

Restaurant HOSPITALITY



Make guests feel like VIPs with wine lockers

Decorative lockers add insider feel for customers and can build repeat business

You may not come across wine lockers very often, but their numbers are growing.

Decorative lockers filled with wine bottles — sometimes a bit of liquor, too — and labeled with plaques that call out the names of local business owners, athletes, celebrities and regular guests, have been popping up in restaurants and bars across the country.

The lockers are designed for guests who have a passion for wine, relish early access to new offerings, or simply enjoy having a supply of wine on hand when visiting their favorite restaurant. In-house sommeliers, bartenders and managers personally help wine locker owners select, purchase and store their selections.

At Barleymash in San Diego, 30 lockers in the “banco” keep dedicated patrons’ liquor safe between visits.

Catering to the wine lover

Any guest who orders wine regularly at your restaurant can benefit from a wine locker

“When I go around the dining room and notice that repeat guests keep buying the same wines, or someone is buying high-end wines, I’ll approach them,” said Romeo Caraffa, general manager at Strega Prime in Woburn, Mass. “I let them know that they can have their wines already paid for and saved for them since they’re in the restaurant a lot. It’s one less expense they have on their bill because the wine has already been purchased in advance.”

Other times, guests may want to go out to eat, but they don’t want to spend money on dinner and wine, Caraffa said.

“With a wine locker, the wine is already there for them,” he said. “That way, a night out could cost \$30 per person instead of \$300 for the group.”

At Christner’s Prime Steak & Lobster in Orlando, Fla., wine lockers can be leased for a flat annual fee of \$500.

“We added the lockers in 2008, when we remodeled and added the lobby,” said owner Alice Christner. “The wine lockers come with the ability to store favorite wines, the help of our sommelier when buying wine, advertising a business on the brass name plate and the forfeiture of corkage fees.”



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Benefits to the business

Besides being a natural conversation starter, wine lockers can generate revenue, whether or not you charge a fee.

Strega Prime has no lease charge for lockers, but guests are required to meet a minimum spend on the wine housed in one of the restaurant's 40 wine lockers, Caraffa said.

"They may spend \$2,000 to build their collection inside the locker, but I also give them 10-percent off of their purchases," he said. "A lot of guests jumped on the offer when we started it, and now I just added another row of lockers because I'm running out of space."

Wine lockers can also improve inventory management, Caraffa said.

"Instead of holding inventory in house and hoping to sell it, whatever I bring in is because someone told me they want it, so it's already sold before it even gets here," he said.

The lockers can even help restaurants build repeat business.

"Instead of going out once a week, guests may go out twice a week," Caraffa said. "And instead of going to a different restaurant on that second night, they'll want to go to the restaurant where their name is on the wall, because this is now their home."



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Adding to the exclusivity

It's no secret that everyone likes to feel special and pampered when they go out, and wine lockers can add to that insider feeling.

“Guests feel like they’re a part of the restaurant,” Caraffa said. “Their name is on it, and when they come in with friends, they show them their locker. They feel like a VIP.”

Twice a year, every Morton’s Steakhouse location hosts a free, invite-only wine tasting, where wine locker holders sample wine that they might want to store. Morton’s provides wine lockers at no charge to its guests. But, since the lockers are given out by invitation only, there’s always a wait list.

Tips for adding wine lockers

If you’re considering a wine locker program at your restaurant, there are numerous companies that offer ready-made lockers for installation.

Christner of Christner’s Prime Steak suggested placing lockers in a visible area of the restaurant to encourage interest.

“Make sure your lockers can be seen by all of your guests and that they are temperature controlled,” she said.

And when introducing the program to guests, be inclusive in order to make the biggest impact.

“Make the lockers accessible to everyone, not just those who are purchasing high-end wines. Everyone is a VIP who walks in,” Caraffa said. “Cater to everyone, even those purchasing \$35 wines.”

Not ready to start a wine locker program? You can still take note of the wines that frequent guests order on a regular basis and talk with them about keeping a supply on hand for future visits.

Liquor lockers get trendy

If whiskey and bourbon are more your thing, liquor lockers are also becoming more popular.

At Barleymash in San Diego, 30 lockers in the “banco” keep dedicated patrons’ liquor safe between visits. Each locker leases for \$800 per year, plus the cost of the liquor (purchased from the restaurant), and there’s currently a wait list. Guests with lockers don’t pay for drinks or bottle service when using the liquor in their locker, and they’re given a VIP card to use upon arrival, letting them skip lines and receive priority seating.