



BEST WEBSITE AWARD

TECH-SAVVY In New Jersey

JERSEY CITY'S SUPER BUY-RITE WINE & LIQUOR, HELMED BY ADITHYA BATHENA,
HAS MADE ONLINE SALES A KEY COMPONENT OF THE BUSINESS

BY JESSICA BEEBE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK RANK

Adithya Bathena, owner and president of Jersey City's Super Buy-Rite Wine & Liquor and CEO of the Buy-Rite Corp., had an early introduction to beverage alcohol retail. "My family has been in the industry since 1990, when we moved to New Jersey from India," says Bathena, who was ten years old when he started stocking shelves in the back room of the Royal Liquors mom-and-pop store in Lakewood. His father, Vimalakar Reddy Bathena, poured his life savings into the business, joined the Buy-Rite franchise in 1992, and a few years later purchased the entire company. Today, Buy-Rite has expanded to encompass 52 stores across the Garden State; ten of them are super-sized, with the criteria being that the space is at least 10,000 square feet or has the potential for more than \$6 million in annual sales.

New Jersey regulations dictate that a retailer can only have two liquor licenses under their name, so Adithya Bathena holds the license of the Jersey City Super Buy-Rite—the first "super" version of the store—which he opened in 2009, and a Holmdel-based Buy-Rite. His father, brother, and wife each own two stores, making eight of the chain's units family-run—though each must operate independently.



Adithya Bathena (pictured) is the owner and president of Jersey City's Super Buy-Rite Wine & Liquor and CEO of the overall Buy-Rite Corp. He joined the business 17 years ago.



Jersey City's 30,000-square-foot Super Buy-Rite (interior pictured) has become known for its expansive product selection. In-store trends are largely reflected in online sales, though Bathena says customers are more likely to select premium products when they shop online.

"It's a careful balance managing the relationships of the stores and making sure they don't share interests," says Bathena, who was named a MARKET WATCH LEADER in 2013. He himself heads the entire franchise; in fact, he started out at the corporate level, as he had a degree in finance and experience in economic analysis. Bathena officially joined the business in 2003, when there were 32 units. He would meet with various store-owners and address their concerns, and he also took the initiative in pricing products across markets.

While he continues to run operations to this day, Bathena also maintains a hyper-focus on his Super Buy-Rite in Jersey City, a 30,000-square-foot unit by the Holland Tunnel that's largely defined by its extensive selection, customer service, and phenomenal website. The success of the site, which has become increasingly important during the Covid-19 pandemic, has earned Adithya Bathena the 2020 MARKET WATCH LEADERS Award for Best Website.

Online Strides

Though Super Buy-Rite has such a prosperous website, Bathena is a major advocate of the brick-and-mortar experience. "I really enjoy in-store shopping, and the experience of dealing with customers," he says. "I like the whole physical nature of the job."

Bathena offered online orders when he first opened the Jersey City store, but maintaining a website wasn't top-of-mind. "But the meaning of the website has changed over the years," he says. "Today, websites are crucial for businesses, and those who don't have them won't last." Buyriteliquor.com lists information on the entire Buy-Rite Corp. franchise—locations, specials, and the monthly ad flyer—but each store operates its own individual website. The Jersey City Super Buy-Rite site can be accessed at Buyritewines.com.

Intense demand for online services from Super Buy-Rite started a few years ago, when Bathena expanded delivery operations into its own department, with a full-time manager and four drivers. Overall, online business has been up by about 30% for each of the last two years. "Since we first opened, we've been running deliveries," he says. "We were one of the first

KEY FACTS: SUPER BUY-RITE

Name of Leader:

Adithya Bathena, owner and president of Jersey City's Super Buy-Rite and CEO of the Buy-Rite Corp.

Founded: Super Buy-Rite was founded in 2009.

Number of stores:

The Buy-Rite Corp. encompasses 52 stores across New Jersey; ten of them are super-sized.

Location:

Bathena's Super Buy-Rite is in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Annual revenue:

Jersey City's Super Buy-Rite has revenue of more than \$15 million.

Sales breakdown:

The Jersey City store specifically sees sales of 38% wine, 37% spirits, and 22% beer.

Number of employees: 40 at Super Buy-Rite

Website: Buyritewines.com, Buyriteliquor.com

Future plans:

Bathena hopes to continue expanding the franchise and will work on improving the company's online components.

stores in the area doing it regularly. But today, it's different—every store delivers. So while the total delivery dollars have gone up, but the piece of the pie gets smaller each year.”

When Covid-19 began to unfold in mid-March—with New Jersey a large epicenter of the virus—the online department grew even more. “It became 60% of my business, which was a sudden wake-up call,” Bathena explains. He pledged a commitment to the website, and has helped it run smoothly through the pandemic. “I’m now treating the site not only as a department, but as a separate store—a separate entity with its own budget,” he says.

In June, Bathena shifted the franchise's sites to the City Hive platform, which had already been running the company's app since 2017. “It was easier to have everything streamlined,” Bathena explains. “Having the website and app on one platform makes it easier for the customer, because their history is all on one database.” The app is a general Buy-Rite app, and the user can select their preferred store location when they first open it. “Then they can see that store's inventory and prices,” Bathena explains. “The City Hive app has helped me not only build up a tool for my own superstore, but has benefited the whole company.”

Bathena notes that City Hive is great for targeted promotions; the platform can access purchase histories to communicate with customers in personalized ways, rather than sending one mass email to an entire database. One employee is trained in running the app, site, and p-o-s system, and employees from across the chain can easily join in on email campaigns and other promotions. What's more, Buy-Rite employs its own graphic artists to create banners for the site and app. In addition to its site, app, and email campaigns, Super Buy-Rite maintains social media accounts to connect with customers, and works as a retail partner with online delivery service Drizly. In fact, Bathena was one of the first retailers to use Drizly in the Garden State.

Super Selection

Super Buy-Rite does annual revenue of more than \$15 million. Overall sales have been flat, but Bathena says he has been increasing margins by focusing on areas like craft spirits and collectible wines. The 30,000-square-foot store—in a warehouse that's double that size—has concrete floors and pallet racking in the spirits and beer sections. The wine department, however, offers a completely different ambiance. “We almost created a store within a store,” Bathena says, detailing the wine space's bamboo flooring and wooden shelving. “It feels extremely homey. When you first walk in, you're in a big-box discounter, but when you get to the center, you're in a specialty wine store.”

Wine makes up 38% of sales at Super Buy-Rite; the store boasts approximately 6,000 SKUs, and Bathena is invested in building a more upscale wine clientele. “We sell Bordeaux, Burgundy, and high-end Champagne,” he says.

Some super-premium products include the 2015 Château Margaux (\$1,445 a 750-ml.), the 2000 Château Haut-Brion (\$1,000), and the 2013 Domaine Coche-Dury Corton Charlemagne (\$3,000).

Bathena usually doesn't list those higher-end wines and Champagnes on the website, though. “We really want to deal with the buyers of these one-on-one,” he explains. His strategy is to promote them at wine dinners, which he was hosting twice a month before the pandemic.

Still, Bathena says the store's lower-priced California offerings make up the majority of its wine sales. “California's still



With 6,000 SKUs, wine (shelves left; dispenser right) accounts for 38% of sales at Super Buy-Rite. Bathena is working to build a more upscale wine roster, anchored by strong sellers in California Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

what's most comfortable for most consumers,” he says. “California Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are our bread and butter.” Best-sellers include Josh Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (\$14 a 750-ml.) and Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay (\$13). Other popular wine offerings are Ca Furlan Prosecco (\$10 a 750-ml.), La Marca Prosecco (\$15), and Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc (\$14).

Spirits, meanwhile, account for 37% of sales, with Super Buy-Rite carrying about 2,000 SKUs. Vodka is the top sales driver, with top offerings including Tito's (\$31 a 1.75-liter) and Smirnoff (\$20 a 750-ml.). Craft spirits have also been trending, among them Earl Grey Tea gin (\$35) from Corgi Spirits and Ginger Spiced whiskey (\$30) from Misunderstood Whiskey Co. Jameson Irish whiskey (\$55 a 1.75-liter) is also a longtime bestseller, as are Hendrick's (\$35) and Monkey 47 (\$51 a 1-liter) gins. Bathena also makes shelf space for boutique spirits like Louis XIII de Rémy Martin Cognac (\$3,650 a 750-ml.), and Macallan 25-year-old single malt Scotch (\$1,800). “We like to carry a breadth of inventory,” Bathena says. “Even if we don't move a high volume of the boutique products, we want to be able to offer them.”

Super Buy-Rite also stocks around 6,000 beer SKUs, which account for 22% of sales. The majority of the 54 cooler doors hold craft brews, with popular IPA offerings including Founders All Day IPA (\$18 a 15-pack of 12-ounce cans) and Lagunitas IPA (\$11 a 6-pack of 12-ounce bottles). Mainstream beers like Corona Extra (\$29 a 24-pack of 12-ounce bottles), Heineken (\$28 a 24-pack of 12-ounce bottles), and Coors Light (\$23 a 30-pack of 12-ounce cans) also maintain customer interest. And Bathena notes that White Claw hard seltzer, displayed in the beer section, has a variety 12-pack (\$18) that's been flying off the shelf.

Online sales are mostly reflective of in-store trends, though Bathena has noticed that some customers are willing to pay higher prices when they order products for delivery. "Some of the younger customers, who maybe work in Manhattan and live in Jersey City and have disposable income, rely on delivery if they don't have cars," Bathena explains. "With delivery, people don't care as much about price—they care about selection and speed."

Crisis Mode

Covid-19 brought chaos to Jersey City's Super Buy-Rite this spring as customers stockpiled products. "It was mayhem for a couple of months," Bathena recalls. On March 12, sales were about 250% of what they would be on a normal Thursday. "People were panic-buying, and at one point we had over a thousand customers visit the store for ten days straight," he says. On March 23, Bathena, concerned about the health of his staff, closed his store to foot traffic, resorting to curbside pickup and delivery only. Several other Buy-Rites followed suit. But despite an increase in online orders, the lack of in-store business was a huge loss and sales ended up tanking.

Sales remained down until the first week of April, when Bathena opened the store back up—with restrictions in place. Capacity was limited to five people at a time, though the store was operating more fully at press time, with customers required to socially distance and wear masks.

Of course, Bathena knows he wouldn't have made it through the crisis without the Super Buy-Rite website, which saw a bump of approximately 30%. At his family's smaller stores, there was an increase of 80%-100% in online sales. "The Jersey City store went from doing about \$45,000 a week in online business in 2019 to \$245,000 in one week during the height of the crisis," Bathena says. In June, online sales began to revert to more normal numbers.

Through the difficulties of Covid-19, Bathena continued avidly serving his customers, answering their emails and calls nonstop. Customer service has been a longtime value, and he especially prides himself on being able to help educate shoppers about products—particularly wine. Bathena himself attended a WSET program at the International Wine Center in New York City upon joining the business and has an advanced certificate. Through the

pandemic, he continued to aid customers in purchasing decisions, hoping his advice would help them find moments of peace as they sheltered in place.

Future Plans

Bathena expects Covid-19 to continue impacting beverage alcohol retailers, even in a post-vaccine world. "I think that, long-term, there will be more people ordering online and doing pickups," he says. In preparation, Bathena is reinvesting profits into expanding Buy-Rite's nationwide shipping business, taking deliveries a step beyond a local focus.

When it's safe to do so, Bathena will get Super Buy-Rite back on track with its high-end wine dinners and other



Craft brews have long been the focus of Super Buy-Rite's beer section (pictured). The store stocks 6,000 beer SKUs, from local IPAs to mainstream offerings. Lately, hard seltzers like White Claw have also been trending.

events. Normally, it hosts twice-weekly product tastings, run by vendors or staff members; during the pandemic, the company hosted 2-3 virtual events a week via Instagram Live. But the annual Buy-Rite Foundation event—a showcase where people can taste different wines, spirits, and craft beers, with proceeds going to charity—has been canceled for 2020.

The Buy-Rite Corp. expects to see continued growth post-pandemic; a new store opened in May, and three new Garden State locations are tentatively scheduled for 2021. As for the Jersey City store, Bathena hopes to keep growth at double digits through the end of 2020. "I think we should keep up growth, even once things go back to normal, especially because our pickup and delivery services are only being enhanced," he says. "Larger growth will come from shipping across the country, so we're going to invest more of our profits into the website, app, and logistics infrastructure. Now is the time that the liquor industry needs to start thinking more tech-savvy. The stores that accept technology will be the ones that thrive." **mw**