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### ON THE COVER

This issue's cover photo taken by Nikki Konefsky Deas at Deli Lane Café & Tavern in Miami, Florida. From left, Gypsy Lou, Kathy Barrow, Adriana Sol.

# Embracing Boutique Brands:

## Creating the Competitive Edge Behind the Bar

By Ann Ewing

Every restaurant works to create its point of difference—the unique quality, offering or ambiance that sets it apart from the sea of eateries competing for customers. Rusty Romo, owner of Harry Browne's in Annapolis, Maryland, has found that relationship-building at the bar is one pivotal way that he engages customers and retains a loyal following.

"Our bar is always stocked with hand-batched and boutique spirits that are outside the mainstream and often unknown," Romo explains. "We certainly carry the national brands, but our customers know that they'll find spirits with distinctive character and unexpected stories behind our bar. For example, we carry an extensive array of Cognacs, Armagnacs and Brandies, and customers know that our staff can educate them about the subtle differences and remarkable qualities of each. They come here for our great food and that one-on-one experience with our knowledgeable bar staff."

Located just blocks from the U.S. Naval Academy, Harry Browne's is an upscale restaurant that attracts visitors from around the country, while enjoying a consistent following of loyal fans from the Maryland and D.C. areas. Romo is committed to giving all guests a unique dining experience by serving "Lavish Lunches, Divine Dinners and Sumptuous Sunday Brunch." The highly regarded restaurant features menu favorites with many local highlights, including limoncello mussels, crispy fried oysters, and cream of crab soup. Harry Browne's also is famous for its Maryland jumbo lump crab cakes served with scallion mashed potatoes, corn and Smithfield Ham succotash, and fried green tomatoes with smoky corn sauce.

As a result of its creative menu and impeccable service, Harry Browne's has enjoyed accolades from outlets ranging from Southern Living and The Evening Capital to the Inland Waterway Guide.

Romo doesn't look for the next big trend as much as he seeks out the extraordinary and rare. Last year, for example, Romo made the decision to add Cold River Vodka to his bar. This Maine-made, triple-batch-distilled, gluten-free vodka has been earning rave review from the spirits world but was unknown to many customers at Harry Browne's. Romo's bartenders were impressed with the vodka's flavor and then enthralled by its story. It was natural to begin sharing their enthusiasm with customers.

"We were intrigued by Cold River," Romo says. "We love that it's Maine-made and distilled in copper potstills. And the fact that the potatoes Cold River uses come from one of the partner's own family farm in Maine is such a fantastic nuance to share with our guests. We're pretty particular about the spirits we carry, and the truth is, in our opinion, Cold River has a flavor character that a lot of the mass-produced brands just lack."

The company's Blueberry Flavored Vodka, made with wild Maine blueberries from a family-owned farm in Down East Maine, adds to that character. The blueberry vodka is produced in limited quantities, based on the highs and lows of the berry season. In this sense, as well, Cold River's commitment to supporting local farmers adds to its appeal and purity.

Romo uses the vodka's rave reviews and awards from such industry notables as Wine Enthusiast, TIME magazine, Bon Appétit, and F. Paul Pacult's SPIRIT JOURNAL – as well as of the company's very intriguing story – to draw customers in and encourage trial. It's an effortless draw to the bar and to the restaurant's cocktail menu.

"It becomes a hand sell, but the time is well invested," he says. "Our guests really enjoy getting an inside look at these smaller, artisanal companies. They leave here having enjoyed a great cocktail and, more important, feeling that they were a part of the 'discovery process.' They appreciate that kind of added service and detail, and that's why they come to Harry Browne's again and again."

While lining the bar with lesser-known spirits might be considered a risky move, Romo and his bar staff make an investment in educating guests and encouraging them to branch out and try something new. For example, after a new spirit comes on board, Romo offers an attractive introductory price.

"We make it easy for guests to try new products by pricing them at or near the price of well drinks. That way, they don't feel like we are trying to upsell them on a

"We really appreciate the creativity that working with independent and innovative restaurateurs affords us,"



drink that is untested in their minds. More often than not, they find themselves really enjoying the boutique spirits more, and then we have a convert who helps us spread the word about unique, quality offerings.”

If the prices and the fanciful stories pique customers’ interest, creative cocktail recipes keep them coming back for more. This year, one of Romo’s top bartenders created the “Naptini,” a splashy Cold River Blueberry Vodka and cranberry juice cocktail that received great customer feedback. Then, restaurant staff worked with Cold River’s D.C.-area sales rep to create the “Slice of Maine,” another Cold River cocktail that featured a floating potato slice, which reit-

erated the company’s uniqueness and generated an effortless conversation starter.

For Bob Harkins, managing partner at Cold River Vodka and director of sales and marketing, introducing restaurant owners and chefs to his product is just plain fun. Cold River, he notes, is an authentic, artisanal brand with a genuinely intriguing background story.

“We didn’t craft a story to sell our vodka to Rusty or his guests,” he explains. “We set out to handcraft an outstanding vodka, and in the process, our story unfolded. Cold River Vodka has an inherent uniqueness that naturally adds to its distinctive flavor.

“We really appreciate the creativity that working with independent and innovative restaurateurs affords us,” Harkins adds. “We enjoy helping them make the most of our product. Harry Browne’s is a great example of a partnership that works very well for all involved.”

It’s those kinds of partnerships that encourage Romo to stay the course with the smaller distilleries. He gives new brands a chance, and they give him outstanding flavor and distinctive character, which he can, in turn, share with customers – who enthusiastically return year after year.

## DROPPED SWEET CORN

By Diana Jones

Through technology and commerce, the globe’s harvest is at arms-length, but has that left us short sighted when it comes to local produce? Regional distributors, such as the Pocono Produce Company in Pennsylvania, provide exciting and necessary access to produce across the nation and around the world, but sometimes our own backyards are as good of a resource. Jeff Anthony, sales manager with Pocono advises that “The customers of our customers, the people eating at our operator’s restaurants, are much more educated about food than they were five years ago.” Quality, from near or far, is the bottom issue.

Heather Hilleren, creator of GreenLeaf Market discovered first-hand that the grass isn’t always greener on the other side of the world, at least not after time spent in holding and shipping. Based out of Madison, Wisconsin, Heather has created a revolutionary website to assist anyone interested in getting the best, freshest, local produce without the headache and hassle. GreenLeaf Market is a website that is accessible nationwide that focuses on connecting local farmers with local buyers. While the idea of buying produce locally seems simple enough, and hardly revolutionary, Heather’s time working for a natural foods grocery proved the situation to be otherwise.

Heather stated that over time the store was buying fewer and fewer products from local vendors and more and more that had to be shipped from across the nation. “Surveys showed that it wasn’t a lack of customer interest in the local product,” Heather pointed out. Rather, the difficulty of contacting, contracting, and fully connecting with producers convinced buyers to pursue larger purveyors who had easy ordering systems in place

**GreenLeaf Market is a website that is accessible nationwide that focuses on connecting local farmers with local buyers.**

**TRY LOCAL**

for the same produce. Distributors like Affiliated Foods in Texas lessen the buyers’ work load but cannot avoid increasing processing time for orders. Heather recalled a common saying amongst growers, “If a farmer drops an ear of sweet corn, when he turns around, it’s gone bad.” For Heather

and the grocery store, it wasn’t sweet corn, but more mushrooms that left them with a bittersweet taste. Since it was such a hassle to handle all of the paper work and communication required to get the mushrooms from local growers, the grocery ordered the product from Washington, across the United States, and received crumpled, unusable product due to the shipping and holding time. Despite the best efforts of regional distributors, some product just doesn’t have the shelf life to last on a cross-country road trip.

Driven by a passion for the freshest and best product, Heather has created GreenLeaf Market to take the frustrations out of ordering locally and to put the fresh back into food. While regional distributors are still an excellent resource, restaurants nationwide now also have the option of going to the site and searching the area for farmers with goods to sell. At no cost, farmers can register with the site for a free webpage where potential buyers can get their contact information. For a small registration fee, farmers can also gain the ability to list their products and to regularly update the list along with costs. Independent restaurant owners now have ease of access to local product at fair prices, making their pocketbooks and customers happy.

For those who may be less familiar with certain

produce, whether purveyor or buyer, GreenLeaf Market also has a pricing feature which compares prices from different sources, ensuring that the product is both listed and bought at a fair price. Invoices are automatically created and the terms of payment are still arranged between buyer and seller. Heather’s site helps the local economy while putting the best, and freshest, produce on the plates of customers.

Additionally, a newer part of the site features an online forum for people who need to sell and those looking for something specific to buy. If a farmer has a bumper crop that they need to sell before it goes bad, they can list it on this part of the site and open up an auction, accepting the highest bid. On the other hand, if a chef is looking for a specific ingredient that isn’t readily found, they can list a “wanted” ad, and wait for return offers from local growers.

With her MBA in entrepreneurship from the University of Wisconsin, Heather Hilleren has gone to work creating a business that helps other small business owners on a grand scale. She looks to expand the usability and accessibility of GreenLeaf Market, adding more thorough search capabilities and features on restaurants that have used local produce in the last month. As she looks to the future of GreenLeaf Market, Heather continuously strives to provide new produce options in familiar neighborhoods.

For more information on GreenLeaf Market.org, please visit the website, [www.greenleafmarket.org](http://www.greenleafmarket.org), or contact by mail or phone, P.O. Box 5155, Madison, WI 53705; (608) 554-4800.