

Charting a course for the next 20 years of CyberCellar

 By Lauren Hartzenberg

21 Jun 2021

Launched in 1998, wine merchant CyberCellar was among the crop of original online retailers that led the advent of e-commerce in South Africa. Unlike many of the others, however, CyberCellar is still in business, trading under the same name and benefitting from the recent boom in online shopping driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Source: Supplied

CyberCellar introduced many local consumers to the concept of buying drinks online, during a time when most South Africans were still getting to grips with the internet. Celebrating its 23rd birthday this year, the wine and spirits retailer has undergone many changes since its initial iteration, including a few changes in ownership and brand positioning.

Publik, a wine bar, retail and distribution business that champions small-batch wines made by independent SA winemakers, [took ownership of CyberCellar in late 2019](#), following the signing of an agreement with CyberCellar's owner at the time Silvertree Brands (formerly Silvertree Holdings).



David Cope, CyberCellar CEO. Source: Supplied

Publik, led by David Cope, sought to bring a fresh approach to CyberCellar, by creating a sophisticated and curated brand that embodies a customer-centric approach. As a legacy online retailer, CyberCellar boasts a longstanding loyal customer base. Now, Cope and his young and dynamic CyberCellar team are aiming to attract a broader following through a refresh of the e-tailer's offering and brand tone.

"The next few years are about taking our customers with us, giving them added reasons to support us while simultaneously reaching a new audience," explains Cope, CEO of CyberCellar.

Here, Cope shares more on the brand refresh and how CyberCellar is primed to prosper over the next 23 years, while he weighs in on the noteworthy impact of the pandemic on the drinks business at large.

■ ***How have things panned out since Publik took ownership of CyberCellar in 2019? Was there quite an adjustment to be made, and how do you feel the deal has benefitted CyberCellar?***

Firstly, the timing was rather fortuitous. We took over and then a few months later Covid hit, which precipitated a crazy growth curve. It required a rapid learning phase and the need to build the most talented e-commerce team possible.

We've since refreshed and repositioned the brand, added focus around consumer behaviour and curated the offering accordingly. Because of this, I'd comfortably say CyberCellar has never been stronger.



Publik takes over CyberCellar in deal with Silvertree

5 Dec 2019



■ **How has the pandemic and related alcohol bans affected the CyberCellar business?**

The most certain way to change people's habits is to force the change, and that's what restrictions caused by Covid have done. It turned what would've been 2-3 years of progress into just a few months and the companies positioned to support this shift have benefited.

The drinks business as a whole suffered hugely during the periods of a total ban on sales, but those in the e-commerce space are all probably better off now because of the last 16 months.

■ **CyberCellar has announced a refresh of its offering and brand tone. Can you tell us more about this?**

We took over a +20-year-old business and obviously all the inherent legacy positives and negatives that come with that. At Publik we've always been curious as to how we can get consumers to interact with wine in an easier, unpretentious manner and this has been a big part of what we've shifted with CyberCellar.

We did a lot of research to get a better understanding of both existing and potential customers, and realised the biggest shift needed was to focus on the customer, not the product. Understanding what they're after allows us to offer a better experience and a more suitable portfolio of products is just one part of that.

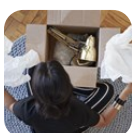


Source: Supplied

■ **E-commerce competition has ramped up recently as consumers have shifted to shopping more online. How does CyberCellar plan to maintain its edge in an increasingly competitive market?**

CyberCellar is all about curation and convenience and that's what we need to be best at. Like any business, we are not just looking at how we can offer this over the next year, but over the next 5 and 10 years. Beyond just selling wine and spirits online, e-commerce as a whole is evolving faster than ever and we need to stay in line with this overall evolution.

We have some exciting plans but I don't want to ruin any surprises!



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Lauren Hartzenberg 18 May 2021



■ ***Any interesting consumer trends you've picked up on in terms of wine and spirits consumption?***

The slow-down in hospitality and travel has been very hard on those industries, but a positive side-effect for wine and spirits is that people are definitely spending some of that disposable income on better quality drinks instead. Instead of an expensive dinner or holiday, buying a rare bottle of whisky or several cases of collectable wines has become a somewhat more accessible substitute.

■ ***Lastly, what are your thoughts on the online retail growth trajectory in South Africa beyond Covid-19?***

It's definitely going to slow comparative to the crazy rate of 2020, but what's important is the growth in number of consumers that have experienced the convenience of online drinks retail. Even whilst returning to regular brick-and-mortar store purchases, many will continue to buy their wine and spirits online too.

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