

FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Wine tastings go digital under COVID-19

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Wine rack. Image credit: Sotheby's Wines

By DIANNA DILWORTH

Like many other sectors of luxury, the high-end wines and spirits business has moved mostly online at a time of COVID-19-related shutdowns.

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Not only are housebound consumers drinking more wine, but they are also contributing to a boom in wine sales online and in bricks-and-mortar stores. Readership of wine content is up and so are online auctions of rare tipples.

"We see the wines that are popping up in our Instagram and Twitter feeds and being advertised for sale via emails, and our impression is that people have traded up, and collectors are digging into their cellars, to find the most pleasure possible in difficult times," said Thomas Matthews, executive editor at *Wine Spectator*.

The places where people buy wine have shifted dramatically. Restaurants are closed. Winery tasting rooms are closed. Auction house in-person sales are cancelled.

"However, retail shops are doing booming business, both brick-and-mortar shops - in many states, wine shops are considered essential businesses - and especially online stores such as Wine.com," Mr. Matthews said.

"In some states, restaurants have been given permission to sell their cellar inventories at retail, and many high-end restaurants are offering rare and valuable wines at very attractive prices," he said.

Wine Spectator is the leading consumer magazine focused on the wine industry and lifestyle around the beverage.



Wine Spectator executive editor Tom Matthews

Drink up

While the economy is hinting at a recession, that has not stopped affluent buyers from purchasing wine.

Luxury buyers are still buying high-end wine at this time. Auction house Sotheby's said that its sales have remained strong.

"We have transferred \$6 to \$8 million of wine and spirits from live auctions to online auctions, to be sold between now and mid-June," said Jamie Ritchie, chairman of **Sotheby's Wine**, New York.

Last month, the auction house hit a world-record price for a bottle of Japanese whisky at its London *Finest and Rarest Spirits* sale. A bottle of *Karuizawa* 52 Year Old Cask #5627 Zodiac Rat 1960 sold for \$435,273.

Consumers are buying all wines at all price points.

"Overall, people are appreciating that wine is one of the great joys of life and enhances all occasions, whether its sharing a bottle with family at home or with loved ones over Zoom," Mr. Ritchie said.

"In our retail businesses, which remain open, we have seen people expand in terms of diversity and also increase the volume they are buying, as more people enjoy great wines at home," he said.

Sotheby's has auction and retail specialist teams working remotely, while warehouses and distribution services remain open, with all employees using all the necessary tools and equipment to protect themselves.

Sotheby's has also expanded its delivery options and reduced the shipping charges, so more consumers can more readily access wine.



Domaine Henri white wines. Image credit: Sotheby's Wines

Digital auctions zoom

Wine Spectator is continuing to publish its print and digital magazine during the downturn with employees working from home.

The publication has seen significant growth in digital readership and social media engagement since the pandemic hit.

Sotheby's has also diversified its marketing and is relying more on digital channels including social media.

The auction house is launching two auctions this month, "[Distilled The Macallan Fine & Rare Collection from Wing Hop Fun + More](#)." They are now open for bidding.

The spirits offering is led by an rare group of 30 bottles from the *Macallan Fine & Rare* series from specialty retailer Wing Hop Fung. Spanning five decades from 1937-1972, these iconic whiskies were purchased as a single set directly from The Macallan in 2005.

"Vine to Online | The Old & New World" opens for bidding April 13-26.

In addition to online auctions, some wineries and tasting rooms are offering online wine tastings, using video software such as Zoom.

In one approach, wineries will offer a selection of their wines and then the winemaker will "taste" them with consumers."

"There is no end to the ingenuity of marketers," *Wine Spectator's* Mr. Matthews said.

It is possible that some of this new digital behavior will continue in a post-COVID-19 world.

"It's probable that online retailers and direct shipping from wineries, which were growing relative to the rest of the market anyway, will continue to increase their share of the wine market," Mr. Matthews said. "But to be truly understood and enjoyed, wine must be tasted and, even better, shared.

"So businesses that offer these community tasting experiences primarily restaurants and winery tasting rooms will surely rebound when the crisis is over," he said.

And the end of the crisis will bring with it the desire to meet people in person.

"I think people will value shared experiences and happy times with friends and family even more, so anything that enhances those experiences will be appreciated and that will benefit the market," Sotheby's Mr. Ritchie said.