

THINKING BIG

Bringing wine to your door

With his wine website, Aaron Bick is hoping his vintage picks will be pleasing to your palate

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While some folks chugged green beer last week to celebrate St. Patty's Day, Aaron Bick could be found with his friends sipping something a bit more refined, in soothing shades of red and white.

Instead of heading to your local pub, the LCBO or an Ontario wine store outlet for your favourite fermented-grape-based beverages, he urges you to let your fingers do the ordering, thanks to his handy Internet delivery service.

"I wouldn't call myself a wine snob, but I'd prefer to have wine on my dinner table. It's so much better than having a beer," he quips.

Bick is the founder of WineOnline.ca, a nifty little liquid business that he launched in 2004 on the simple premise that consumers would appreciate a more convenient way to get their fine wine than lining up at government-run booze outlets, or at stand-alone stores that only offer the stuff made in Ontario.

And he figured folks would like it even better if they had a selection that may not be available at their local liquor store, and one which would also come right to the doorstep.

"We're trying to offer an alternative to someone who has a busy lifestyle. We bring the winery to your home," he explains.



AARON HARRIS/TORONTO STAR

WineOnline.ca president and CEO Aaron Bick at his Fine Wine Reserve in downtown Toronto. "We're happy to be people's trusted wine adviser," he says

After flogging numerous goods in his career "from bottled water and dried fruit to women's clothing" the resourceful entrepreneur seems to have found his niche with *vino*, particularly since he had immersed himself in wine circles when he lived in New York City and San Francisco.

Now the Burgundy and Chardonnay lover happily visits vineyards all over the world. So does his brother, who lives in Italy and is no slouch either when it comes to picking out top-notch producers in Europe. In the last couple years he's built up a wide selection of suppliers from France, Italy, Australia, California, South Africa and, yes, even Canada.

"We have strong relationships with producers and we scour the world for quality," Bick notes.

Luckily, due to his expertise on the smaller and more obscure wineries out there, you don't have to know your brands or vintages to make an order. The website provides all kinds of information on the wine itself, the winery it came from, food pairings, the rating of the wine, even the local restaurants that serve it.

He comically offers up products on his website that appeal to the high-end "Connoisseur," the "full of character Artist," the "Hostess" who likes hip and trendy beverages and "Enviro Guy," who naturally gravitates toward the organic and biodynamic varieties.

"We have wine that's \$9.95 a bottle right up to \$3,000 a bottle," he says, adding: "Yes, you could call (the latter) the filet mignon of wine."

As a result, he's attracted every level of customer, including private clients (he politely declines a request to name-drop) who spend "tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars on wine annually."

Bick now has some heavy hitter clients on the restaurant scene including Barberian's Steak House, Jamie Kennedy Kitchens and Wine Bars, Terroni, Fresh, ONE at the Hazelton Hotel, Auberge du Pommier and Canoe.

"I think the service is a great idea," says Jacques Kavafian, a financial analyst at Research Capital Corp. who follows the leisure and travel industries, and considers himself something of a wine snob.

He admits he even likes some of the less expensive offerings, including a \$12.95 organic red wine from a French vineyard, due to the fact that Bick knows his picks, even on the so-called value end of the wine scale.

AARON BICK Q&A

Q. What were your total sales and profits in the last year?

A. We had \$2.5 million in sales last year with little profit due to reinvesting it in the business via expansion. We have done at least 100% sales growth in each of our 1st four years in operation.

Q. How much seed capital did you have when you launched and where did you get it?

A. \$300,000 in capital to start the WineOnline.ca business, personally financed.

Q. What's been your biggest success/failure so far?

A. WineOnline.ca has 150 of 200 of Toronto's best restaurants as clients and many, many of Ontario's best private consumer clients. However, we are not as deeply engrained in the public consciousness as we would like to be.

Q. What are the biggest challenges facing your business?

A. Getting WineOnline.ca into the consciousness of the Canadian wine consumer as a superior and legitimate alternative to provincially run liquor boards.

Bick's target market is both "the person who wants to know more about wine and wants to learn about value wine and those that are interested in the incredibly rare, sought-after wines."

Because of the heavily regulated alcohol market in Ontario, over which the LCBO has the monopoly, he had to set himself up as a licensed agent so that he could bring wines from select producers into the province's consignment program.

And after establishing ties with various suppliers, he's able to offer up some stuff the liquor store can't, simply because he has a bit more flexibility in terms of the size of the order and payment terms.

"It's a billion-dollar business in the U.S. Apparently nobody had figured out up here that an agent could retail products to the public," he says, noting online competitors that have emerged in Ontario mostly sell local wine.

"Our biggest problem is we can't bring in enough" product sometimes to keep up with demand because of all the "unbelievable" regulations and red tape his business faces in dealing with the LCBO.

WineOnline.ca is now offered in Ontario and Nova Scotia, and he's branching out next month to Alberta with his sights set on B.C. and likely Quebec after that.

"Basically we want to conquer Canada and the U.S.," adding he's even working out a deal to broker product in China.

Most orders are delivered in 12-bottle cases but some wines come in a six-pack, so to speak, and when it comes to Ontario wines you can mix your order instead of ordering a dozen of the same kind.

There's also a selection of wine accessories available on the website, including glasses, corkscrews and books, and someday he hopes to offer spirits as well.

But for the moment, he's finding the wine business very pleasing to his entrepreneurial palate. And as they say, "*In vino veritas*" ("There's truth in wine").

"We're happy to be people's trusted wine adviser."