

North Western Brooklyn

Fort Greene's "War of Rosés" Continues As Thirst Merchants Plans Move Closer To Greene Grape

By **Heather Chin** - March 17, 2016

A small business showdown between two local wine shops — **Thirst Merchants** and **Greene Grape Wine & Spirits** — is forcing neighbors to take sides in a battle that echoes a conflict from three years ago at the start of Fort Greene's **wine store boom**.

Back then, the issue was broad, with dozens of existing and new wine-sellers figuring out how to coexist and find a niche in the same neighborhood without anyone going out of business. This time, though, it got personal, with Thirst owners Emilia Valencia and Michael Yarmark accusing Greene Grape Wine's Amy Bennett of opposing their move to a new location and trying to put them out of business, and Bennett accusing Valencia and Yarmark of attacking her personally and **organizing a petition** for residents to boycott her business.



The dispute began in February, when Thirst told customers that the store had lost its lease at 187 DeKalb Avenue and was looking for a new location — preferably in their home neighborhood of Fort Greene. Soon, a new address was announced: 11 Greene Avenue, a former hair salon opposite Cuyler Gore Park, located two blocks down and 1.5 blocks over from their current home. They hoped to open in May and applied to the State Liquor Authority (SLA) for approval to move their liquor license.

As part of the SLA review process, the board contacts the four nearest businesses that offer similar services and asks whether they support the new application.

Greene Grape's Amy Bennett said no.

"The SLA makes the determination about whether stores are too close or not. And 300 feet away is really close," Bennett said. "There's nothing in between us like a high-rise or new

development. I don't see how a half a minute walk is far enough. If it wasn't 300 feet away, I wouldn't oppose."



Image via Thirst Merchants.

But according to Valencia, Bennett is "a serial opposer" who has challenged other wine shops moving into the area.

"She also opposed Gnarly Vines on Myrtle Avenue and tried to oppose our license 10 years ago," said Valencia. "She's trying to say it's not personal, but the fact is she just doesn't want

another store near her."

Bennett objecter to this characterization noting that Valencia and Yarmark have also opposed new stores.

"I feel it's a little hypocritical, considering **they opposed Heritage Wines** when they wanted to move in 600 feet from them and I didn't," said Bennett, who added that although she challenged Thirst's moving into 187 DeKalb a decade ago, she wouldn't do so nowadays, since so many stores now exist. "But here, at some point the sales split."

SAVE THIRST FROM GOING OUT OF BUSINESS!

When we found out we were going to lose our lease, we did everything we could to find a new location that keeps us in the neighborhood we've been a part of for over a decade. We were thrilled when we finally found a new spot right down the street, but now **The Greene Grape is trying to block us from moving there!** If they succeed, we are not going to be able to move, and are going to have to go out of business.

The Greene Grape is owned by a lawyer who regularly tries to block new stores from getting liquor licenses in the neighborhood. If you agree with us that it is shameful for The Greene Grape to try and put Thirst out of business just to make a few extra dollars, we need your help.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Contact our local elected officials and ask them to tell the State Liquor Authority that the neighborhood supports Thirst's plan to save its business by moving to a new location.

- Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams: 718-802-3700 / askeric@brooklynbp.nyc.gov
- City Councilmember Laurie Cumbo: 718-260-9191 / LCumbo@council.nyc.gov
- State Senator Velmanette Montgomery: 718-643-6140 / montgome@nysenate.gov
- State Assemblymember Walter Mosley: 718-596-0100 / MosleyW@assembly.state.ny.us

Contact **The Greene Grape's** owner, Amy Bennett, Esq., and tell her that if she succeeds in putting Thirst out of business, you won't be shopping at The Greene Grape anymore.

- amy@greenegrape.com

Contact the New York State Liquor Authority and tell them that there is room in the neighborhood for both Thirst and The Greene Grape.

- jacqueline.held@sla.ny.gov

We are so thankful for your support over the years, and we hope to continue serving you for years to come.

Also split are local patrons of Thirst and Greene Grape. An **online petition** that Valencia and Yarmark promoted on **Facebook** and **Instagram** garnered 458 signatures, as well as comments of both support and outrage.

Loyal Thirst customers Patrick Carroll and Winnie McCroy praised the store's unique offerings and insisted that "there's enough winos, er. oenophiles, in Ft. Greene/Clinton Hill to support multiple wine shops."

Popular wine author Alice Fiering also chimed in, declaring "Bastards! Let's go fight!" while fellow local small business Dick and Jane's **joined them** by writing "Let's fight."

Others vowed to boycott Greene Grape if Thirst's move wasn't approved.

Neighbor Patti Hagan lamented "whatever happened to peaceful co-existence in free enterprise Ft. Greene, Brooklyn? There's plenty of room for Thirst on Greene Ave. Please understand, Greene Grape, that I (& neighbors) will boycott Greene Grape if you selfishly block Thirst from relocating to 11 Greene Ave. Take heed & back off."

According to Bennett, neighbors also came in-person to the store at 765 Fulton Street, "upsetting my staff" with threats to boycott if Thirst weren't allowed to move to 11 Greene Avenue.

Thirst's Yarmark insisted that "we never asked for this kind of situation to happen. . . We were telling people to keep it positive; it's not about [boycotting], but it's about staying alive."



(Photo by Juliette Dekeyser)

Ultimately, the decision was left up to the SLA and at a Tuesday, March 15 hearing, Thirst was granted approval to move their liquor license and go full-steam ahead at 11 Greene.

Bennett told us that she's "fine with" the SLA's decision, because while they approved the move, they also "went out of their way to disapprove the 'bullying.'"

"You might not agree with the result, but if you buy into the process, you can be happy you're heard in the right forum," Bennett said. "They said cyberbullying is not good, which was nice to hear because the only reason I went is because they threatened a boycott."

For their part, Valencia and Yarmark thanked their loyal customers for their support because "it wouldn't have happened without your support and encouragement. Thank you for rallying on our behalf!"

"We do something very specific and we complement each other more than compete," explained Yarmark. "We feel it's better for the community [and] the commissioners recognized that."

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