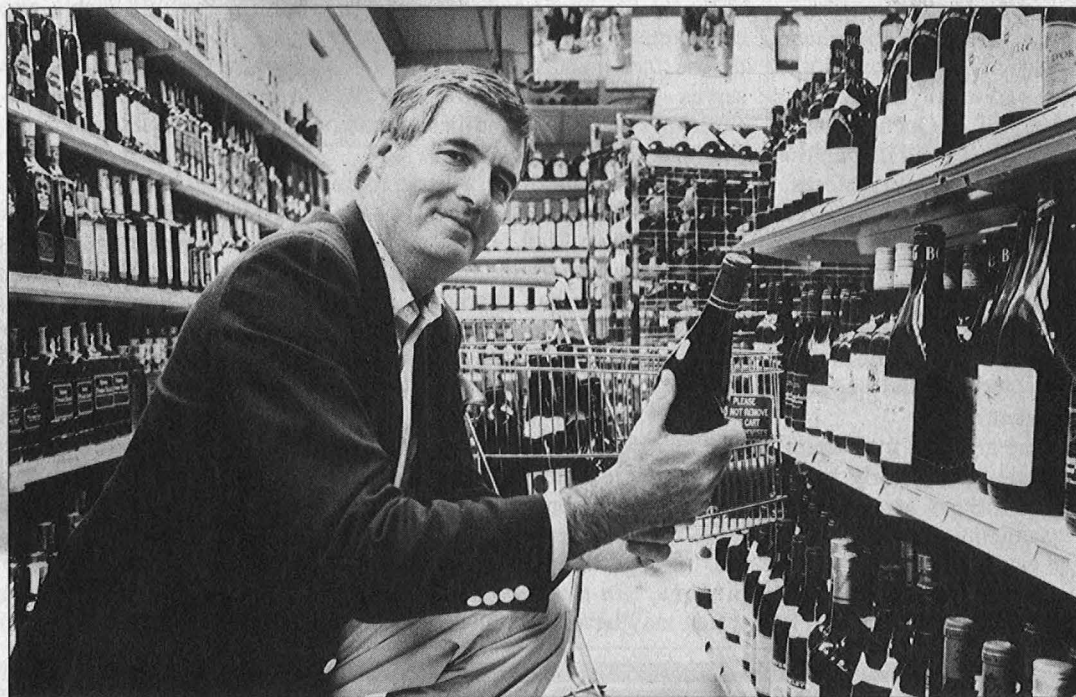


AT THE GOVERNMENT STORE

A connoisseur's guide to London's liquor outlets // by Peter Desbarats



Desbarats: It's only on the surface that they appear monotonously identical.

A good way to measure the maturity of nations, as well as individuals, is to watch how they handle their liquor. Whenever I'm tempted to think that Canada has finally grown up, after the longest adolescence in recorded history, I bring myself back to reality by visiting one of our state-owned liquor stores.

My acquaintance with these institutions goes back to the '50s and spans many provinces. I can remember, thousands of bottles of wine ago, the tortuous procedure required to make a purchase in one of Quebec's liquor stores, always referred to in those days as "the Commission." You entered the Commission, tried to find your wines on a long list posted on the wall, committed them to memory, and then ran to the wicket before you forgot everything, where you tried to whisper them to a clerk as if you were going to confession.

The clerks were often more supercilious than bank tellers. One faulty syllable in the name of a French wine and they would cup a hand behind an ear and yell, "*Quoi, monsieur?*" That was usually enough to drive the whole list from your mind, and you were forced to run back to the wall, commit "*Clos des Mouches*" to memory again, and then blare it out to the clerk with enough force to let everyone in the Commission know that French had not been your best subject in high school. As soon as the clerk returned with your bottle, he would immediately wrap it

in plain brown paper and hand it to you as if it were contraband.

This puritanical procedure always struck me as curious in a province where, at that time, corrupt politicians were almost as numerous as bootleggers, and Montreal was notorious as a good place in which to have a bad time.

In Manitoba, a few years later, I was liberated from memory and language tests by a system that was even more bizarre. To buy a bottle of wine, it was necessary to write your name and address on an order form, along with the brand name and official number, and then slip the form to a clerk as if it were a prescription. The procedure left the impression that someone, somewhere, was keeping track of your consumption; if so, the official record must have been something to see. Since no one ever asked for proof of identity, many customers used a *nom de plume* as a way of safely thumbing noses at the provincial bureaucracy.

You were never allowed to actually look at a bottle of wine in those days until you were in the privacy of your own home. It was in England in the 1950s that I first actually saw wine on display. I was so embarrassed that I hardly knew which way to look until my neighborhood wine dealer, over a period of time, taught me that it was quite normal not only to talk about wine in public but even to handle the bottles before buying them. *continued over*

It must have been in the "swinging '60s" that Ontario and other provincial governments "got with it" and tried to pretend that they actually enjoyed selling wine. Bottles were put on display, and all you had to do was walk in, take what you wanted and pay an outrageous price for it. Some stores even put in shopping carts although they're usually, as you must have noticed, little toy models with knee-high handles and the capacity of a glove compartment.

Still, despite talk in Quebec about privatizing the business and in Ontario about selling beer in grocery stores, the government stores are all we have and I've learned to make the best of them. Like a prairie dweller who, over time, appreciates every little ripple in the flat landscape, I've become a connoisseur of London liquor stores. It's only on the surface that they appear monotonously identical.

Of course there are only four liquor stores that I frequent regularly but I assume that the others are equally unique and fascinating.

My favorite is the "downtown" store in the little shopping plaza on York Street. By the time this is published, it

may have moved to a new little plaza now under construction across the street but this won't change its essential character which has more to do with location than decor. Despite its modest size and the fact that it looks almost exactly like any other liquor store in the city, the fact that it is the "downtown" store lends it something of the hustle, bustle and sophistication of downtown London. This is reflected by the fact that the store usually reserves space in its bins for at least five superior French reds and occasionally even has them in stock.

If I want something a little more casual but still upscale, I visit the store in the Westown Mall. This store has a more open appearance, as befits its easygoing suburban character, and a surprisingly small inventory, testimony to the good character and weak livers of all the senior citizens in the vicinity.

East on Oxford Street, on the other side of Adelaide, there is a mini-mall whose name I never remember but whose access routes, cutting across lanes of speeding traffic on Oxford, are unforgettable. This mall has a piquant, *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere which may have something to do with

the fact that it is across the street from an army base and perhaps considers itself a prime target in the event of nuclear war. Tucked into the northeast corner of the mall, next to the lottery ticket seller, is my third favorite liquor store. Don't be fooled by the modest entrance. Inside is a veritable expanse of shelves and a surprisingly large selection of affordable wines selected to complement the cuisine of the many take-out restaurants in the vicinity.

Finally, on my way to and from arenas in the east end during the hockey season, I sometimes drop in at a store on Dundas Street East, in the neighborhood of Canadian Tire, not for its selection of wine but to savor the early post-war industrial architecture of the building. Even the modest wines purchased here seem to have a robust factory tang, a soupçon of Pottersburg Creek that makes drinking them a carefree adventure, with no thought for tomorrow.

Despite this infinite variety, I still find myself dreaming of the day when Canada will be mature enough to have real wine stores with wine merchants in them who compete for business on the basis of expertise and price. ■