

UNCORKING THE CITY | By Lettie Teague

Bubbly Is Percolating

As anyone who has ever worked in retail during the holiday season knows, this is not necessarily the happiest time of the year—even for those shopping in stores that sell Dom Perignon and Cristal and offer their customers free tastings of fancy Scotch. “I just want to get in and out,” snapped a woman to me in Sherry-Lehmann Wine & Spirits when I asked about her holiday plans. “I don’t have time to talk.”

That pretty much summed up much of the mood of many of the shoppers I encountered while hanging around Sherry-Lehmann earlier this week. Thankfully, it wasn’t a mood shared by the Sherry-Lehmann staffers—a helpful if rather harried bunch who spent much of their time dashing back and forth from the floor to the counter to the computer screens positioned throughout the store. They fielded questions and offered fast sound bites of advice, and when the crowds swelled, they all took turns calling out: “Does anyone need help?”

More often than not, the answer was “Yes”; and more often than not, it was Champagne that the customers wanted. Sales of Champagne and sparkling wine have been quite strong this holiday season, according to Pierre-Olivier Camou, the store manager. People are spending more on each bottle and buying in larger amounts. “It’s my impression that people are spending more. If they were buying one bottle last year, now they are buying three,” said the remarkably jolly Mr. Camou, who looked rather sparkly himself in a black shirt and bright pink tie.

As if on cue, a woman next to me placed two bottles of sparkling **Louis Bouillot Cremant de Bourgogne**, one white and one pink, onto the counter.

But most of the customers I

saw weren’t looking for value as much as they were big names like Veuve Clicquot, the Champagne that one Sherry-Lehmann sales associate called “the big orange machine,” in reference to the brand’s signature label (which happens to be yellow, not orange—long story). It’s also the best-selling Champagne in the store.

Veuve Clicquot buyers are looking for the same thing that most customers seek during the holidays: a familiar brand. “When it’s a gift, people really go for the known name,” said staffer Hernando Courtright, who told me he preferred Pol Roger Champagne himself.

Some of the store’s Champagne customers were actually buying the wines for themselves—like the blonde woman who was holding a bottle of the “big orange.” “But I’ll be back to buy my friends’ presents,” she said. Would she buy them Veuve Clicquot, too? “Prosecco, actually,” she said with a laugh. “That sounds terrible, doesn’t it?”

When the number of shoppers grew smaller, I walked downstairs to check out the action on the phones, because Chris Adams, the CEO of Sherry-Lehmann, said a full 50% of the store’s holiday sales take place over the phone.

In fact, the percentage hasn’t really changed that much over the years, he said, even with the advent of Internet shopping. Sometimes people even call while online.

“Sometimes they just want to talk to someone,” he said.

And there were plenty of consultants ready to chat with would-be customers. A crew of 15 men and women outfitted with telephone headsets and computers were waiting to take calls. They reminded me a bit of air traffic controllers, except of course they

were landing orders of Pinot Noir, not passenger jets.

Phone consultant James Morrison, a Thermos by his side, barely paused for breath as he took one call after the next. In fact, he was up to call 146 when I stopped by to eavesdrop. Mr. Morrison was in the middle of taking a gift order from a famous television hostess (who was ordering Champagne, of course).

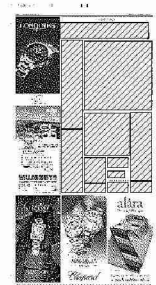
When I returned to the sales floor, I encountered a woman who seemed a bit nervous and also excited about having bought her husband “a romantic Christmas present: a mixed case of Bordeaux, Burgundy and Super Tuscans.”

I assured her that he was a very lucky man and went over to eavesdrop on a man who was looking for a wine that was “like Caymus Special Selection” Cabernet Sauvignon.

I stood briefly amid an anxious crowd of customers who had gathered near the back of the store, waiting for their bottles to be brought up from the basement. (Sherry-Lehmann customers cannot take bottles from the shelf; they must wait to have the wines brought to them.)

This anxious knot merged with a happier group in the back that was waiting too—but in their case for a free taste of \$200 Johnnie Walker Blue Label. I asked a man wearing a Santa Hat holding a glass of Scotch if he was buying Blue Label for his friends. The man said he preferred giving—and getting—Champagne, especially Cristal and Dom Perignon.

As we were chatting, a woman dashed into the store. She was looking for an order she’d arranged to pick up. She had a car waiting, she said. Mr. Camou dashed to the back of the store to assist in the search. A man in a fur hat took up her refrain. He was waiting, too.



Where was his wine?

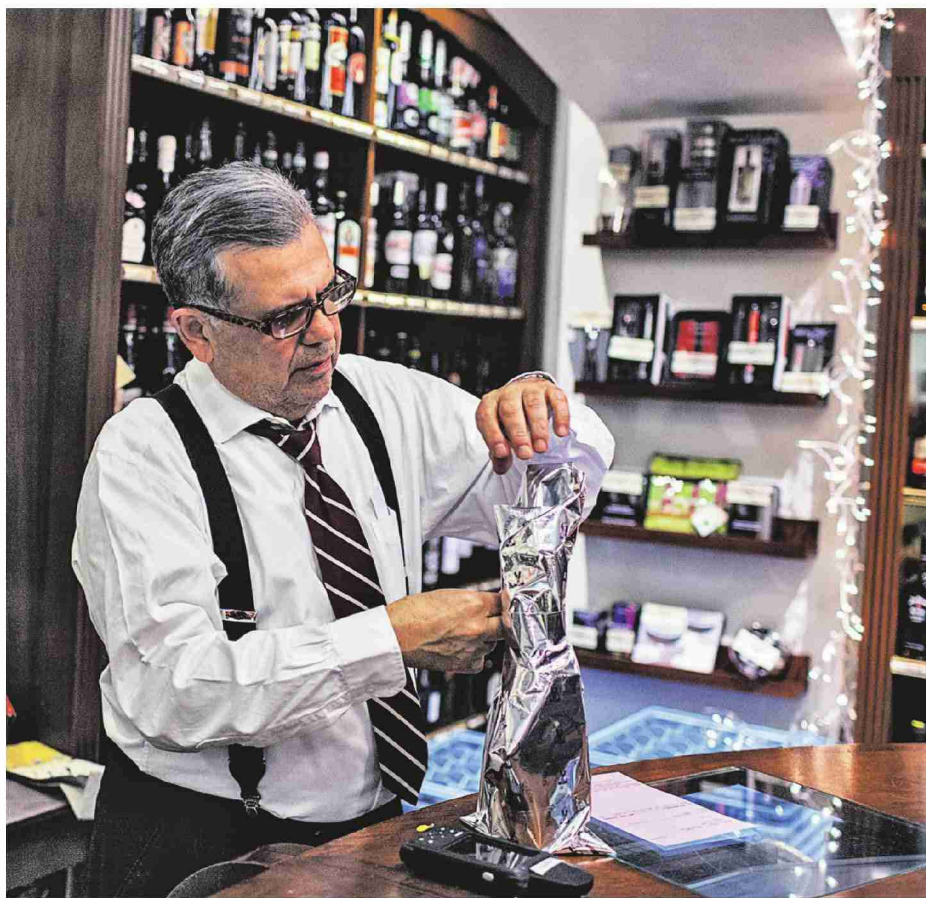
That was the problem with the holidays, Mr. Camou said with a sigh after he had found the woman's package and returned to his post: "It's a time when people should be happy and they're not."

'When it's a gift, people really go for the known name.'

By 6:30 p.m., the phone team had logged almost 1,200 calls and there was an hour and a half yet to go. (They eventually logged almost 1,300, according to Mr. Adams.)



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal (2)



Frank Rivera wraps a bottle for customer pickup at Sherry-Lehmann Wine & Spirits in Manhattan. Below, Nathaniel Allen tastes Johnnie Walker Blue Label, which is being sold for \$200 a bottle at the store.