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THU SEP 27, 2012

FOOD AND DRINK

# Wine Rack redux

Traditionally the place you hit up for a cheap, after-thought bottle of plonk en route to a dinner, the lowly Wine Rack is now making an aggressive appeal to more sophisticated tastes.

BY: KIM HUGHES

If there's one thing most businesses cling to ferociously, it's consistency. Everyone knows that selling the same product in the same setting is the key to longevity and success.

Or is it? That notion was certainly up for debate during the hot, sticky August long weekend, when shoppers along the snappy stretch of the Danforth near Carlaw were met with the opening of a new retail shop aggressively challenging preconceptions of what it was, and what it was hocking.

What it was—make that, what it is—is a Wine Rack, albeit a far more stylish version than the joints usually tucked into corners of suburban Walmarts and Loblaws, where harried shoppers historically score after-thought bottles of Ontario plonk en route to the car or, in tourist designated-areas like Queen's Quay, whenever the LCBO is closed.



The abundant promotional bells-and-whistles in effect on the Danforth (balloons, billboards, rickshaws, sidewalk tastings) heralded a new kind of Wine Rack, a point underscored inside by pricey organic bottles of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

This snazzy, welcoming 21st-century Wine Rack—an “ultra-premium” Wine Rack, as store manager Wilson Smith explains—is selling lifestyle to cosmopolitan East End shoppers craving superior labels to pair with the organic goodies scored at the Big Carrot down the street.

Wine Rack, it appears, is subtly but decisively rebranding. As one store in their 160-strong chain folds due to poor sales, host-store renovations, or other factors, a shiny new neighbourhood-friendly Wine Rack gracefully emerges to take its place.

The Danforth location is one of four new stores the company has opened in grand fashion in the past year province-wide. And judging by the steady stream of dog-walking, strolling-pushing Riverdale shoppers snapping up bottles since launch, the formula is working.

“Most people coming in are so happy we’re here, because we’re right in the middle of the strip where they do all their food shopping, and we’re about halfway between LCBO stores at Broadview and Danforth and Greenwood and Danforth,” says Smith as he points out \$70 bottles of premium Niagara-grown Le Clos Jordanne at the rear of the shop, past the expected shelves of Jackson-Triggs, Inniskillin, Arbor Mist, and Growers 1927 Cider.

“We’re trying to get people to understand we’re not just VQA Ontario wines anymore,” Smith continues. “We have international blends as well. We are now the largest wine purveyors in the world for [New York-based] Constellation Brands. These days, 70 per cent of the juice from our vineyards around the world is shipped here and blended with 30 per cent of our own, so we can have international blends from South Africa, France, Italy, California, New Zealand, Australia, Chile, Argentina.”



Michael Tutt, Wine Rack's Marketing Director, is more blunt: "It's all about introducing ourselves. Not everybody knows Wine Rack—or people who may have known it in the past may have a preconceived notion of what we are and what we sell. We've done a lot of work over the last several years to update our image, update our selection, and be very customer-focussed and friendly and knowledgeable in what we're selling. We've spent a lot of time thinking about the customer experience in our stores. Things like offering samples gives people a chance to try something they might not otherwise have tried, while reducing the risk of them making a wrong decision.

"Our whole approach to the business has been improving over the last two years," Tutt continues, "and we're really trying to make sure that, when people walk through our doors, they get an exceptional customer experience. We try to separate ourselves from the competition, which are the big LCBO stores. We don't have the same selection, but we do have great people and we look to them to make the difference."

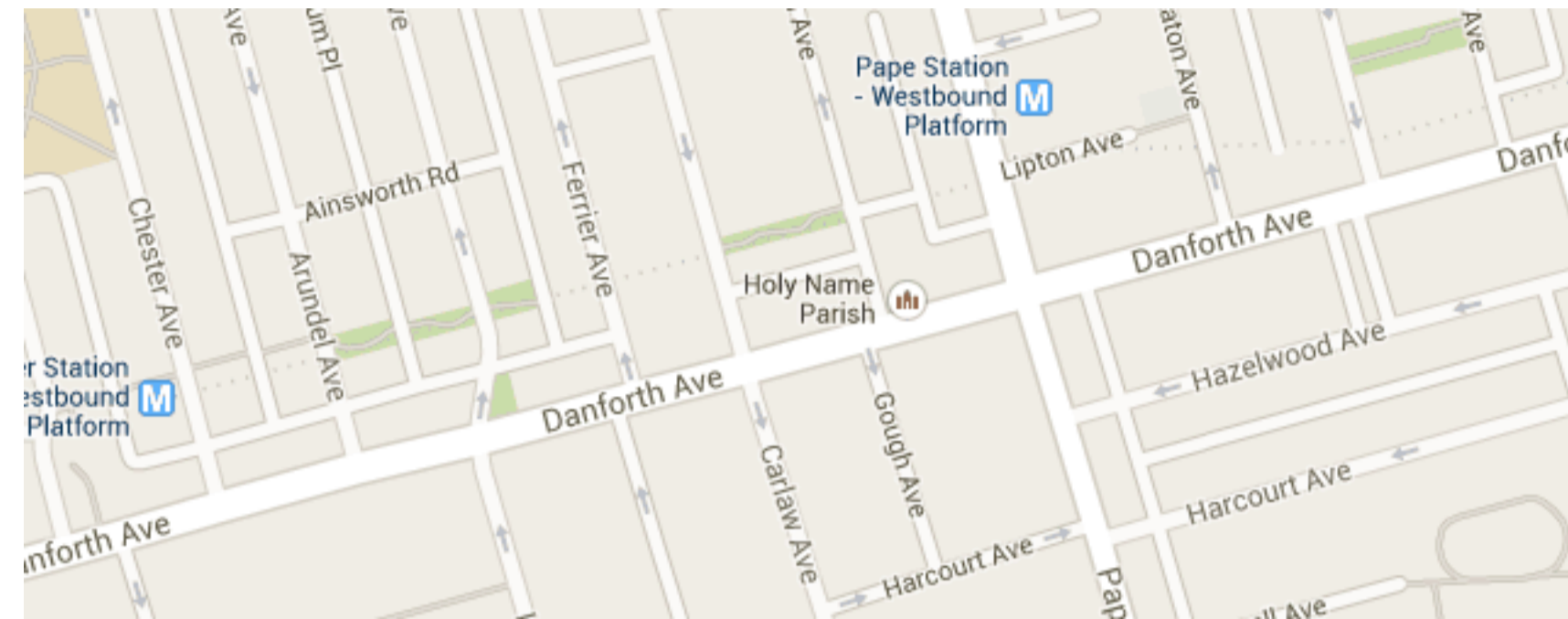
Smith deftly proves this point. His six years with the company—first at the flagship store at Church and Wellesley ("It is *the* biggest, highest volume") and then Queen and Broadview before moving east—builds on 25 years in the hospitality industry.

If you want to know what pairs nicely with fish or ham or beef—and are reluctant to rely solely on

the paper necklaces garlanding the bottles indicating the same—Smith is your man.

And his plans to make Wine Rack a Danforth go-to destination through daily tastings (“I’ve changed many people’s minds at that sample table,” he enthuses) and various upcoming special events pretty much ensure a happy and prosperous future in the ‘hood.

Says Tutt: “This is the new normal. When we open any new stores, we try to make some noise and get to know our neighbours. The last four stores we’ve opened in the past year—the Danforth store, plus two in Ottawa and one in North Bay—are more neighborhood-oriented. We want people to come in and get to know us, and to experience our wines.”



**TAGS** LCBO, Wine, Wine Rack

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**Ash**

I live down the street from the new wine rack on Danforth, it is a great store, perfectly situated, wines at every price point and the staff are really helpful.

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6:06 pm on October 8, 2012

Reply Report

**Sarah**

I go to the little one in the Sobeys at Yonge and St. Clair all the time, mostly due to the fact that, ridiculously, there is NO other Beer Store or LCBO between Summerhill and Eglinton — a huge stretch of road for someone without a car. (Seriously, a beer store would make a KILLING at Yonge and St. Clair.)

Anyway, yes, love the Wine Rack. Always a nice experience with great staff!

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1:18 pm on September 27, 2012

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