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30 racks of Budweiser, half-gallons of Tito's: The humble packie is essential in the age of coronavirus

Danny McDonald

CAMBRIDGE — It would almost look like a standard late weekday afternoon for a package store, if not for the masks.



© Matthew J. Lee/Globe staff Frankie Arguinzoni, an employee with Supreme Liquors in Cambridge, got three 1.75-liter bottles of vodka for a customer on a recent April day.

At Central Square's Supreme Liquors, a steady stream of customers walk through the doors. Most have face coverings. The woman asking an employee about brands of Prosecco? Masked. The guy who wants three large bottles of Grey Goose from a top shelf? Masked. The man waiting to be rung up with a large jug of white wine? His face covering is lime green.

However, some visages are not obscured. As if noting this as irregular, one of the cashiers jokingly asks an unveiled man, "Where is your mask?"

While the economy takes a gut punch from the coronavirus outbreak, statistics suggest these are good times for stores that sell alcohol. Locally, booze shops from Boston to the Berkshires are reporting increases in sales. The week ending April 18 saw nationwide alcohol sales at off-premise locations like package stores increased nearly 16 percent, according to Nielsen. Over seven weeks ending on that date, sales are up 24 percent, according to that group.

"Liquor stores are going to be OK," said Steven Wilkinson, general manager for Supreme Liquors, while adding [that bars and restaurants are a different story.](#)

Rob Mellion, executive director the Massachusetts Package Stores Association, a Westborough-based group with about 700 members statewide, said that given that bars were effectively shut down across the state weeks ago, “wholesalers are surviving off off-premise sales,” meaning liquor stores,

Mellion indicated the state of the liquor store industry is much more nuanced than it may appear at first blush. Given that restaurant and bar business is struggling, some wholesalers — the folks who sell the booze to the package stores — are making up for lost margins through the inclusion of products store owners do not necessarily need when they’re making bulk purchases. That has driven up net costs for stores, he said. Additionally, there are added labor burdens. Amid the pandemic, some booze deliveries are not being physically brought into the stores anymore, giving store workers and owners another task.

“It’s been tremendously stressful and expensive for businesses to stay open,” he said.

While some stores are undoubtedly doing gangbusters, Mellion said the so-called pantry-shopping, where customers buy in bulk, that occurred at the beginning of the pandemic is starting to decline.

The state’s Alcoholic Beverages Control Commission has received just one request, which it granted, for an extension of credit from a package store since the start of the pandemic. Wholesalers are allowed to offer stores 60 days to pay their bills, but stores can ask state authorities for more time. But Mellion said some stores have applied for federal pandemic relief, funding which may have saved them from needing to apply for a credit extension from the state. He said he was aware of at least 15 retailers in Massachusetts who received such relief.

At the Cambridge Supreme Liquors location, recent sales are down by an estimated 18 to 20 percent, said Wilkinson. Company brass attributed that bad news to students from nearby colleges like Harvard and MIT being sent home. At the company’s Quincy location, meanwhile, Wilkinson estimated sales are up about 18 percent. For its store on Gallivan Boulevard in Dorchester, sales are also up.

“It depends on the neighborhood,” said Tom Cifrino, president and chief executive of the company.

There may be other pandemic factors at work. According to Wilkinson, the company also saw an initial pandemic-induced surge in sales at its Fields Corner store, but that trend flattened once Boston authorities recommended a nighttime curfew.

The pandemic also appears to be changing people’s buying habits, he said. More people are buying Budweiser 30 packs, for instance, a product that hasn’t sold well for years, according to Wilkinson. People who typically buy a fifth of Tito’s vodka are now buying a half-gallon.

Elsewhere in the state, others are reporting a boost in sales. Ed Domaney, owner of Domaney’s Liquors and Fine Wines in Great Barrington, which is located near the New York border in Western Massachusetts, said usually March and April are dreary. It’s the offseason for tourism. The pandemic, though, has seen sales at his store increase by an estimated 35 percent over the same time last year. He said he’s noticed an “almost hoarding behavior” among his customers, who are acting as if they don’t know what the next day will bring.

“What are you going to do? You’re stuck home,” said Domaney. “You’re going to eat, you’re going to drink, you’re going to watch movies, read a book.”

Wachusett Wine & Spirits has stores in Worcester and West Boylston. At the latter location, owner Charles Faucher said the increase in sales has been north of 35 percent during the crisis. One of the major driving factors, he said, has been the cessation of in-person dining and drinking at bars and restaurants. He has noticed an uptick in sales of bitters, mixes, and simple syrups, presumably so people could make cocktails at home. Some of the consumer behavior reminded him of how people stock up on goods the day before a major snowstorm.

“Honestly, I’ve never seen anything like this,” he said.

Meanwhile, Ryan Maloney, owner of Julio’s Liquors in Westborough, said sales are increased, but that many of the products that sold, especially at the start of the crisis, were bulk items, like half-gallons of hard liquor, 30-packs, and boxes of wine, where the profit margins for the store are thin.

“Is it a windfall? Not really because our expenses are increased,” he said.

At Bauer Wine & Spirits, located on Newbury Street in Boston’s Back Bay, co-owner Steve Kesaris said the vast majority of his shop’s recent business has been curbside pick-up or delivery. He doesn’t get into specific sales numbers, but says, “Business is strong.”

Statewide, tax revenue from alcohol during the pandemic are not yet available. The most recent revenue figures, which include tax from sales generated by wholesalers, wine growers, and farmer-brewers, among others, reflect activity in February, before the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic. Since excise tax for alcohol is not imposed at the retail level, the state does not track figures for package store sales.

Back at the Supreme Liquors location in Cambridge, there are pandemic-related changes to the store’s milieu not involving masks. Strips of fluorescent green tape on the floor mark where the store would like people to wait in line in the age of social-distancing. Plexiglass, held in place by wooden frames, now separates the customers from the cashiers at the long counter, another addition prompted by coronavirus.

Frankie Arguinzoni, a 43-year-old cashier from Dorchester, said he’s thankful to have a job amid the crisis.

“I’ve never washed my hands so much,” he said.

One of the customers, 34-year-old Patrick O’Donnell lives a few blocks away and acknowledged it was “a little weird” going about everyday activities in the middle of the public health emergency. O’Donnell thought allowing liquor stores to remain open during the pandemic was the right call.

“People need something to do,” he said, before considering a row of Irish whiskey bottles. “It’s a bit of an escape, if you will.”

Outside, there are more than a dozen bars and restaurants within a 5-minute walk that have been shuttered by COVID-19. Inside the store, the purchases are various; a sampler 12-pack of IPAs, a quarter pint of Fireball, a single can of hard seltzer.

Sporadically, one of the cashiers calls the next customer forward — “Next!” — and another person moves to pay.