

# Bubbles Rises to the Top

LOCAL LIQUOR STORE BENEFITS FROM GROWING PASSION

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*The “king” is dead, long live the king!* Maybe not dead exactly, but in the beer world, a slow regime change has been brewing. That king of beers, Budweiser, along with its golden, easy-drinking domestic compatriots, has been steadily losing ground. As more and more small craft breweries expand their reach—the Brewers Association reports a total of 2,403 total craft breweries in 2012, the highest number since the 1880s—local liquor stores have tried to keep up with the demand for the myriad of porters, IPAs and lambics now on the market.

“The thing that most people want, what most people are asking for and is really popular is the hoppy stuff,” says Ben On, owner of Bubbles Wine & Spirits on North Oak Trafficway in Kansas City. “That would be one of them. The other one would be bourbon barrel stout or whiskey barrel stout.”

Ben runs Bubbles along with his wife, Vy, and their son, Lawrence, and one point of pride is the store’s massive beer selection. The bourbon barrel stout—for example, Chicago’s Goose Island Bourbon County Stout, a full-bodied stout aged in bourbon barrels for a more complex flavor—is a good example of a specialty beer that Bubbles offers to thirsty craft-beer connoisseurs.

And that’s just one of more than 1,000 different beers available, in the 5,000-square-foot store. Now in business nearly 20 years at the same location, all three members of the family regularly taste the new products they stock, as many as 10 to 15 different drinks a week.

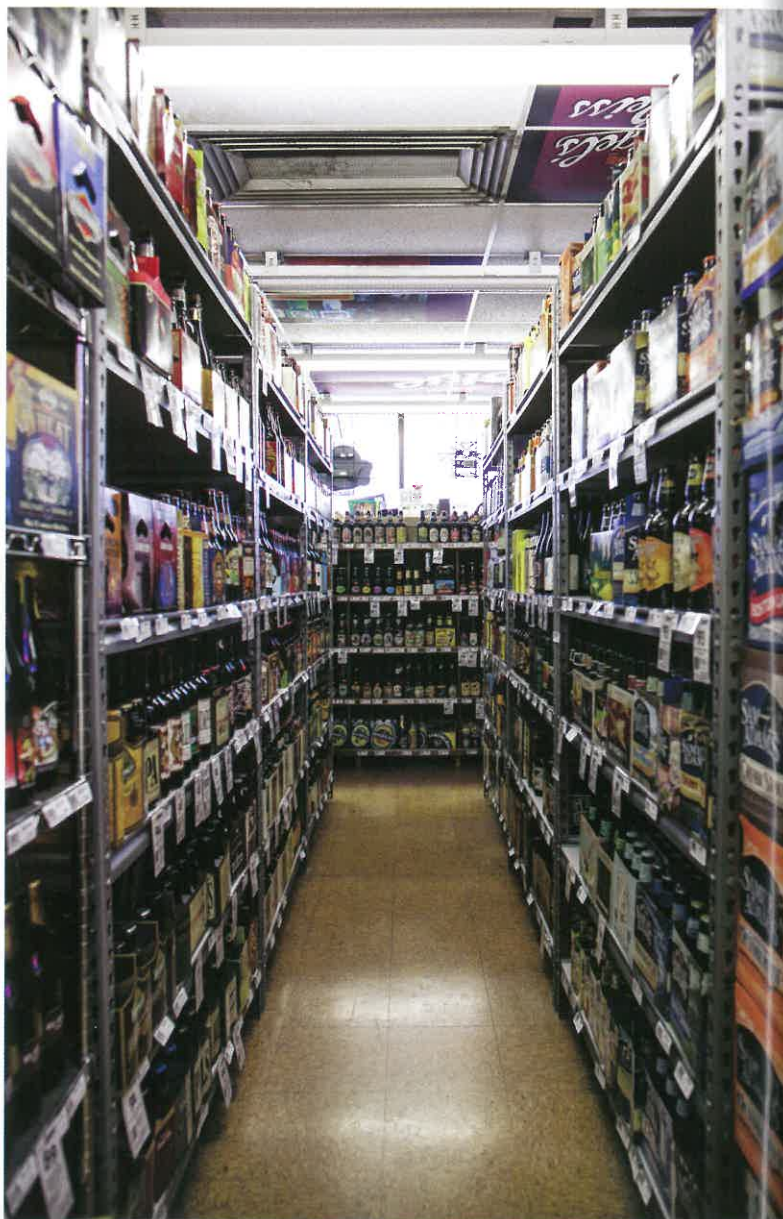
“The only way to learn about your product is to taste it,” Ben says.

A few recent additions include the seasonal Contact High from St. Louis’ 4 Hands Brewing Company, a saison from O’Dell Brewing Company (Fort Collins, Colo.) called Celastrina, and the award-winning Banana Bread Beer from the U.K.

Of course, don’t ask Ben to name his favorite.

“Too many to choose,” he says. He will tell you that he traditionally leans toward hoppy beer, like an IPA, as well as stouts.

“But you know how beer drinkers are, it depends on the sea-



son,” he says. “So here comes wintertime, you drink your stout; here comes summertime, you drink your lager and pilsner, and during spring you drink some hoppy beer.”

It’s that kind of variety that has built a loyal clientele. Ben says about 80 percent of his customers are regulars, and many he knows by name. Lawrence started a Facebook page for the store in 2010, which they use as the primary medium to alert fans to the latest seasonal arrival or special release. Posts from customers litter the page with special requests for obscure or hard-to-find brews from around the world.

Mike Tipton, who just moved to Gladstone, prefers craft beer or wine and visited Bubbles for the first time recently looking for some specific selections.

“Right now I’m into fruity beers because it’s summer and they aren’t too heavy,” Tipton says. “Stiegl and Unibroue’s Éphémère are my favorites, but I’ll settle for a Summer Shandy on a hot day.”

For a first-timer, Tipton was impressed.

“Lots of options,” he says. “If you’re interested in trying a variety of different beers, they have a huge selection you can create your own six-pack with.”

That night he took home some Stiegl Radler, a thirst-quenching shandy from the long-time Austrian brewery that’s been making beer since 1492.

Of course, even while the beer selection is impressive, Ben is also sure to mention that the store’s exceptional variety doesn’t stop there.

“We have probably the largest Scotch selection and the largest tequila selection in the whole city,” he says.

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With more than 7,000 total products for sale, the store also carries many of the special release whiskeys that only go to the largest liquor stores as well as many of the limited release wines. Right now, he's excited about Papillon, a blended red from Orin Swift.

As for Tipton, he says the shandy was delicious, and his recent visit won't be his last.

"The owners were very friendly and the staff was very helpful in guiding me through the maze of beers to get what I wanted," Tipton says. "The prices were reasonable, too."

While the good experience might have earned Bubbles another regular customer, Ben says he enjoys his job as much as the customers enjoy shopping there.

"I'm a people person, so I enjoy talking to different people," he says. "You meet people from all walks of life; that's what is interesting about this business. Even when I was in the restaurant business, it's not like that. A liquor store is a lot more fun!"

Bubbles Wine & Spirits is located 7407 N. Oak Trafficway and can be reached at 816.436.8987. or at [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/bubbleswineandspirits).

