



COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

# Passion In The PANHANDLE

THE OWNERS OF FLORIDA'S WINE WORLD HAVE SPEARHEADED AND SUPPORTED EVENTS THAT HAVE RAISED MILLIONS OF DOLLARS FOR AT-NEED COMMUNITY MEMBERS

BY TERRI ALLAN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW COUGHLIN

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**T**hirty-five years ago, Chan Cox, an employee at a wine and spirits distributorship located in the Florida Panhandle, was informed that a wine industry scion would be visiting the area—which, at the time, was not a well-developed wine market. “We never had California wine celebrities come to our area, and we didn’t know how to showcase his visit,” Cox now recalls of the 1985 visit by Peter Mondavi Jr. “I suggested to my boss that we host a wine festival.”

That singular idea spawned a series of annual events, spearheaded by Cox, who went on to establish the Wine World chain of liquor stores, supported by his business partner Robert Montgomery. Those events have raised millions of dollars over the years to benefit numerous children’s charities in northwest Florida. Indeed, the Destin Charity Wine Auction, another Cox brainchild, is regularly named a top-ten wine charity auction by Wine Spectator.

*For 25 years, Robert Montgomery (left) and Chan Cox (right) have built their businesses in the Florida panhandle. Since founding Wine World in 2000, the duo has also focused on giving to charity.*





*The South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, which benefits the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation, also features a retail component, with Wine World (Destin unit pictured) garnering up to \$200,000 in sales of featured wines and spirits.*

“You can’t do these events without industry support,” says Cox, who was named a MARKET WATCH LEADER with Montgomery in 2018. “Our industry is so generous, starting with our local distributors and including the many representatives from national wineries and import companies who come out and pour their wines.” Cox points to the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, which typically features up to 80 tents and as many as 800 different wines, noting that the philanthropic efforts wouldn’t be possible if it wasn’t for Montgomery’s support. “In the early years, there were constant expenses that our company incurred for hosting the events and related meetings,” he explains. “Bob has always been completely supportive. He’s never said no.”

For their outstanding community support and ongoing generosity, Chan Cox and Robert Montgomery have been honored with the MARKET WATCH LEADERS Alumni Award for Community Service.

### **Festival Fun**

The South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival was founded as the Sandestin Wine Festival in 1985. Hosted for years at the Sandestin Golf & Beach Resort in Miramar Beach, the festival has grown from a one-day wine tasting that once attracted 50 people to a four-day, multi-event wine, spirits, craft beer, and food festival that drew 4,000 people in 2019. In 2013, Cox moved the festival to Grand Boulevard at Sandestin, an upscale, mixed-use lifestyle center. Upon moving to its new location and being renamed the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, a 501(c)3 was formed. (The Sandestin Wine

Festival continues to be held at the Golf & Beach Resort, but neither Wine World nor the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation remain affiliated with it.) Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this year’s festival, slated for late April, was cancelled.

The South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival benefits the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF), which launched 20 years ago and is also a 501(c)3. Cox estimates that the festival raised \$30,000 for the auction last year. “The goal of the festival has never been to make a lot of money,” he says. “But all that we do make is given to the foundation. From the very beginning, our mission has been that the festival be both fun and educational.” With the growing popularity of spirits and craft beer in recent years, the festival has expanded to include tastings around those products. The event’s Craft Beer & Spirits Jam, for example, was attended by some 800 people last year, Cox notes.

As savvy operators, Cox and Montgomery also have been able to weave a retail component into the four-day festival. “Another goal of ours is to sell wine,” Cox says. And so Wine World is able to sell featured wines and spirits at the event, typically accounting for sales of \$120,000-\$200,000, he notes.

### **Children’s Aid**

The auction, meanwhile, first held in 2005, is an offshoot of the festival. Prior to its establishment, Cox had attended other charity wine auctions, such as the Nashville Wine Auction and the High Museum Wine Auction in Atlanta. “I thought we could get people to come to Destin beaches



Spirits make up 45% of sales at Wine World, with Tito's vodka (left) the chain's top-selling spirit overall. Beer is focused mainly on craft offerings (right), and constitutes about 10% of sales, though Montgomery says hard seltzers like Tru and White Claw are also big sellers.

in April," he now says of the event's origin. "In the beginning, as founding sponsor, we did everything pertaining to the auction, including cleaning up afterwards." But with the success of the event over the years, Cox has been able to hand over the reins to the auction foundation's staff and board of directors. He remains on the board and serves as the liaison to the wine industry, recruiting celebrity winemakers to attend. To date, the DCWAF has raised nearly \$22 million, Cox says.

Due to Covid-19, this year's auction was pushed back to August and scaled back as a virtual event. Still, auction proceeds surpassed initial goals and raised \$1.35 million, benefitting 16 northwest Florida organizations, 15 of which cater to the needs of children. The remaining charity, Pensacola-based Pathways for Change, aids adults afflicted with substance abuse; all proceeds from the auction's "paddle raise" fundraiser are donated to Pathways for Change. To further support the event, Wine World donated a portion of its wine sales during the month of August to the foundation. In 2019, the Destin Charity Wine Auction raised \$3.6 million.

While the Destin Charity Wine Auction and South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival are well-established, Wine World has added other events in recent years that also benefit local organizations, increasing its ability to give back. The three-day Harvest Wine & Food Festival in WaterColor was founded four years ago and, like the Sandestin festival, proceeds benefit the auction foundation. And three years ago, Wine World launched the one-day Destin Crafted craft beer, Bourbon, and food festival, with proceeds donated to Children in Crisis. While at press time, this year's Destin Crafted had been cancelled, the WaterColor festival remained scheduled for November.

## Complementary Partners

Business partners since the 1990s, Cox and Montgomery opened the first Wine World in Destin 20 years ago. Over the years, the concept has expanded to five locations, ranging from 3,500 to 8,000 square feet. In 2005, the duo expanded into on-premise sales with the opening of their first Wine Bar restaurant. Today, their on-premise holdings include eight venues—three Wine Bars and five spirits-and-beer-focused Craft Bars. "We started together in 1995, and our business has grown greatly in those 25 years," says

### KEY FACTS: WINE WORLD

#### Name of Leader:

Founder Chan Cox and partner Robert Montgomery

#### Founded:

2000

#### Number of Stores:

5 retail and 8 on-premise venues

#### Store Locations:

Northwest Florida

#### Annual Revenue:

\$24 million, split evenly between the off- and on-premise businesses

#### Sales Breakdown:

45% spirits, 35% wine, 10% beer, and 10% miscellaneous at retail

#### Website:

Chanswineworld.com

#### Future Plans:

Cox and Montgomery were planning another Wine World location and a brewpub in Destin at press time, as well as a new Wine World & Market concept in Pensacola.



*Beyond the Destin Charity Wine Auction (2019 event above), Wine World (Destin location top) has founded other events, including the Destin Craft Beer, Bourbon, and Food Festival, to increase its opportunities to give back to local organizations.*

Montgomery, a real estate developer. “With our diverse business backgrounds, Chan and I complement each other. We’ve worked very closely together, and as a result, our business has flourished.”

Sales revenue for the Wine World retail chain was approximately \$12 million last year, according to Cox, while on-premise sales were another \$12 million. As with other restaurant operators, however, 2020 has been a challenging year. “All of our restaurants were shut down during the pandemic, so half of our sales went away,” Cox explains, adding that, on top of that, “we’re in a seasonal area and depend greatly on spring break in March and April for much of our on- and off-premise sales. So we were hit with a double whammy.” But at press time, with the restaurants operating at 50% indoor capacity, plus outdoor space, business had vastly improved, Cox says.

While wine has been the traditional sales leader at Wine World, spirits have taken off lately, now accounting for 45% of the chain’s sales. “Craft spirits have boomed in our area, across all categories, including Bourbon and Tequila,” Cox notes. Overall, Tito’s vodka (\$20 a 750-ml.) is the

top-selling spirits brand at the chain. “We do very little commodity business,” Cox adds. “Craft spirits, with their average \$50-plus price point and higher margins, have been driving our business.”

Wine represents about 35% of Wine World’s sales, and the stores have emerged as destinations for their market’s Bordeaux and Burgundy aficionados. “We’re the only retailer and restaurateur in the area that focuses on Bordeaux and Burgundy, and sales of those products are growing like crazy,” Cox notes. Indeed, through the company’s Wine World Direct proprietary line, Wine World brings in its own containers of wine from France and Italy. Other wines trending at Wine World include California Cabernet and rosé.

Beer and RTDs comprise 10% of Wine World’s sales. Cheese represents 5% and accessories account for another 5%. Since nearly every local grocery and convenience store sells major domestic beer, Wine World has instead focused on craft brews—a move that Cox says has been successful. Most recently, however, “hard seltzers like White Claw and Truly have been on fire,” he notes.

### Good Business Sense

Cox and Montgomery are far from finished with building up their drinks and hospitality businesses. At press time, the duo was preparing to add another Wine World, as well as a brewpub, in Destin. Entry into Pensacola is also planned, with an 11,000 square-foot Wine World & Market concept. “We’re very motivated to expand into Pensacola,” Montgomery notes.

Regardless of how expansive their business holdings get, support for community organizations will continue for Cox and Montgomery. “Our charitable efforts make us feel good, but it’s also good business,” says Cox. “By supporting these local charities and getting involved in these events, there’s a business benefit.” Montgomery adds that local community members will likely continue to do their part. “For Wine World customers, shopping local means more than just making purchases locally, but also assisting local charities.”



PHOTO (BOTTOM) COURTESY OF WINE WORLD