

Let Ian Cutler Sell Booze?

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Paul Wellman

Ian Cutler

Santa Barbara Distiller Would Benefit If Proposed State Law Passes

Right now, anyone who wants to take home some craft-distilled whiskey, gin, or vodka after a tasting at Cutler's Artisan Spirits in Santa Barbara's Funk Zone must go around the corner to Les Marchands Wine Bar & Merchant to buy a bottle, which actually traveled more than 100 roundtrip miles or so on the back of trucks through the state-mandated distribution channels. A new state law, AB 1233, would change that, allowing owner Ian Cutler and the state's nearly 150 small booze-makers to sell up to three bottles directly to their tasting room visitors, much like wineries already do.

"What we're looking for is essentially the same rights as the wine and beer makers already have," said Cutler, who spends as much time explaining California's curious post-Prohibition era alcohol laws to jaw-dropped customers as he does explaining his process and product. "You can walk into Figueroa Mountain Brewery and buy a beer or go across the street to Oreana and buy a bottle of wine, but current California law prohibits me from direct sales."

Cutler promised that the bill, which was introduced by Sonoma-based Assemblymember Marc Levine, is not an affront to the state's three-tier system. Those "tied house" laws separate distillers from retailers by mandating distribution companies as the middlemen, hence the very long route for Cutler's bottle to go be sold at Les Marchands, literally a coin-flip away otherwise. "We're not a liquor store and we don't intend to be a liquor store," said Cutler. "We don't want a retail license. We just want to sell our products out of the distillery."

The only announced opposition so far comes from a group called Alcohol Justice, which is opposed to easing alcohol

regulations. It remains to be seen whether the state's major distributors — which the *Sacramento Bee* reports donated nearly \$700,000 to state political campaigns in 2013-14 election cycle, including \$172,000 to members of the committees that oversee alcohol rules — will fight the bill.

Santa Barbara's Assemblymember Das Williams supports the legislation because "it would help local businesses."

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