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Last spring, both wine-consumer enthusiasm and Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board specialty store-employee morale sagged under a gloomy pall. The stores' barren retail shelves recalled the Stalinist era's infamous consumer shortages, with no apparent relief in sight.

At the low point, Jim Short, director of marketing, and Tony Jones, division chief of product management and pricing, urged patience.

They promised a new, focused strategy to provide better selection, quality and pricing across the specialty-wine program.

Change unfurled slowly, but gained momentum by September. Now, leading into the holidays, the quality and variety of specialty-store wine offerings fulfill the pledged improvements admirably.

On recent visits to stores at Penn Circle in East Liberty; Oxford Centre, Downtown; McIntyre Square in Ross; and the Waterworks in Pittsburgh, near Aspinwall, the profusion of terrific wine buys stacked out in aisles actually made navigating difficult. Numerous new Chairman's Selections also hold prominent stack-out positions at the front of the stores.

Specialty wine coordinators say the fun has only started. Behind the scenes in backroom storage, hundreds of new wines await deployment. The inventory's sheer volume challenges specialty wine coordinators to educate consumers. But judging from recent conversations, new optimism has replaced last spring's slumping spirits.

Specialty-wine choices range across virtually every conceivable style and wine-producing region. Take a world tour enjoying these tasty selections:

Austria

2007 Laurenz V "Friendly" Grüner Veltliner, Niederösterreich, Austria (Specialty 26676, \$12.99): This is a regional offering made from grapes grown in Niederösterreich ("Lower Austria") on terraces along the castle-studded Danube River. Pleasant citrus and floral aromas lead to lively lime and grapefruit flavors with refreshing mineral notes. Crisp acidity balances a soft, yet dry, finish. Try it with mild, creamy cheeses and figs. Highly recommended.