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Schneider's Turns 60

BY CELESTE MCCALL



Rick and Jon Genderson. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Would you believe, Schneider's of Capitol Hill is 60 years old? Located at Third Street and Massachusetts Ave. NE near Union Station, the popular liquor store was established in 1949 by Abe Genderson and Max Schneider. The store is now operated by brothers Jon and Rick Genderson.

Their maternal grandfather, Max Schneider, immigrated from Latvia before World War I. Back then, the fledgling business was confined to a tiny basement with four employees, but in 1959 the owners purchased four townhouses to create the present space. It's a lot bigger than the long-ago basement, but even today, Schneider's crams a lot of booze into its 11,000 square-foot digs, plus another 4,000 in a warehouse on New York Ave. SE.

"We've grown expediently," said co-owner Jon Genderson, adding that his store might do the largest dollar volume per square foot in the city, even the world. But he declined to say how much.

Changes over the years? "We've steered the store more as a fine wine shop than a liquor store," he explained. In 1949, wine comprised about 1 percent of

Schneider's business. Today, that figure is closer to 62 percent, the store's number one seller. Well-traveled Washingtonians have been exposed to wine and appreciate fine dining. However, Genderson cites another reason for wine's popularity. In Washington, retail stores are allowed to import wine directly rather than going through a wholesaler. (Not surprisingly, wholesalers have been fighting this policy for years.)

"For that reason, we can buy older vintages that would otherwise not be available," Genderson explained. "We might have the city's, even the country's, best selection of rare wines." He recounted one of the store's most unusual and lucrative requests: For a millennium party, a customer requested vintages from the year 1900. That's right, 100-year-old bottles, and Schneider's was able to supply a Chateau Margaux for \$4,500 and a \$3,500 bottle of Chateau Lafitte. There's more where that came from: Schneider's recently sold four bottles of 1966 Chateau La Fleur Pomerol at \$1,000 a pop. However, Genderson emphasized that those of us who want a \$12 bottle of Nugan Estate Shiraz to drink with meatloaf are equally

important. "That's the secret of our success and longevity - we treat all our customers like family. It's paid off, and they've become friends over the years. We place emphasis on customer service," added Genderson. "Schneider's is one of the few places where someone will greet you at the door. We give a lot of attention and personal service." I can attest to that. We shop at Schneider's regularly and when we can't find something, an employee never fails to help us out.

Saturdays are the craziest days, especially in December. That's when customers from the neighborhood, as well as downtown, the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, Pennsylvania and even from overseas converge on Schneider's. While the holidays are the busiest season, any Saturday finds folks queued up as Schneider's 18 employees help them choose from 10,000 labels, including 200 kinds of beer. Biggest wine sellers? "French and Spanish are big right now," Genderson said. "We also sell a lot of Australian, New Zealand and South American, especially Argentine Malbec.

What Schneider's does not carry are pop wines or malt liquor, nor does it sell singles except for boutique brews. "We've tried to take care of the neighborhood," said Genderson. "It's been good to us. Capitol Hill is a great place, especially since its resurgence about 20 years ago.

The Gendersons practice what they preach. Jon - a Hill activist who serves on several boards -- and his spouse of 29 years, Lori, live on the Hill; so do Rick and his wife Staci. Their dad, Abe Genderson, enjoys the best of both worlds: he and Mom (Charlotte) spend their summers in Bethesda. Come winter, they head for sunny Delray Beach, Florida.

We wish Schneider's another 60 years of success as part of our community.

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