

RETAILER SPOTLIGHT: ELBE'S BEER & WINE



Co-founder Willie Bobrow at work. (1950s photo)



Andy (left) and Jeff Bobrow run the Montgomery County store.



The well-known Elbe's truck could carry 65 kegs of beer. (1980s photo)



The Bobrow brothers update the daily numbers by hand.

Entering the two-story building that houses Elbe's Beer & Wine in Wheaton is like stepping back in time. Adjacent to busy Wheaton Triangle, the original structure built in 1947 at 2522 University Boulevard existed in a rural community with grassy lots for neighbors.

Today, the 2,250-square-foot retail operation that was founded by the Bobrow family in 1951 is surrounded by businesses, homes and a major thoroughfare for Wheaton's more than 48,000 residents. The store interior still exudes old-time charm in spite of the modern refrigeration units, security cameras and flatscreen monitors displaying the Maryland Lottery *Keno* and *Racetrax* games.

"We took the business to a new level," said **Andy Bobrow** of Silver Spring, who with his brother **Jeff** of Rockville is the second generation in the family meeting Wheaton residents' need for Maryland Lottery games, beer and wine.

Elbe's is Wheaton's oldest continuously operating business. One of the Lottery's original retailers and an original Agent Plus store, Elbe's at one point cashed so many winning scratch-offs and terminal tickets it became the 8th largest Agent Plus store in the state, Andy said. He has worked in the business founded by his parents for 36 years. (Agent Plus stores in 2014 were renamed Expanded Cashing Authority Program stores able to cash winning tickets up to \$5,000.)

The friendly Bobrow brothers play a big role in Elbe's charm, as noted by rave reviews on Yelp and Facebook. They also give the neighborhood store a happy, small-town feel.

"We have an older-based clientele," Andy said. "The mom and dad shopped here and now the daughters and sons are shopping here. We get to know them really well."

Customers who saw the brothers grow up know them well, too, and enjoy stopping in to make a purchase and say hello.

"I've been working here since I was 14 years old," Jeff said. He has devoted 41 years of his career to Elbe's.

Andy is the mastermind behind the store's eclectic mix of old and new. A stepping-stone pattern of colorful alcohol and Lottery product decals covers time-polished tile floors. Decades-old beer and alcohol advertising fliers and signs coat the walls in the store foyer. Towering shelves are neatly lined with dust-free bottles of wine, brews and boxed products. The Lottery stay-and-play counter is also spotless and well stocked.

"As a business, the wine and beer pays the bills," Andy said. "The Lottery is your bread and butter."

THE BEGINNING

Willie and Miriam Bobrow of Kensington founded the business in 1951. They named the store Elbe's after the Elbe River, where he was stationed during World War II. The U.S. Army veteran and native of Poland is now a spry 93 years old. He manned the register up until about five years ago, Andy said, and still visits the store regularly to greet customers. Miriam, 82, worked until December 2013 and is also retired.

Elbe's served as a grocery, beer and wine store with home grocery delivery for years. Today, the store has a thriving party keg and specialty business featuring local brews and imports. The product mix includes Lottery games, of course, plus ice and dry ice.

The couple's five children grew up playing at and working at Elbe's. Only Andy and Jeff stepped into leadership roles and have made Elbe's their own. The brothers run Elbe's with three full-time employees.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Andy and Jeff have embraced social media to promote their business. The website launches with the sound of liquid pouring into a glass and includes a link to an Elbe's jingle engineered by five-year employee Stu Price with a friend on vocals. Historic photos show the community growing along with the Bobrow family.

The Facebook page launched in 2012 offers unusual historical facts, promotes specials and Lottery jackpot rolls. Check it out: www.elbesbeerandwine.com and facebook.com/elbesbeerandwine.

ELBE'S BEST PRACTICES

- * Keep Lottery playslip holders full and supplies stocked.
- * Remind customers about new tickets.
- * Make it easy to see which games are new. They affix a NEW! sign attached to a spring mounted to a suction cup. They move the dispenser signs to flag new games.
- * Keep point-of-sale materials current and visible. "Having POS is what helps sales," Andy said.
- * Make sure a store partner is on site so customers can cash big wins.
- * Embrace social media!
- * Join the community. Jeff is a 44-year member and Andy is a 34-year member of the Kensington Volunteer Fire Company.