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Insurance costs may be stabilizing for tavern owners

By Paul Tash
Montana Tavern Times

After navigating a challenging and expensive liquor-liability insurance market for the past six years since the COVID-19 pandemic, Montana tavern owners are receiving some encouraging news.

“We are beginning to see signs

of market softening, even in the liquor liability space,” said Holly Hovland, a commercial insurance agent for Leavitt Group. “While conditions are still evolving, this shift is creating new opportunities and some much-needed stability for business owners across the state.”

For several years, liquor liability insurance has been marked by

skyrocketing premiums, stricter underwriting, and limited carrier options. Though the market remains difficult, Hovland said, “we are seeing some relief and some companies stepping back into the liquor-liability space. Many tavern owners are experiencing level renewals,

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MORE INSIDE



Insurance agent Holly Hovland explains how revenue can change rates for owners. **Page 3.**



MTA photo

MTA meetings put focus on potential state-level gaming changes

The Montana Tavern Association continues to host discussions with liquor licensees around the state regarding potential changes to the state’s gaming-machine play, including raising bet limits and win maximums. Above, licensees gather in Bozeman March 11 at the Ponderosa Social to review potential changes. In addition to Bozeman, meetings have been held in Billings, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, Absarokee, Missoula, Lewistown, and Havre. A meeting in Kalispell is planned for April with others possible. The meetings are for all liquor license holders, not just MTA members.

THC beverages are on the rise. Are you ready?

By Ashley Bray
Bar & Restaurant News

Jake Bullock, co-founder and CEO of Cann (a social beverage containing Delta-9 THC and CBD), urged Vibe Conference attendees to prepare for the “fifth drink category” during his breakout session titled “The THC Beverage Opportunity.”

Sponsored by Questex and held in February in San Diego, the Vibe Conference is dedicated to the on-premise national account beverage industry across restaurants, hotels, casinos, cruise lines, airlines and concessionaires.

Bullock’s session explored the cannabis beverage category, which is rapidly expanding into on-premise venues, with hemp-derived THC beverages creating new revenue opportunities and changing consumer behavior. Bullock emphasized that operators who sit on the sidelines risk being left out of frameworks that could define access and profitability for years to come. Here’s a recap of what was covered in this future-looking session.

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ABOUT OUR NEW LOOK...

I guess you can say it was time for the *Tavern Times*. After 30 years, the trade journal for Montana’s liquor and gaming businesses has a new look. The blue and yellow come from the state’s flag, while the new typography, design elements and general layout create a more attractive and easier-to-read publication. We hope you like it. Feel free to email me at paul@tashcommunications.com with any comments. — Paul Tash, publisher

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Insurance

from Page 1

and in some cases, even modest premium decreases.”

Why market is easing

Hovland provided several factors that are contributing to an easing market. Those include:

- **Improved carrier profitability:** After years of rate increases and tightened underwriting, many insurance carriers have stabilized their loss ratios, allowing them to compete more aggressively again.
- **New and returning market capacity:** Additional carriers are entering or re-entering the liquor liability space, increasing competition and putting downward pressure on pricing.
- **Refined underwriting practices:** Carriers have become more disciplined in how they evaluate risk, leading to more predictable outcomes and greater confidence in offering coverage.
- **Risk management improvements:** Many tavern owners have implemented stronger training, policies, and controls around alcohol service, which helps reduce claims and improves overall risk profiles.
- **Legislative changes:** Updates to Montana’s liquor liability environment have helped bring more clarity and structure to how claims are handled. This has improved carrier confidence in the marketplace and is contributing to increased competition and more stable pricing.

MTA led the way

Those legislative changes came in 2023 when a bill crafted by the Montana Tavern Association to address sky-high insurance premiums for taverns, restaurants and other establishments that sell alcohol passed the Legislature. A top MTA priority, the legislation reformed liquor liability laws in Montana in several ways to create a more competitive insurance marketplace in the state.

The 2023 law places reasonable limits on the ability of patrons and their families in drunk-driving accidents to sue taverns for alcohol service. For example, servers now can only be guilty of serving a “visibly intoxicated” consumer. The law now states that because a server “can perceive only visual or audible indicators of intoxication,” a jury or judge can’t consider a “hypothetical blood alcohol level” at the time of service, which plaintiffs had been allowed to provide in liability cases.

The 2023 law also:

- Limits the damages for

emotional distress per incident to \$250,000 for all impacted.

- Limits punitive damages, or fines to punish negligence, to \$250,000 per incident.
- Requires that lawsuits be brought only under liquor liability statutes, also known as the “dram shop” laws, and not premise liability statutes.
- Requires that the plaintiffs provide evidence of intoxication they plan to use within 180 days of the sale or service of alcohol preceding the incident.
- Requires plaintiffs include the date, time, and circumstances

of the event within 180 days of the date of sale or service of alcohol preceding the event.

Another perspective

Hovland’s market analysis matches a recent one by Scott Tuxbury, a longtime Montana insurance underwriter and consultant. In a presentation to the MTA in September 2025, he said liability insurance premiums in the state were “stabilizing” in response to 2023 legislation – a sentiment supported by several tavern owners who said their premiums actually went down last

year. Tuxbury said liquor licensees could expect 10-15 percent decreases in premiums “in the next year or two,” though he didn’t expect them to drop back to pre-pandemic levels.

Though the current market “softening” does not mean the market is back to where it once was, it is a positive step forward, Hovland said.

“Carriers are becoming slightly more competitive, and that can work in a licensee’s favor when it comes time to renew their policy,” she said.

EXPERT ADVICE

Insurance premiums tied to sales, so keeping accurate books is key

By Holly Hovland

Leavitt Insurance Group

One important aspect of liquor liability insurance that often surprises business owners is that these policies are typically auditable on an annual basis.

What does that mean for you?

Your premium is directly tied to your gross annual sales. At the end of the policy term, the carrier may review your actual sales figures and adjust your premium accordingly. If your business performed better than expected, you could owe additional premium. Conversely, if sales were lower, you may receive a return premium.

Because of this, it’s critical to maintain accurate financial records and communicate with your insurance agent throughout the year, especially if your revenue fluctuates significantly.

For taverns with significant gaming income, how your policy is structured can make a big difference.

If a large portion of your revenue comes from gaming machines, you may benefit from a policy that is rated per machine rather than based on total revenue. In some cases, this approach can result in more favorable and predictable pricing.

This is not a one-size-fits-all solution, so it’s worth discussing with your agent to determine which structure best fits your operation.

Many tavern owners have recently received conditional renewal or non-renewal notices — and understandably, these can cause concern.

Here’s the important thing to know: Don’t panic.

Recent legislation has tightened the requirements for insurance carriers when issuing these notices. As a result, carriers are sending them out more frequently, often as a precaution if a renewal has not yet been finalized.

In most cases, these notices are not an indication that your coverage is being dropped. Instead, they are typically triggered by:

- Changes in policy wording
- Adjustments in rates (either increases or decreases)
- Administrative timing issues during the renewal process



File photo

Holly Hovland, an insurance agent for Leavitt Group, says many tavern owners are experiencing level renewals or modest decreases.

The notices themselves tend to be vague, which can add to the confusion. However, your insurance agent receives the same notice at the same time and is likely already reviewing the situation.

If you receive one, your best course of action is simple: reach out to your agent. They can clarify what the notice means for your specific policy and guide you through any next steps.

While the past several years have been difficult for tavern owners navigating the insurance landscape, the current shift toward a softer market is a positive development. By understanding how your policy works, staying proactive with your financial reporting, and maintaining open communication with your agent, you can position your business for the best possible outcomes at renewal.

As always, having the right advisor in your corner makes all the difference. If you have questions about your liquor liability coverage or want to explore your options, now is a great time to start that conversation.

THC

from Page 1

What are THC beverages?

The most important distinction to be aware of is hemp-derived THC versus THC from marijuana.

While the 2018 Farm Bill resulted in a loophole that allowed for hemp-derived THC beverages, it expired on Sept. 30, 2023.

Congress has passed multiple one-year extensions to prevent a lapse in programs, with the current extension keeping the 2018 provisions in place through September 30, 2026.

Bullock said this creates a 12-month window for the industry's "good actors" – brands and operators building responsibly – to establish the framework for an alcohol-style regulatory model that opens mainstream multi-outlet retail to THC beverages. Congress has signaled support for low-dose THC products, and there is strong bipartisan support for 2.5mg and 5mg dosing thresholds – but not for 10mg and above.

5th adult beverage category

Adult beverages can be separated into the categories of beer, wine, spirits, and RTDs – and now THC beverages. Bullock acknowledged that THC beverages aren't just offering flavor innovation – they represent an entirely new product category altogether.

And this product has serious selling power in the off-premise

with strong category penetration in independent liquor stores, while multi-outlet chain retail adoption is on the horizon. In fact, Cann's own sales in traditional retail – liquor stores, grocery, and on-premise – grew 273% in 2024.

Total Wine & More liquor store said, "THC drinks outsold the entire Chardonnay category in Q1 2024, the first quarter of launching."

Dave Anglum, vice president of adult beverages at Minnesota-based grocery chain Cub, called the THC beverage category potentially "the next hard seltzer or RTD drinks," and said, "it has the capability of becoming a significant category."

While it's clear that THC beverages are making inroads into off-premise retail, where does this new category stand in the on-premise?

Bullock says live event venues and independent restaurants are opening up to THC/hemp drinks. To illustrate the opportunities, Bullock shared a case study of Cann's partnership with Live Nation.

The rollout began modestly with a trial run at Minnesota Yacht Club, progressed to Shaky Knees Music Festival in Atlanta, and then scaled across the Live Nation portfolio to events like III Points in Miami. At each stop, the numbers told the same story:

THC beverages outsold energy drinks and hard seltzers behind the bar.

They held their own against top-selling RTDs – some of the

most proven performers in the live event environment.

Health and safety incidents were down at events where THC beverages were available.

In post-event attendee surveys, THC drinks ranked among the top things festivalgoers said they were glad the venue had offered.

That last point deserves particular attention. In an era of hyper-competitive hospitality, guest satisfaction scores are currency. The fact that a beverage product moved the needle on attendee experience surveys – not just revenue – signals something significant about where consumer preferences are heading.

THC beverage consumer is...

The profile of the hemp beverage drinker doesn't match the stereotype many operators might assume. Cann broke down the demographics of some typical THC beverage consumers.

Soccer Moms (Ages 25–54, Female) – 63% of hemp beverage consumers are women between 25 and 54. They are calorie-conscious, wellness-oriented, and actively seeking sophisticated alternatives that don't feel like sacrifice. This is a guest who already exists in your dining room – she's just not being served the right product yet.

Millennials (30-45) – Millennials are turning to hemp-infused beverages as a primary vehicle for relaxation, stress relief, and mental clarity. They are willing to pay a premium for brands that align with their wellness positioning – meaning strong margins are achievable.

Gen Z Young Adults (18–24) – Over 18 million Gen Z consumers now prefer hemp beverages during social events. One-in-three are also

choosing hemp beverages over alcohol.

Of those ages 21-25, alcohol is still dominant with 50% of this demo having a past month incidence with alcohol. But cannabis is gaining ground with just over 25% consuming it monthly.

THC beverages will eat NA

The session made a bold prediction that THC beverages are coming for the non-alcoholic (NA) category.

Today's guests are more mindful about what they're consuming, and they are drinking better and exploring alternatives. As a result, modern NA programs have evolved well beyond soda and mocktails – today's guests expect beverages that deliver on three dimensions: Effect, sugar/calorie profile, and caffeine content. THC beverages check all three boxes in a way that traditional NA options simply cannot. The guests ordering those zero-proof drinks are exactly the guests most likely to convert to THC beverages once they're on the menu and properly trained staff are recommending them.

On-premise operators should do

The session closed with a summary of where the opportunity sits for hospitality operators:

- THC drinks are not going away. The consumer demand, retail momentum, and live event performance data are too strong.
- Off-premise has led adoption so far, but on-premise will ultimately drive the category at scale. Your venue is where trial and conversion happen.

The fifth category has arrived. The question is who serves it first.

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TAVERN TIMETABLE

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 12–13: Montana Gaming Industry Association annual convention, Forge Hotew Anaconda.

September. 21–23: MTA Convention, Fairmont Hot Springs

STANDING DATES

2nd Tues. of month	Carbon/Stillwater TA 328–4807
1st & 3rd Wed. month	Cascade Co. TA 453–9567
2nd Mon. of month	Central Montana TA 366–9633
1st Thurs. of month	Hi-Line TA 265–9551
2nd Wed. of month	North Lake Co. TA 844–3372
2nd Wed. of month	Lincoln Co. TA 293–4493
2nd Tues. of month	Miles City TA 234–3164
1st Tues. of quarter	Missoula Co. TA 728–0030
3rd Thurs. of month	Park County TA 222–0665
Last Tues. of month	Ravalli Co. TA 821–1853
2nd Thurs of month	Richland Co. TA 433–4354
2nd Thur. of month	Sheridan-Richland-Daniels 474–2358
2nd Mon. of month	Silver Bow TA 560–7375
Last Wed. of month	Southwest Montana TA 835–2150
1st Mon. of month	Toole Co. TA 434–2442
2nd Tues. of month	Tri-County LBA 475–3125
1st Thurs. of month	Yellowstone TA 855–0778

Beer isn't dead, it's at a crossroads

The data is better than you think

Bar & Restaurant News

The recent narrative around beer has focused on declines and lost market share, but the real story may be a lot more positive.

The National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA) shared a variety of data around beer consumption at a recent Vibe Conference in San Diego during a breakout session titled "Why Beer is Still Big Business." The session brought together distributors, suppliers, and operators to discuss the forces reshaping the beer category and where it's headed in 2026 and beyond.

NBWA opened with a chart that provided overall impression of the on-premise industry. It showed consumers spent over \$1 trillion on food and beverage away from home in 2025, eclipsing the spend on food and beverage at home.

In addition, on-premise beer sales actually grew in 2025 (14.8% versus 14% in 2024), picking up share from off-premise retail. On-premise beer purchases increased by roughly \$300 million year-over-year (+2.6%), while off-premise fell \$2.3 billion (-3.9%).

Draft – one of the on-premise's unique selling points for beer – told an even more encouraging story. Kegs gained 4.5 share points within on-premise package mix in 2025, representing a \$596 million gain for draft. Draft now accounts for 55% of on-premise beer dollars, up from 50.6% the prior year.

There are also more beer drinkers today than a decade ago – over 10 million more adults drank beer in the past 30 days in 2025 compared to 2015, per Scarborough Research. The rate of beer drinkers as a share of the 21+ population has held steady at 41.7%. The problem isn't the size of the audience. The problem is winning the occasion.

"The money right now is in social channels," said Kimberly McKinnish, NBWA senior vice president and CEO. "Sometimes it feels like it's harder to sell beer, and I think that's because success is really not just defined by volume alone. Now it's about winning the right occasions."

Pricing Model Is Broken

Price sensitivity also comes into play when considering beer consumption. Outlaw Light's CEO Ari Opsahl was direct: Beer got too expensive, the premiumization cycle has been overcooked, and the industry is now paying for it in lost volume and, more dangerously, lost

On-premises retailers' share of sales on rise

+\$300M

Year-over-year increase in on-premise retail sales nationally or 2.6%, from 2024 to 2025.

+10.1M

Additional number of beer drinkers nationally from 2015 to 2025, growing from 96M to more than 106M.

National Beer Wholesalers Association (NBWA) statistics



drinkers.

"I think we've pushed an entire generation of future beer drinkers away from the category because of price," Opsahl said.

He said beer was historically the most affordable, most sessionable option at the local liquor store. That was its identity and its gateway function. Today, some 24 packs of beer compete on price with a bottle of quality vodka. A beer at a neighborhood bar can cost the same as a margarita. Those comparisons didn't used to exist – and they're driving consumers to make different decisions.

He pointed to a widely circulated industry analysis arguing the pricing model for beer is structurally broken – that major brewers have prioritized EBITDA per barrel and quarterly earnings reports over category health, hiding volume declines behind revenue-per-unit figures. His view: That's a model with a limited runway.

Brian Lebrede, director of beverage for Texas Roadhouse, echoed this from the operator side. His restaurant has built a value-oriented beer program as a deliberate counterweight to price creep. The goal: give guests a quality, ice-cold beer at a price that doesn't require them to choose between the beer and something else on the menu.

The practical takeaway for on-premise operators: Beer's value proposition is its strongest competitive differentiator right now – but only if the pricing reflects that positioning. If a beer costs as much as a mixed drink, the beer loses on price every time.

What Beer Needs Back

Beyond pricing, Opsahl identified a second structural problem: the industry's disconnection from local communities.

Beer was built community by community by sponsoring local events, supporting causes, showing up at the grassroots level. The centralization of marketing functions, the consolidation of

field sales teams, the shift toward national media buys and consistent brand themes ("this brand is for sports, this brand is for golf") has hollowed out the local presence that made beer culturally relevant.

For on-premise operators, this is a partnership opportunity as much as a critique. The brands willing to show up locally – to staff training events, to neighborhood promotions, to operator-driven programming – are the ones worth prioritizing.

Texas Roadhouse sells a lot of beer – consistently, profitably, and at scale. The approach is worth understanding in detail because it reflects a discipline that many on-premise programs have drifted away from.

Texas Roadhouse's beer program is built on brands the guest already knows and trusts, Opsahl said. The menu philosophy is what he called the "first date mentality:" guests don't want to look uninformed at a restaurant, so they gravitate toward brands they recognize. Stocking unfamiliar brands, even high-quality ones, doesn't drive beer revenue – it drives hesitation.

Any new beer brand gets 18 months to prove itself, he said. That means consistent presence in local grocery and liquor stores, measurable velocity, visible brand investment, and a distributor relationship that shows up and

supports the operator. After 18 months, if a brand hasn't demonstrated those markers, it comes off.

Texas Roadhouse doesn't mandate brands from headquarters. Individual operators choose what goes on draft and in package within a curated framework – which means regional relevance matters. A brand that resonates in Texas may not move in New England. The program accounts for that.

On-Premise Operators

The overarching takeaways for on-premise beverage leaders:

Beer is a growth channel right now. On-premise beer sales grew in 2025 while retail declined. Your venue is where the category wins.

Draft is the highest-margin, highest-engagement format. Invest in it and talk about it actively. It's the best sampling tool you have.

Price your beer to win. A beer that costs the same as a cocktail will lose the beer occasion. Value positioning is not a compromise – it's a competitive strategy.

Trust-based brands drive velocity. Guests who trust a brand order faster, with less hesitation, and come back. Prioritize recognized brands and give new entrants a structured 18-month window to prove their worth.

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GIA convention a chance to voice concerns, connect

Montana Tavern Times

The Montana Gaming Industry Association's annual convention will be held Tuesday and Wednesday, May 12-13, at the Forge Hotel in Anaconda.

The event kicks off Tuesday with the fund-raising Freeze-Out Poker Tournament, with registration from 1-2 p.m. and play beginning at 2. The reception and dinner begins at 6 p.m., while the finals of the poker

tournament starts at 8 p.m.

On Wednesday, the GIA will get down to business. Following a buffet breakfast at 8 a.m., the Annual Meeting will begin at 9. The meeting will feature discussion of issues impacting the industry at the state and national levels. The meeting will wrap up by noon.

"The GIA convention provides members with up-to-date information on a variety of industry issues," said Shauna

Helfert, executive director of the Gaming Industry Association. "It's also a great opportunity for gaming operators to network with peers from the industry."

To register for the event, contact Helfert at mtgamingindustry@gmail.com. Those registered are encouraged to make hotel reservations by April 25 to ensure the block rate of \$139 per night. Call the Forge at 406-797-4100 to book a room.

Montana Gaming Industry Association Annual Convention

May 12-13, Forge Hotel, Anaconda, MT. To register, contact Shauna Helfert at



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Four Loko owner explores selling brand

Reuters

The parent company of Four Loko, the canned alcoholic beverage that became a college campus sensation in the late 2000s before being reformulated under regulatory pressure, is exploring a sale of the brand that could value it at around \$400 million.

Chicago-based Phusion Projects, the owner of the brand, is working with investment bank JPMorgan on the sale process, sources said. JPMorgan declined to comment, and Phusion Projects did not respond to requests for comments.



The potential sale underscores how ready-to-drink (RTD) beverages have emerged as a growth category in an otherwise sluggish alcohol market, as beer and wine sales decline and younger people drink less alcohol.

In December, Anheuser-Busch InBev acquired RTD party punch maker BeatBox for up to \$490 million, and in 2024, Sazerac acquired RTD cocktail brand BuzzBallz, known for its spherical bottles.

U.S. beer, wine and spirits sales declined in 2025, but RTD sales grew 16.4% year-over-year.



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Roy Choi: Food, purpose, and staying power

Bar & Restaurant News

Chef and author Roy Choi took to the keynote stage for a very candid conversation at the 2026 Bar & Restaurant Expo. Choi is a voice and advocate for street food culture past, present, and future. He is the co-owner, co-founder, and chef of Kogi BBQ, Tacos Por Vida in LA, and The Chef Truck and Best Friend at Park MGM in Las Vegas. His newest cookbook, *The Choi of Cooking: Flavor-Packed, Rule-Breaking Recipes for a Delicious Life*, was published in April 2025.

Choi was interviewed by Aisha Tyler, an actor, director, comedian, entrepreneur, Emmy-winning television host, and New York Times best-selling author. The conversation covered creativity, failure, and what it means to build something that lasts.

Making people feel seen

“I think what’s great about what you do is that you’re a purveyor of joy,” Tyler said to Choi. “You’re creating a joyful experience and a connection for someone. It’s not just about the plate; it becomes about the experience and putting a smile on somebody’s face.”

Choi attributes this “joy” as the reason for his success. His concepts are places where people can show up as their whole selves and feel seen. They hear music they grew up with, taste flavors that feel familiar but surprising,



After his keynote presentation, Roy Choi gave a cooking demo at The Chef’s Stage where he made kalbi and kimchi quesadillas.

and sense that the place was built for someone like them.

That genuine experience is also why Choi’s Korean BBQ taco truck, Kogi, drew lines of hundreds of people. He was feeding an altogether different hunger – one for connection, culture, and a shared experience that felt genuinely alive.

“The curated experience of Kogi was we’re having a collective moment,” Choi said. “Everybody in this line feels the same way. We’re all feeling the same excitement, and this is ephemeral because this truck is not going to be here tomorrow or even in a couple of hours. We’re never gonna have this exact experience again.”

It’s a concept that operators should lean into, especially as more and more consumers view experiences as a form of currency.

It’s all but impossible to replicate the feeling that a specific room, team, and brand story creates for people, and it’s the thing that sets you apart from the competition. The question worth asking of your own space: Do guests leave feeling seen, or just served?

Go all the way in

Choi also discussed the constant competition and the one-upping of even yourself that the hospitality industry can engender. For him, “food is not to compete, it is to nourish.” The pressure to make every next thing “better than the last” is what burns operators out and shuts restaurants down.

“It’s a weird thing that we have as a society, that we judge each other, that the next thing has to be better,” said Choi. “What if your next thing isn’t technically supposed to be better? What if it’s supposed to just be what it is?”

Choi’s answer to the never-ending race was to just stop running it. Rather than chasing a version of success that was never built around you, Choi recommends operators find the lane that is actually theirs and go all the way into it. For him, depth beats breadth almost every time.

“If you go all the way in, you can

create your own lane,” he said. And he’s living proof of it because the things people dismissed in Choi – his generosity, his love of street culture, his desire to feed everyone regardless of status – became the entire foundation of everything he’s built.

“Going all in” refers to not only building a brand or concept, but a team as well. And when it comes to motivating that team, Choi believes in going all the way into the trenches with them. “I’ve always found that action is the best way of teaching. That’s carried me through and built an organization and a team that hopefully believes in what I represent,” he said. “No matter how big you get and how important you are, how successful you are, the only way to do it is to be in the trenches with them and to hold their hand. Show that what you’re teaching them is what you believe in as well.”

He gave a small but memorable example of how he reframes mindset for his team: Instead of telling someone to pick something up off the floor, he teaches them to think of it as meant for them. This reframe turns a chore into a sense of ownership and purpose.

Final takeaway

You can’t manufacture genuine community, a room where people feel at home, or an owner who shows up every day because they actually believe in what they’re building. And those are the things that separate lasting concepts from ones that burn out in a few years.

Choi started Kogi with \$1,500, a borrowed truck, and a philosophy that people told him would never work. Eighteen years later, it’s still going – not because the tacos are perfect, but because the people who love Kogi feel like it belongs to them too. And that’s something worth building.

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Liquor Biz

Small-town taverns are the place to be

By Paul F. Vang
Montana Tavern Times

We made it through March, somehow. What a crazy month, with big snowstorms one week and record-breaking hot weather the next. Those mid-March snowstorms totally missed the Mining City, so we're hoping for meaningful spring rains and snow. April showers, May flowers ... something like that.

Whatever the weather, the industry news keeps on coming. Here are some highlights.

Journal salutes taverns

What with changing tastes, dry months, crazy tariffs, you name it, there have been plenty of discouraging stories about the hospitality and beverage industries lately. On the bright side, however, the Wall Street Journal had a story celebrating small town taverns. Things being what they are, the story celebrated taverns in New York, New Jersey, and Chicago (I guess Journal reporters probably look at Chicago as a small midwestern town).

In any event, the Journal story calls American taverns "the country's most quintessential institution" – the "third place" between home and work where a community can gather. Occupying the "gray place" between bar and restaurant, taverns aren't fancy. But you can drink a beer, order a burger and linger at a tavern. Nobody's going to kick you out after 90 minutes.

The story highlighted a New York City chef who tired of commuting an hour and a half and found a new home in a small-town tavern and eatery, where he's able to get produce from local farmers. And when the power went out, a bunch of regulars went out back to fire up a generator.

The story concludes that Americans should celebrate our nation's 250th birthday by doing what Americans have been doing all these years: "Show up and order a drink – then do it again and again until everyone there knows your name."

A-B acquires BeatBox stake

Anheuser-Busch InBev announced a deal to acquire BeatBox, a maker of a line of fruity beverages, or "party punch," as a brewbound.com report describes the BeatBox products.

ABInBev made a \$450 million deal to acquire an 85 percent stake in BeatBox, with the goal to make it 100 percent within five years. BeatBox will join A-B's "Beyond Beer" line of beverages, including Cutwater Spirits ready-to-drink canned cocktails and Nütrl vodka-based hard seltzer.

Justin Fenchel, a co-founder and the CEO of BeatBox, said that joining AB InBev was a big step for his company.

"This partnership gives us the opportunity to accelerate our momentum in the U.S. and bring BeatBox to even more fans," he said.

Brown-Forman, Pabst end union

Brown-Forman, makers of Jack Daniels and other spirits, and brewing company Pabst

have mutually agreed to end a partnership, according to a brewbound.com report.

In 2021, Pabst acquired exclusive rights to B-F's Jack Daniel's Country Cocktails FMB line, as well as the right to create new products, which included Jack Daniel's Bolder and Jack Daniel's Hard Tea. After the separation, Brown-Forman will take over management of the supply, sales, marketing and distribution of these products.

A Brown-Forman spokesman said the move will allow the company to "take greater control of our ready-to-drink strategy." A Pabst spokesman said that the change will "allow us to reallocate resources toward ... our iconic brands.



Bourbon declines shutter Cooperage

A maker of whiskey-aging barrels will be closing a facility, laying off 52 employees in Smyth County, VA, according to a report in Cardinalnews.org, an online news outlet in Roanoke.

A decline in bourbon whiskey sales in 2025 was cited as a reason for the plant closure. The company has other facilities in Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

The barrel factory, or cooperage, has been operated by Speyside Bourbon Cooperage Inc., which is owned by Scotland-based Speyside Cooperage Ltd, which itself is owned by a French company, Tonnellerie Francois Freres Group.

Healthcare and the "New Puritans"

W. Blake Grey, a writer for wine-searcher.com, reported on a personal health crisis that could have been made worse by doctors when he freely admitted that "I drink wine with dinner."

Some younger doctors at the hospital where he was a patient dismissed his symptoms because he was an alcohol user – not an alcoholic or alcohol abuser, just a person who drinks wine with dinner.

He said one doctor who interrogated him like a court witness, then asking him how long he's been using alcohol. Grey replied, "How old am I and then subtract 18 (the legal age at the time)."

Grey relates his problem to World Health Organization recommendations that there is no safe level of alcohol use, and that some healthcare workers are taking things too far.

I had a strong reaction to this story. My wife and I are not abstainers, and we would be really upset if a doctor or other healthcare worker ignored or mistreated a health issue simply because we are "users."

California grape crush at 30Y low

The California wine industry in 2025 had one of the lowest since 1994, the year O.J.

Simpson led a slow-motion chase through Los Angeles, and Jeff Bezos launched Amazon. While it was a relatively small crop, a wine-searcher.com report indicates it's a mixed bag.

For wine lovers, a surplus of high-quality grapes became available to private label wine makers who usually don't have access to premium grapes.

From the industry viewpoint, however, it's grim. A report in wineindustryadvisor.com indicates that even with a small harvest, there was a surplus of grapes due to falling wine sales. Some 57,000 acres of grape-growing farmland were taken out of production, and even more acres of grapes were left unharvested.

The bottom line is that the wine industry is pursuing a strategy to become smaller, to get more in line with a smaller customer demand, and it's a painful process.

For another view, a story in The Guardian tells of smaller winemakers in Napa County, CA, who are succeeding in a tough market, much of it because Canada is shutting down imports of American wines, leading to an annual loss of a billion dollars to the U.S. wine industry.

Laura Gabriel, who owns winery and a wine-tasting business in Napa, says she could see the downturn coming, but isn't discouraged. She says small businesses need to reach customers where they are, and she's had success marketing on social media.

"In times of challenge, that's when innovation happens," she said.

Dress codes for steakhouses?

Finally, we'll note that a restaurant chain, Ruth's Chris Steak House, has asked customers to dress up a bit, particularly banning gym wear, pool attire, revealing clothing or exposed undergarments. They also want customers to take their caps or hats off, and if they don't, they will be asked to dine in the bar, not the dining room.

In a foxnews.com report, another chain, Chili's, responded to customers, "The only dress code at Chili's is that you have to be dressed."

As far as I could determine, there are no Ruth's Chris restaurants in Montana. They might not understand areas where restaurants filled with people wearing cowboy hats is totally normal.

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