Mass. Wine Lovers Welcome New Direct Shipping Law

BOB SALSBERG, Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Whether it's pinot noir, merlot, chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon, wine lovers in Massachusetts will soon be able to have some of their favorite bottles shipped straight from the vineyards to their homes.

A provision in the new state budget lifts a long-standing prohibition on direct deliveries from wineries to consumers. It follows a spirited campaign by out-of-state producers and customers that recently received a major endorsement from former New England Patriots quarterback Drew Bledsoe, who operates a winery in Washington state.

The law won't take effect until Jan. 1, but connoisseurs in a state with one of the nation's highest per capita wine consumption rates are anxious to enjoy the convenience of ordering brands that are currently difficult or impossible to find on local store shelves.

"It definitely opens the door to us wine geeks to have, right on our doorsteps, these cool, funky, small-producers' wines," said Lorraine Martinelle, of Worcester.

Although she's made frequent trips to wine country in California and abroad, the best Martinelle said she could do was to have her favorites shipped to her friend's home in neighboring Connecticut.

According to Free the Grapes, an industry-backed group based in Napa, California, direct wine shipping occurs in all but nine other states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Utah.

"It's about consumer choice," said Jeremy Benson, a spokesman for Free the Grapes, who added that wine lovers from Massachusetts had been among the most vocal of those in states with direct shipping bans.

Under the new law, domestic wine producers will initially pay $300 for a direct shipper's license, with a $150 renewal fee each subsequent year. Shippers may deliver no more than 12 cases of wine (containing no more than 9 liters per case) to each person in a year.

The wine must be for personal consumption only and cannot be resold. Wineries must report all deliveries to the state each year and pay Massachusetts excise taxes.

The American Wine Consumers Coalition complained that the new law would still prevent direct shipments of most international wines because they are only

available in the U.S. through wine retailers, who remain barred from direct shipping under the law.

Resistance to direct shipping had come from liquor store owners who feared a loss of business and from those concerned that wine could easily be delivered to underage drinkers. The law requires that wine packages bear the words "contains alcohol" and be signed for at delivery by a person 21 years or older.

Violations could bring fines and license suspensions.

A 2006 law allowed some small wineries that didn't have a wholesale contract in the state to ship wine directly to consumers. But large producers objected, and a federal judge later struck down the law as unconstitutional.

Emily Murray, a Worcester resident and wine lover who said she had been frustrated by a lack of direct shipping, said the state's reluctance to lift the ban wasn't surprising, given that Massachusetts was also slow to end many of its blue laws, such as its former prohibition on Sunday liquor store sales.

Yet it may well have been Bledsoe, who played for the Patriots from 1993 to 2001 and was inducted into the team's Hall of Fame, who nudged the direct shipping effort over the goal line by visiting the Statehouse last year to push for the bill.

Bledsoe, owner of the Doubleback winery, explained to lawmakers that he was having trouble providing samples to friends, fans and former teammates in Massachusetts, including Tom Brady, who succeeded him as New England's quarterback.

"Tom actually bought the wine, and he shipped it to his dad's house" in California, Bledsoe said. But the plan went awry when Brady's father drank the wine before his son got there.

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