There's more to it than that. **I want a wine that I don't fully understand, that shows me something I never noticed the last time.** There are lots of 'great' wines that as soon as you get them in your mouth you know exactly what they are, they're not that complicated. They're not even interesting or compelling, they don't elicit deeper thought. That's what gives an edge to a wine for me. Viña Bosconia is delicate, minerally, has a particular piney aroma that I can't fathom. **It's unique, pleasurable, evokes a sense of wonderment.** Like a pinot noir rosé from [Sancerre producer] François Cotat. **You taste it, say 'wow!' and bells ring.**