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— By Lettie Teague

Meet Roberta Morrell, the Matriarch of Morrell Wine Group in New York City

Company includes retail shop and wine bar in Rockefeller Center; ‘I have a great life’

Roberta Morrell in her company’s retail shop at Rockefeller Center. Her parents started the business that she now leads.

By [LETTIE TEAGUE](#)

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The New York wine business was a very small world when Roberta Morrell joined her family’s business almost 40 years ago. Morrell & Co. was one of two wine shops that famously catered to what was then called “the carriage trade.”

Fast forward a few decades and the founders of that other wine shop, Sherry-Lehmann, are no longer in charge and there are now wine shops all over New York that cater to wealthy collectors. And Ms. Morrell, chief executive of what is known today as Morrell Wine Group, is still front and center of it all.

The company started in 1947 as a small liquor store on East 49th Street, run by her parents, Samuel and Charlotte Morrell. The couple moved to a much larger location on East 53rd Street in 1971 and Roberta’s brother, Peter Morrell, took over as company director and wine adviser. The company moved two more times, ending up in 1999 at Rockefeller Center. In the heart of Midtown Manhattan, the Morrells opened a jewel box of a wine shop and their first restaurant, Morrell Wine Bar & Cafe. The family sold the company in 2012 to HMS Consolidated LLC.

When I met Ms. Morrell at her office two blocks from Rockefeller Center, she had just returned from Charleston, S.C. As the public face of the company—her brother has retired—she is always out and about, attending tastings and black-tie dinners and traveling to wine events and wineries, of course. “I know everybody,” she declared and it was no idle boast as she rattled off an array of names that included just about every notable on the New York restaurant-and-wine scene today. A good many of those Ms. Morrell named were once her employees, many nurtured by her. They included Jean Reilly, a Master of Wine; Martin Sinkoff, vice president and director of marketing for Frederick Wildman & Sons Ltd., a New York-based wine importer and distributor; and Mark Fornatale, the Italian portfolio manager of Michael Skurnik Wines.

Both men praised Ms. Morrell and Mr. Fornatale credited her for his career, which began when she hired him in 2001 even though he knew next to nothing about wine.

“Roberta introduced me to the players and made sure I was invited to tastings and events that would help me both enhance my understanding of wine and build my network as a wine professional,” Mr. Fornatale wrote in an email. “...I count my time at Morrell as pivotal both in life and career.”

What did Ms. Morrell look for in a potential hire? “...I like to hire people with an innate sense of fairness but who are passionate about wine,” she replied. “I think anyone who is serious about the wine business needs to work retail,” she added.

Currently, Ms. Morrell is at work on her memoir—she’s up to chapter 27 and the year 2001, she said. Her desk was littered with old Morrell & Co. wine catalogs whose splashy covers were like time capsules of another era: Ms. Morrell and fashion designer Arnold Scassi in full ’80s regalia, a youthful-looking Michael Bloomberg in the store in the 1990s, an even more youthful-looking Daniel Boulud in his kitchen. The catalogs also contain some of her musings about a wine or a meal or a trip that she plans to incorporate into her book.

Ms. Morrell declined to give her age but said: “Put it this way, I’m old enough to keep my shoes on when I go through security at the airport.”

Why has Ms. Morrell remained in the business so long after the conventional age of retirement? She laughed. “I was in show business when I started out in the wine business,” the former singer replied. “And guess what? I’m still in show business. The whole industry of food and wine is theater and I don’t want to do anything else. I have a great life.”

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