

# CLOSING TIME

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## Working for a national group? Optimize your wine lists by becoming a big-league buyer.



After a few years of studying, stocking, and tasting my way through New York City's great cellars, I finally got my shot at becoming one of those refined and meticulous people known as sommeliers. Little did I know that I would spend only a few years on the floor, as the restaurant group that I worked with was set to take on the national market with multiple concepts. Nowadays, with more and more restaurateurs expanding into new markets with the help of their key sommeliers or wine directors, a few pointers from my experience might help you navigate the slippery terrain of buying at a national level.

**NOT ALL MARKETS ARE THE SAME.** Since the repeal of Prohibition, each state has had control of its own liquor and wine laws. Get to know the laws in the states your restaurant group is entering; every little detail can affect your overall vision, budget, and projected sales.

**PRICING CAN VARY DRASTICALLY.** Some wines I poured by the glass in one state—say, a \$15 Pinot Noir—were out of our price range in another. The same goes for trends: what's popular in one community may be out of fashion in the next. Clientele is also going to vary from neighborhood to neighborhood, city to city, state to state. For example, New York City is a taxi culture; guests can drink more without worrying about driving, which results in a higher check average. By comparison, in places where most residents drive, you can expect at least a one-third drop

in wine sales. You have to adapt to the needs of the local market by doing your field research.

**STAFFING IS AN X FACTOR IN NEW MARKETS.** Each market has a different pool of workers, with varying levels of commitment and skill. Whether you're looking for experienced or eager-to-learn candidates, it's best to put the word out early, especially to other sommeliers in that area. And make sure you have plenty of time for wine-tasting and training workshops to get your employees up to speed.

**BE FLEXIBLE.** As my company grew, I felt less need to control our sommeliers and their wine lists, so long as they worked within the parameters we had set for wine quality, relationships with distributors and suppliers, cost, and profitability. Allowing the sommeliers to give each list an identity of its own, considering availability and appropriate pricing, is exciting for them as well as their clientele. They may want to experiment with formatting and categorization as well. Remember, being flexible is the best way to achieve success within each market.

**LET THE DISTRIBUTORS DO THE LEGWORK.** Identify the top six to 10 distributors in your expansion market and establish contact with their managers or owners at least a few months out. After sending them my wine lists and a by-the-glass template, I would schedule tastings in each market, asking them to present only six of the wine categories in my entire glass program to see what they would bring to the table. I was often amazed by their selections, and sometimes shocked! But I always ended up with the best wines by the glass from the vendors who paid attention to my needs.

**GO DIRECTLY TO SUPPLIERS AND WINERIES FOR THE BEST DEALS.** Since every market works differently, it's a good idea to find out whether the wineries and importers with whom you have good relationships are available in your new area and how their distribution channels work. This will save you the trouble of searching through price books to find the wines you want to put on the list. Going directly to suppliers not only keeps them up to date on your situation, but also allows you to arrange for better deals and to get your hands on their allocated wines.

**NATIONAL DEALS ARE GOOD, BUT . . .** Purchasing the same core group of wines for multiple markets can ease your workload and increase profitability, but it can also create some headaches. For instance, if your selection changes only once in a while, you can expect plenty of 86s. It's no fun having to find a filler for your Chardonnay or Cabernet at a particular location while you await the next delivery. As I've recommended, you should get your local vendors to help find the best wines in each market and keep your lists fresh. If you are going to make a national deal, lock in big quantities and hold the supplier and distributor responsible—especially for your by-the-glass wines.

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