



## BEVERAGES

Senior reporter  
Ed Sealover

ESEALOVER@BIZJOURNALS.COM

303-803-9229

@ESEALOVERDENBIZ

# Taste testing

Colorado wineries shift strategies as uncertain summer approaches

**D**an Foster had it all planned out. The Denver wine company he runs in partnership with John Elway, 7Cellars, was going to launch its long-planned Farm Collection with an event at Empower Field at Mile High stadium, then go nationwide.

The big day was planned for March 13. It didn't happen.

The story of Foster and 7Cellars was unique in its details, but it was emblematic of the Colorado wine sector as a whole. For two-plus years, the industry grew, got national attention and expanded to new products and markets. Then coronavirus hit, and wineries that already were learning a new way to do business had to rethink everything in their playbook once again.

Liquor-store sales are up over the past two months, as drinking is not an activity people have given up during the time of pandemic. But Colorado wineries in particular had several obstacles that made it tougher for them to rely on traditional sales outlets during this time.

Most are small producers that charge more per bottle during a time when people want to pay less. Most are emerging brands at a time when people seek out the known. And a large number of wineries in Palisade and



DAN FOGARTY/PROVIDED BY ATTIMO

A server pours wine at Attimo, which opened on Jan. 10 following construction and permitting delays in Denver's Ballpark neighborhood.

Grand Junction rely on tourists visiting tasting rooms — a crowd that will be way, way down this year.

"During the pandemic, everybody has a lot less discretionary income. And they're not celebrating anything," Foster said. "So, we're kind of like an octopus now. We're putting all our tentacles out there to touch and reach as many people as possible."

Doug Caskey, executive director of the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board, said he expects wineries with a heavier reliance on tourist visitors will get hit more significantly than urban wineries that increasingly serve populated areas like Denver and Boulder. But the real secrets to wineries' success, he said, may be how well they employ everything from virtual tastings to delivery methods, touching customers in new ways.

Foster took to social media with strategic posts and Facebook ads, and reached out to potential customers via email and texts. He sent gift boxes to buyers and vendors and expanded partnerships, donating wine to places like hospitals to grow its name and say thanks to frontline workers who needed a drink.

Jon Schlegel needed a similar retooling with Attimo Wine, the long-planned winery that the co-founder of Snooze an A.M. Eatery finally opened

in Denver's Ballpark neighborhood on Jan. 10 following unexpected construction and permitting delays.

In 120 restaurants and with 30 retail accounts before coronavirus hit, Attimo is down to just three restaurant accounts right now, as the limited number of eateries that remain open and sell wine to go have culled their lists dramatically. Local liquor stores are too busy selling through existing backlogs of inventory to take on new orders, and most that are getting new supplies are sticking to the top 200 stock-keeping units (SKUs), not potential newcomers like his winery, Schlegel said.

Attimo, whose revenue dropped some 80% because of the loss of all event business, has tried new tactics, from a "wine-thru" sale of products (where customers drive through in a line) to launching delivery over an area ranging from Broomfield to Castle Rock. Knowing he can't pack his event space in the near future, Schlegel is thinking of smaller-focus fillers going forward, from pasta talks for adults to cooking classes for kids this summer, as many of them will be without the camps that usually fill their calendars.

"It's almost like a complete restart," he said of his business plans.

Meanwhile, a lot of Western Slope wineries are just starting to ask what they are going to do, said Bret Neal, owner of Stoney Mesa Winery in Cedaredge.

Where Stoney Mesa once got 60% of its revenue from its tasting room and 40% from retail and restaurant accounts, its restaurant sales have dropped to zero, Neal said. He just reopened in late April for to-go sales and expects to get an idea quickly of how far business is going to drop off. And he worries that other Grand Valley wineries that do all of their sales out of their tasting rooms will struggle to be profitable or survive the rest of 2020.

Bookcliff Vineyards in Boulder sets up for a wine dinner, an event that was becoming more popular at wineries along the Front Range before coronavirus. PROVIDED BY BOOKCLIFF VINEYARDS



### ► COMING UP

#### AMERICAN CRAFT BEER WEEK

American Craft Beer Week is scheduled for May 11-17 — a time when all Colorado breweries and most American beer makers won't be able to host customers in their taprooms because of coronavirus restrictions.

In response, the Boulder-based Brewers Association is asking drinkers to:

- Check out the national to-go beer directory at CraftBeer.com for each state to see what local specials are being offered;
- Take a pledge at AmericanCraftBeerWeek.com to give a beer to someone else;
- Consider contributing to the Believe in Beer Craft Brewery Relief Fund, which will offer grants to breweries suffering the most.

### ► CLOSER LOOK

#### HONORING A HERO

On May 7, Strange Craft Beer Co. released Kendrick's Ale, a hefeweizen brewed with bitter orange peel and honey, in memory of Kendrick Castillo, who died during the 2019 STEM School Highlands Ranch shooting while defending other students.

Strange Craft founder Tim Myers and John Castillo, Kendrick's father, are longtime friends who formerly home-brewed together and have set May 7 — the date of the shooting — as the annual day to release the beer. It will be sold until crows are run out, and a portion of proceeds will go to the St. Mary Catholic School Scholarship Fund.



Strange Craft Beer Co. produces Kendrick's Ale in honor of a school-shooting victim. PHOTO BY TERRY O'NEILL FOR DENVER POST