

Former PLCB Chairman Maintains Passion for Affordable Excellence

By Jazmin McNeal

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For many, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, or PLCB, took a turn for the better when Jonathan Newman was chairman from 2002 to 2007. He helped lead the effort to open up liquor sales on Sunday and put some stores in grocery stores. His "Chairman's Selection" wines became well known as excellent value buys, and his efforts on the PLCB even won him national prestige as a wine enthusiast. Although Newman has since left the PLCB, that doesn't mean he has left behind his love of wine. His company, Newman Wine & Spirits, will celebrate its first anniversary in January.

Newman said former Gov. Tom Ridge, who appointed him to the board in 1999, inspired him to become a board member. And Newman came to the table with big ideas. He said he knew he wanted to make a difference for the board, bringing a better philosophy to the idea of the state being involved with liquor sales.

But he also brought his personal passion to his work with the PLCB.

"Wine became a passion of mine. As a graduating law student, I read hundreds of books on wine, and I have a good palate," Newman said.

During his tenure as chairman, he was of counsel at Obermayer Rebmann Maxwell & Hippel. After stepping down as chairman in 2007, Newman decided to continue to share his love for and experience with wine, and Newman Wine and Spirits is the result.

Launched in January, the company has rapidly expanded into more than 200 wine retail stores in six states — Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Virginia — and the District of Columbia. The company works with producers of all sizes to find the best wines of the bunch. It's based in West Conshohocken, Pa., but it also maintains an office in San Francisco to be close to California wine country.

Newman says the company strives to bring excellent wines to consumers at an affordable price.

"I saw a void in private retail, a weakening economy and a wave in the industry as a chance to make a difference in people's lives. The retailers needed an advocate to hunt down good deals," Newman said.

During his work with the PLCB, Newman was passionate about making Pennsylvania a wine-friendly state. He initiated marketing plans, pushed for a legislative agenda, began Sunday sales and created one-stop-shop stores, among other developments. He knew employees on a first-name basis, he said, and would personally field any comments or complaints sent to the PLCB.

"I [hosted] hundreds of wine dinners and sampling events with consumers and interacted with store personnel to understand the psyche of the consumer and what drives sales. I also got to know wine makers and wineries around the world to understand where the wine purchasing opportunities were," Newman said.

When Newman stepped down from the helm of the PLCB, he had numerous contacts around the world and he had a reputation for giving good sale prices on quality wines. He knew that starting his own wine and spirits business would be a challenge, but his experience and reputation helped him bring in a variety of customers.

Newman's love for wine began at an early age. Around the family dinner table, wine was a part of his family's lifestyle. His parents (he is the son of retired state Supreme Court Justice Sandra Schultz Newman and the late

nationally renowned plastic surgeon Julius Newman) taught him that wine is not taboo, and a small amount can benefit your health.

"Wine has good anti-aging properties and is good for the heart," Newman stressed. "A small amount each day can improve your health."

Newman handpicks every wine Newman Wine and Spirits features for their sales, personally tasting each one. He was presented with 2,800 different wines from vineyards around the world this year, and only 85 were included in the company's portfolio.

"My fellow tasters and I look for a wine that has a unique story, a wine that will bring satisfaction not only to the consumer's wallets, but to their palates as well," Newman said.

One can make the argument that he is well qualified to make such selections, having been honored and recognized by many wine and liquor associations nationally. He was named Wine Enthusiast 's Man of the Year in 2003 for revitalizing the PLCB. In 2004 he earned the American Wine Society Award of Merit. Marvin Shanken's Market Watch magazine named him in 2005 as one of the top five leaders of the alcoholic beverage industry.

What Newman says he loves most about his business is helping others get a good deal and "making a difference in people's lives. I feel like I am making a difference around people's dinner tables in a positive way."

Newman and his co-workers look at the Quality Price Ratio of each wine, which is how they determine what wines to include in their portfolio. This means they decide if the quality of a wine is worth selling at a lower price.

Expensive wines do not impress Newman.

"I am more impressed when a \$20 or \$30 bottle of wine tastes like a \$50 or \$60 bottle."

About every two months, Newman travels to wine country, whether that be California, Italy, France or another vineyard-heavy locale around the world. Newman makes sure he gets to have a personal connection with the wine makers.

His years of experience as a lawyer and on the PLCB have given him insight into how to run his business efficiently and successfully.

"It is ironic, since I was on the PLCB for so long, that now I am unable to sell my wines in Pennsylvania. But you can drive 20 minutes to get one of my wines," Newman said.

Newman Wine and Spirits hopes to expand to selling more than just wine within the coming year. The company also plans to expand its market into more states, including Illinois, Texas and Florida.

"I have focused my energy on finding value in fine wines. And I have every intention of devoting most of my time exclusively to getting distribution for fine wines and to concentrate on creating value for the wine consumer in the future," Newman said. •