

LIVING

NY wine-shop boom prompts merchant battle

By Amber Sutherland and Sean Piccoli

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A boom in specialty wine shops around town is great news for city sippers — and a potential hangover for existing merchants being squeezed by the stepped-up competition.

The state counts 1,368 licensed wine and liquor stores operating in the city — a 14 percent increase since 2010.

Crain's New York Business tied the uptick in vino vending to new, neighborhood-oriented outlets offering ever more specialized reds and whites to wine-loving locals.

"I was, like, a psychotic wine collector," Crush Wine & Spirits managing partner Robert Schagrin told The Post, noting he detoured from real estate to a showroom full of boutique bottles on East 57th Street.

"I just followed my dream and made it into a reality. It's five times larger than I ever dreamed."

Schagrin's store is a glass-partitioned, climate-controlled temple of wine, with curvy, back-lit shelves that hold more product than a flat wall would accommodate, and a celebrity clientele that includes Rihanna and George Clooney.

Schagrin and others agree it's a golden age in the city for wine.

"New York is the wine capital of the world," he said. "The quality of wine and the quality of the stores have gone up."

But some store owners worry about a big fizzle as competition drives bottle prices down. "I don't think the demographics of the city have grown anywhere near the number of new stores," Tom Geniesse, who opened Bottlerocket Wine & Spirits in the Flatiron District in 2006, told Crain's.

Others rely on a gimmick. After Paul Common lost his job as an equity analyst for Merrill Lynch, he decided to drain his savings account and in 2012 opened Uncorked in the West Village. He offers free tastings all day, every day, using technology that allows him to maintain 40 open bottles of wine. It is the only "try before you buy" store in the city, Common told Crain's.

The Wine Institute says Americans enjoyed 856 million gallons of wine in 2012, 15 percent more than in 2007. And more regions of the United States and the world are feeding our appetite by producing vintages.