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North Haven Distributor Works At Gauging Trends For Wines And Liquors

## A TASTE FOR SUCCESS



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ERIC LITCHFIELD, director of import wine sales for Slocum & Sons, addresses the wine sales staff during Friday's weekly wine tasting at the company headquarters in North Haven.



NIALL HOUTON, wine salesman for wine and liquor distributor Slocum & Sons, checks the aroma of a red wine during a recent tasting for the company's sales representatives. Wine sales amount to 95 percent of the company's sales by volume.

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**S**locum & Sons, a wine and liquor distributor based in North Haven, has thrived by adapting to changes in what people are drinking.

In the 1970s, the company sold mostly spirits, or hard liquor, but as America's drinking tastes began to shift from martinis and Old-Fashioneds to wine, Slocum increased its wine inventory.

### THE CORNER SHOP

Today, wine sales amount to 95 percent of the company's sales by volume.

At first, Slocum & Sons capitalized on the growing love of European wines, and looked mainly to France for its inventory, but in the late 1970s and early '80s, California wines gained oenological respectability and a large following.

"The basis for the business was French wines, and it's transitioned from Bordeaux and Burgundies to baby boomers influenced by publications like *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Advocate*," said John Slocum, the third generation of Slocums to be active in the company.

The boomers became increasingly willing to try American wines, and today, wine is produced in 48 states. Then, in the mid-1990s, the Australian wines grew exponentially in quality and popularity, and many labels, such as Yellow Tail and Lindemann's, became wallet-friendly.

"Australian wines are now considered high volume/super value, but their super-premium wines can rival any wines that are made in the world," Slocum said. At 36, he is the general manager of the company that was founded by his grandparents Bateman and Jean Slocum in 1976 as a spinoff from Seggerman Slocum, a New York

company.

Bateman Slocum died nine months after buying the company, but his wife remained as president, assisted by their sons Tom and G.E.B. Slocum. In 2005, the family-owned company was sold to Lester Eber, a native of Rochester whose family has owned Eber Brothers Wine and Liquor since 1934.

But the Slocum family still has a significant presence in the company. In addition to John Slocum's role, his brother Toby is a salesman, their father, Tom, is a consultant, and Drew Barter, a cousin, is a manager.

The company has about 100 employees, including 40 salespeople who, by law, can sell only to retailers in Connecticut.

In the tasting room, two dishwashers keep the high-quality wine glasses sparkling, and wines are sipped by Slocum customers — then spat out into wine bucket-shaped spittoons.

"We're not drinking out of a paper cup," said Wendy Eber, the company's chief financial officer and Lester Eber's daughter. "We appreciate wine."

The company has continued to adapt to changing tastes, and, during the current business downturn, to smaller budgets. The wine industry has not been immune to the recession, and prices have generally gone down, Lester Eber said, as people shop for better values. Some companies have merged, or bought out smaller ones.

Most people pay between \$9.99 and \$19.99 per bottle, and continue to search for new vineyards, new flavors and lower prices.

"Consumers are constantly searching for a new taste," Eber said.

"Our Spanish wine business is on fire," Slocum said. "You get a combination of value and quality."

These days, wines from Argentina offer both

quality and reasonable prices. Malbec, a type of grape that is particularly suited to the Argentinian soil and climate, has become extremely popular.

"You get all the best things of merlot and cabernet," Slocum said, referring to two traditional wines. "A lot of foreign wine companies are investing in Argentina."

In addition to selling wine produced by other companies, Slocum imports wine directly from Argentina and Australia, which cuts out the importer and allows it to sell wines like Cabrini or Porta Sole at lower prices under its own label.

To boost wine sales to a younger generation, many wineries have jettisoned formal names in favor of something jazzier, such as Fat Bastard, Old Fart, Rongo Dongo, Ku dé Ta and House Jam.

Even the label designs have changed. Instead of the regal crests and formal typefaces traditionally used on wine bottles, there are fresh, eye-catching images: a picture of a girl on the beach, a Rorschach blob, or a handprint and bright red lips.

"The key to the catchy names is that the wine has to be 'in the bottle,'" John Slocum said. "It has to taste good."

Containers are changing, also. Corks, now made of plastic as well as cork, are giving way to metal screw tops, even on higher-end vintages. The glass bottles themselves are being replaced by boxes, which are cheaper, lighter and easier to ship. Recently, Red Truck came out with a plastic barrel-shaped container that holds three liters and fits easily into the refrigerator. "It's cute marketing," said Wendy Eber. "It keeps wine for 40 days."

Meanwhile, the company continues to look out for the next new thing. "There's been a spirit renaissance," said Slocum, on his way to Louisville, Ky., to learn more about how bourbon is made.