

A New York Store for 83 Years

An Interview with Chris Adams,
Co-Owner and Chief Executive Officer, Sherry-Lehmann

EDITORS' NOTE In 1997, Chris Adams began his career at Sherry-Lehmann as a part-time sales associate during the holiday season, which prompted him to seek out full-time employment with the company. He soon became a General Manager, Managing Director, and Executive Vice President, before assuming his current post.



COMPANY BRIEF Sherry-Lehmann is currently in its 83rd year of business. The Sherry-Lehmann store combines old-world charm with modern sophistication, and caters to wine pundits and amateurs alike. Sherry-Lehmann (sherry-lehmann.com) is consistently rated the number-one wine shop in New York by the Zagat Survey and was referred to as the most "justly celebrated wine store in the nation" by Vanity Fair. The store is located at 505 Park Avenue in New York.

What is the state of Sherry-Lehmann's business?

We have had a terrific year. I'm very pleased with the growth of the business, both in the store and through our e-commerce and mobile platforms.

The initiatives that we have undertaken in regard to always looking at streamlining our supplier and fulfillment processes, and in redeveloping the website to make sure it's sufficient and reflective of who we are and what we carry, continues to pay dividends for us.

It's a very competitive market, but we're as well positioned as ever. This is certainly being proven by the numbers and I'm very pleased with our growth year over year.

With the impact of e-commerce, is brick and mortar still relevant?

The most important thing about brick and mortar is that it identifies who we are. It's important to hold inventory and have a place where customers can examine the bottles. That will never go away because, at day's end, it shows the integrity of the business.

When we look at pricing transparency on the Internet, we certainly want to be competitive. However, we're also aware that we're holding real inventory, properly purchased, stored, and displayed in our store, and anyone at any time can walk in, look at it, and ask us about it.

That, in this market, will continue to be a substantive difference between us and everybody else.

How important are the tasting classes you offer in order to get people into the store?

It's a critical part of what we do since so much emphasis today is on the experience. We can create opportunities for customers and friends to have an experience with a winemaker or an educator in a Sherry-Lehmann facility.

Much of retail is theater, and good theater requires the proper players and good props, and we have those.

The master classes we've done have been phenomenal. We continue to hold these and we look forward to doing them in our Los Angeles warehouse and event spaces, as well.

Our winemaker's Windows on the World Wine School, for which he is famous for, is now taught in a compressed version at Sherry-Lehmann. Every month, he holds advanced classes and, for an affordable price, one can come in and get an overview of Bordeaux, Burgundy, California, etc. These classes sell out quickly.

What is your vision for Sherry-Lehmann in Los Angeles?

California is a great wine market for us, so it's natural to extend our footprint there. We wanted to place an additional allocation there to satisfy customers.

We also envision that it will be a place where people can gather and be with top winemakers, taste great wines, and have unique dinners and experiences with our team.

At day's end, the true vision of it is as an extension of the brand and a way to enhance our presence. We want to bring our value-added proposals, which are competitive pricing, a depth of inventory, an awareness of the qualities of the wine, proper storage, along with effective marketing to position us in the California market.

How important is providing education so consumers can feel secure in making a purchase at Sherry-Lehmann?

We have to provide that education throughout the market. We have to explore with the customer what it means to properly understand, purchase, and store wine.

Over the past several years, we've watched customers become more concerned with the integrity of the wine product – where it came from, who made it, how the grapes are handled, and if it's fermented.

These are the things that I look to help them understand. It's a terrific harbinger for us that people are now interested in these things. Once they've become interested in the elements that forms the character of the wine, it's natural for us to begin a conversation about how the wine is purchased, how it's transported, how it's stored in a warehouse, how deep our inventory is, etc.

If someone wants to order a case from us, I never worry because I know we will have it, and that's important to our market. We carry a substantial inventory that is deep and broad and, as the customer becomes more aware of the qualities of the product, we have to make sure they also know how to purchase and preserve it properly.

How valuable are the relationships you maintain with winemakers around the world?

In terms of supplier relationships, it's important for us to have ongoing communication with our importation distribution partners. However, it's more important for us to be out in the vineyards of the world focusing on building our relationships with the top château domains and wineries, because those relationships become part of the fabric of the store. We have friends around the world and we have to understand what they're going through on a yearly basis because their agriculture is affected by nature. They also must understand what we're going through on a yearly basis because of the vagaries of the retail environment in America. Having that dialogue is critical for us to be able to edify and focus on their brand and, by extension, for them to be able to help us furnish Sherry-Lehmann's brand.

The first thing that makes Sherry-Lehmann great is we've been a New York store for 83 years, so it's hard to diminish that level of achievement. Also, we're a brand that has been on the ground in the vineyards of the world for most of our history and we have developed strong relationships.

What has been the secret to the success of your relationships with your partners at Sherry-Lehmann?

We're all hard-driving, type A, but we like to have fun, and we love the product we're involved with. It's not an easy business, it's highly regulated and very competitive, so a passion for it is first and foremost. ●