March 2020. A novel coronavirus, imperceptible and deadly, spread on the breath, led to lockdowns across the country. Restaurants were shut down overnight, feared as super-spreader sites.

At Wine & Spirits, we immediately canceled our spring tasting event, who was to be a celebration of the moso popular wines in restaurants as reported in our Annual Restaurant Poll. And as news came in of permanent closures at legendary dining rooms—including many loyal respondents on our list—we wondered if there would be restaurants to poll in 2021.

It's not news that restaurant closures were a boon to online wine retailers. Wine.com, the leading site, grew its already significant sales by 215 percent from April to September. Many of the sommeliers who managed to keep their jobs shifted to selling wine to go. For most restaurants, wine sales crashed, the fall steeper than in either of the two last recessions (see the chart on page 41). But for some, wine sales actually increased as a percentage of their restaurant's total sales. As Andrew Fortgang of Le Pigro in Portland, Oregon, reports, that didn't mean it was a good year—just that he was able to continue selling wine during the times that the restaurant was effectively closed. And the others we interviewed, he was able to find creative ways to sell it through the strong network he'd built over a 15-year run.

Many chefs and sommeliers, servers and dishwashers, line cooks and bussers, bartenders and bar backs have been furloughed this year as restaurateurs struggle to keep the lights on. The pandemic has led them to completely reinvent their businesses. Some have survived selling meal kits, others have taken their tables to sidewalks, parking lots and barricaded parking spaces. Many welcomed new guests at these sidewalk tables, mostly younger people, those for whom the

Infographics by CARLOS MONTEIRO
The benefits of meetings over a shared meal outweigh the calculated risks. Some of these guests, just out of college, may have thought of restaurants as a place to work their way through school, or to work while they wrote their first stories, or while they waited for an audition. Others may have undertaken food and wine as a calling and a career. But few of people who dismiss restaurants as a luxury—or food as anything more than calories to burn. But for those of us who thrive in the warmth of the social fabric restaurants create, sharing a bottle of wine over a Zoom call can be a lovely way to stay connected with friends, but it isn’t the same as sharing a bottle in person—or sharing our reactions with the person who helped us choose that bottle. A bug is different from a hindblaze, a fist bump, elbow tap, Facetime, Zoom, Slack... A good restaurant is a bug. There’s no replacing it. Whatever that connection may be that is missing, we hope to find it again soon.

Top 50 Wines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wines</th>
<th>Number of times included in the Top 50 in the past 50 years</th>
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For three decades, we’ve taken the temperature of a small community of restaurants, checking in on the state of their business and reporting on the wines they sell. Our poll started when the Zagat Guide was a prime resource for tracking restaurants, and we built our early list based on its 40 most popular restaurants in each of the cities it covered. After Zagat Guide sold to Google, we shifted our sources, relying on Eater Hotlists, trusted local sources and on our own research, but maintained the same premise—searching out the most popular restaurants across the country and asking them to list their ten bestselling wines in the fourth quarter of the year. The poll results are a window into a wine-and-food community, favoring democracy over elitism, honoring cultural appreciation over all you-can-eatism.

There have been other years when the health of the restaurant industry was challenged by economic pain, but this is the first year when the industry’s health was taken down by the country’s health. As we set out to contact restaurants in January, many of those that had persevered through the holidays were taking a hiatus. Evan Hansen, from Selden Standard in Detroit, gave his staff the month off, awaiting more lenient restrictions from the state in February. Others, such as NYC’s Bathtub, had closed since March. Aware of their varied situations, we did not require participants share their list of best-selling wines, as our goal was to hear from them and to report on the current state of the industry. More than any year in the past, we had a flood of early respondents who jumped at the chance to participate, sharing wine data and stats from their year. Others told us they had no access to data—as they were either working remotely, or not working at all. Others simply declined. “I’d like to forget 2020 altogether.” Paul Botamer told us when we called him about Fearing’s in Dallas.

By our deadline 133 restaurants had answered the poll, with 89 of them providing information on their most popular wines for the fourth quarter of the year. We thank all of them for their courage during the most difficult year for restaurants in our lifetimes. On page 64, you’ll find a list of our participants, and we encourage you to seek them out.

We have taken extra care in how we present the data this year. We do not only have significantly fewer respondents than in years past, but all of those respondents are working in different ways: indoor, outdoor, takeout, retail and a myriad of combination of all of those. So, rather than ranking our Top 50 Most Popular Wine Brands, we have highlighted the 48 most mentioned brands, presenting them in a circle, by country and region. You’ll find stalwarts of the poll, like Jordan, Duckhorn, Heitz and Rombauer, who have made the list ten of the past ten years (in fact, they have made this list for decades). You’ll also find newcomers, brands that found an opening in this fractured year.

In the pages that follow, our reporting focuses not only on trends we found in the data—a rise in rosé sales, an interest in chil·lable reds, the robust strength of cabernet and a focus on inexpensive wines overall. We also report on the creative approaches sommeliers and wine directors have taken to sustain their connections to loyal guests—and the efforts many of these guests have made to sustain their connections with their favorite restaurants.

Here’s hoping that 2021 will be a better year for all of us.
The fracturing of the restaurant business in 2020 generated myriad reactions and survival strategies; data reported on Top-selling wines was significantly more diverse than in years past. And with tables moving out into streets, parking lots and sidewalks, the weather played a more important role than ever. Here we report on how restaurateurs responded to initial lockdowns, partial reopenings and unexpected closings throughout 2020, with details on their best-selling wines. Some brands sustained a strong showing in this on-again, off-again year, meanwhile, a lot of new names found success during 2020. We list the brands that acceded multiple mentions, in alphabetical order, by category, on the following pages.

**PART I: SPRING TO SUMMER**

**CREATIVE PIVOT**

"I REMEMBER THE DAY they said we were shutting down—March 16," recalls Dan Shivea of Shiva in Del Mar, California. "I was thinking it would be just a couple of weeks and we'd reopen again when this dies down. Luckily, my much younger general manager, Anthony, said, ‘We need to be doing something right now.’ She really knew her audience. And the ABC allows us to sell to-go. It was spring, so we have our place almost turned into a party place."

Many people found that strong liquor fits better than wine, given the Covid-era feel of the moment. At Jack Allen’s Kitchen in Austin, TX, David Toby watched his wine sales wither: "Most people have beer and wine at home, and I tried to discount wine, but that didn’t help." What did? "Frozens went bonkers, selling by the case. People were stocking them up in their freezers."

While the furloughed and the work-at-home crowd took solace in go-cocktails, restaurateurs around the country found themselves staring into the abyss. "We just moved into survival mode," says John Aranui of Au Trois Cafe in Beverly, Illinois. "We’re a neighborhood three-star restaurant, so what does this all look like for us? We really had to think on the spot."

For many, there was no effective pivot. At NYC’s Balthazar—a grand space and a magnet for tourists—veteran Beverage Director Rebecca Rappo recalls how the restaurant attempted takeout and delivery and cocktails to go. “Everyone was trying everything and anything. A lot of people got turned out to get sick. One of the bussers at Balthazar died in this spring of COVID. He had been with the company for a very long time.” Kirk McInally decided to close Balthazar for the duration and closed two of its sister restaurants permanently.

There were bright spots: At Tonio’s in Albany, New York, Dominick Pernicone reports, "We sold more bottles at $500 and up for the first three months that we’ve been open for three years combined." He believes people wanted something different than the bottles they poured themselves at home. At Aspet, Colorado, Chris Dunaway recalls a group that came to dinner at 11 p.m. and bought $30,000 worth of wine. “People wanted to get out and indulge after being cooped up,” he surmises.

More frequently, however, the few people looking for wine reached for light, refreshing, less expensive bottles. Restaurants reported robust sales of Pinot, a little $10 bottle of Chardonnay from the north coast of Spain; and they were caught off-guard by the interest in “chilled reds.” Light Italian reds caught on, as did wines like Bernard Baudry’s frisky Chinon—Nathan Vandergrift of Rue Cler in Durham, North Carolina, sold through a lot of those Chinons and reports that they are now allocated.

With a skeleton staff working at a distance from diners, restaurateurs had to invent new ways to connect their cellar with customers. At Acquerello in San Francisco, Giuseppe Paterlini created Acquerello Wine Experiences, a retail program with trims of wines linked by a theme.

Ben Dale, of Spoon and Stable in Minneapolis, offered guests the option of calling him up personally to select a bottle to go with their dinner. "We didn’t get a lot of hits on that, but the ones we did get were fun," he says.

At Nixta Taqueria in Austin, Sara Mandanibi didn’t give out live mobile number, but she found that the slower pace the pandemic enforced allowed more connections with wine customers. "Because people are sitting at home all day long, they are more interested in wines," she enthuses.

For all the trouble, many restaurateurs spoke of those early days of the pandemic with something that almost sounded like nostalgia. "We got through summer," says Dan Shivea. "Following all the rules and regulations was just ludicrous, but we did it, and it’s fine."

**WINES THAT WOULD IN 2020**

Here are the brands, by category, in alphabetical order, mentioned most by our respondents this year.

**SPARKLING**

**SPANISH**

Dun Perignon
Champagne
Pierre Gimbert
Champagne Brut
Lucer Blanco
de Huerta Cava
Taittinger
Champagne Brut
La Francaise

Veuve Clicquot
Champagne Brut
Champagne
La Grande Dame
Zarzua
Lambrequin Garnacha de Calatayud
Bruno Zambell
Lambrequin de Lorbeau

Environ
Almanza Albahar
Ribeira Sacra Loures
Vina de Aldea
Palacios
Principat Canets
Princats
R. Lopez de Heredia
Roca Cristal
Vida Cellar
Roca Reserva Blanco
Rosa Tendencia

**CHARDONNAY**

**FRANCE**

Jordan
Russian River Valley
Rombauer
Vineyards
Carneros
Christian Moreau
Chablis
Sonoma County
Spayn

Amoroso
Almanza Albahar
Ribeira Sacra Loures
Vina de Aldea

Espagne
Arribas
Alianza
Riada de Robles
Getaria
Riada Atalaya

Bohigas
Casa Brus
Xarel-lo

Domino des Andinaises
Chimo les Grapes
Chimo les Creatas
Clos Cibonne
Clos des Provence Real

J.L. Chave Selectios
Cites des Rhone
Mon Coeur
St Joseph

Bernard Baudry
Chimon les Grapes
Chimo les Creatas
Clos Cibonne
Clos des Provence Real

Christian Moreau
Chablis
Thomas Laballae
Sanmenero les Monts
Dames
Chateau Vantrevre
Bandol
Blandel Blanc

Photograph by SARAH KARLAN
WINES THAT WORKED IN 2020

ROSE
Amoréz
Gundlach Bundschu
Ruben
Clos Cibonne
Côtes de Provence Cru Classé

PINOT
Emeritus
Russian River Valley
Ruttey–River Valley
Hallow Ranch
Evening Land
Vineyards
Ecole–du–Mont Hills Seven Springs Vineyard

AILIA
Sextima Coast
Williamette Valley
Maunui
Williamette Valley O.P.P.
Merry Edwards
Ruttey–River Valley
Sextima Coast

Greece
Alpha Estate
Amyndeo Hogehog
Florina Asyltrik
Florina Terzile
Vineyard
Gala Estate
Sammetel Thalassitis

ITALY
Antinori
Bobigny Guardo
Al Toscana Il Bruccato
Tosacna Villa
Antinori Rose
Elisabetta Foradori
Tosacna Trentino
Rosalino

Frescobaldi
Brunello di Montalcino
Cascigliandolo
Tosacna Castello di Pomino Benefizio
Montepelino
Tosacna A Quo
Angelo Negro
La Spinetta

La Spinetta
Tosacna Il Rosi di Castellino
Tosacna Vermentino

BY THE GLASS
Alpha Estate
Frances Chateau
Lucie Crochet
Matias Ricobelli
Pascal Jolivet
Piper-Heidsieck
Ridge
Tremback
Whitehaven

Photographs by MARISSA LESNOV
There were several people in one-piece snow suits, like you would see on a mountain, skiing—maybe a little more stylish, as this is New York. I've asked them, "Did you buy that this year?" And all of them said yes, because they want to go out to eat. Even though it is twenty degrees out.

—Christine Wright, Heath, NYC

Wines That Worked

**CAVE FAMILY**

Cain Cellars  
Napa Valley  
Caymus Vineyards  
Napa Valley  
Caymus Vineyards  
Napa Valley  
Duckhorn Vineyards  
Napa Valley  
Ferrari-Carano  
Alexander Valley  

Frank Family  
Napa Valley  
Grgich Hills  
Napa Valley  
Heitz Wine Cellars  
Napa Valley  
Jordan  
Alexander Valley  
Louis Martini  
Alexander Valley  
California  

Obidian Ridge  
Red Hills Lake County  
Oschans Ridge  
Vineyard  
Paul Hobbs Winery  
Napa Valley  
Caymus Vineyards  
Napa Valley  
Sieg's Leap Wine Cellars  
Napa Valley  

In 2020

**DESSERT**

Alessandro  
2017 Burgundy  
Andonti Carv  
Badia a Collioure  
Vin Santo Toscana  
Feersa  
Dona Antionia Porto  
Fosco  
Bin 27 Porto  
Graham's  
10 Year Tawny Porto  
Taylor Fladgate  
10 Year Tawny Porto  
Warre's  
10 Year Tawny  

Smith Woodhouse  
10 Year Tawny Porto  
Taylor Fladgate  
10 Year Tawny Porto  
Warre's  
10 Year Tawny  

"I have to think that by summer or fall people are going to run out like they've been in a bomb shelter for the past year."

—Brent Kroll, McKinney, TX, Washington DC

"The pandemic has brought out a lot of ugliness, and a lot of kindness. It's made me question what hospitality really is."

—Mariana Caldwell, CA, Santa Monica, California
32nd Annual Restaurant Poll

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