

# Competition Between Wine Stores Creates Price War And Sour Grapes

By KURT LOFT  
kloft@tampatrib.com

**TAMPA** — A wine war is raging in Tampa.

Formidable armies are in the trenches, and we can expect protracted battles. But in the end, it may be consumers who enjoy the rewards of victory: lower prices on a bottle of wine.

When Total Wine & More opened in August on Dale Mabry Highway, it challenged ABC Fine Wine & Spirits, which quickly went on the offensive. Competitive blood practically drips off the billboard directly above Total Wine's rooftop.

Both chains have the cash to fuel a fight. Based in Pottomac, Md., Total Wine operates 37 megastores across the South and mid-Atlantic region, including the one in the Bay area. Orlando-based ABC runs 150 stores, about 20 locally.

However, in a random sampling of prices, we found plenty of disparity. A bottle of Wild Horse Pinot Noir from California, for instance, sells for \$18 at Total Wine and \$22 at ABC — a \$4 difference. If that price holds for a case, you would pay \$48 more at ABC.

The same goes for many inexpensive wines, such as Alice White Chardonnay from Australia. A bottle sells for \$5.50 at Total Wine, \$8 at ABC.

Smaller wine chains and independent stores are taking note — or ignoring the battle altogether. The Cork & Olive, Wine Warehouse, Vintage Wine Cellars, WineStyles and dozens of small shops hold their own through customer loyalty and personal service. They hardly have the deep pockets to buy billboard space and full-page ads.

But the corporate wine war isn't just about low prices, argues Michael Probst, president of the Cork & Olive chain, which opens its 10th Bay area store this month.

"I find it almost embarrassing," Probst says. "There are other issues that are important to customers, like spending the money on better service. The normal wine buyer wants a nice atmosphere and to be treated as a customer, not just to save a dollar."

Nor does Probst believe the wine war will continue to drive down prices: "It's only a matter of time before prices come up again because they can't keep selling for [near] wholesale."

Representatives from both Total Wine and ABC, by the way, declined to comment for



Tribune photo by JAY CONNER

**Battling for wine lovers' dollars, ABC Fine Wine & Spirits proclaims its message on a billboard above Total Wine & More.**



## UNCORKED

this column.

### Delicato Ditches Cork

Another major winery has abandoned traditional corks for screw caps. Delicato Family Vineyards of California wants to protect its product.

More wineries are embracing the screw cap simply because it makes a more effective seal, says Chris Indelicato,

chief executive officer of Delicato.

"Everyone in the wine industry knows that traditional corks will make 5 [percent] to 8 percent of wines taste and smell bad," he says.

"When consumers taste a 'corked' wine, they don't always realize that the cork is the problem; they just assume that they don't like that wine. It was a pretty simple decision when we looked at it that way."

### New Wine Magazine

Can another magazine about wine and spirits survive? The people at Imbibe think so, and they expect their bimonthly publication to fill a niche.

A one-year subscription is \$15.95, and single copies sell for \$5. For information, go online to [www.imbibe.com](http://www.imbibe.com)

### Tasting Notes

This week's wine: Angove's Coonawarra Vineyard Select 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon. Made from 100 percent cabernet grapes, this velvety, full-bodied red comes from the Coonawarra region of southern Australia, home to 16 wineries.

The area is known for its "terra rossa," a layer of mineral-rich red clay over limestone, which brings plenty of nutrients to the vine stock and produces small, highly concentrated fruit.

Angove ages its cabernet in French and American oak for 18 months, and the result is a moderately intense wine with hints of pepper, blackberry and licorice and an appealing finish. It sells for about \$20.

Reporter Kurt Loft can be reached at (813) 259-7570.



Coonawarra's cabernet tastes of pepper, blackberry and licorice.