



## Tops Friendly Markets

82 Route 15W, Hardwick • (802) 472-6504 • Store manager: Doug Judd • Liquor manager: Rhonda Hess

**R**ecommending the appropriate wine or spirit to a customer can be a challenging part of running a Vermont liquor agency store.

It may be even more so if you don't happen to sample any of the product.

Yet that's the challenge liquor manager Rhonda Hess faces when she arrives at the Tops Friendly Market in Hardwick each day. Hess doesn't drink, but you'd be hard pressed to find someone more knowledgeable about wine and spirits in the Northeast Kingdom.

"I didn't know a lot about it when I started," Hess says. "Now I learn things every day. I'm always learning new things."

How? By leaning on the expertise of the clientele. "I really like learning new things and meeting new people," she says. "I ask the regulars. Some come in and hang around – they tell you about their day and about what's going on. They'll come in and we'll talk about it, or I'll look up information and read about it."

It's a skill Store Manager Doug Judd finds indispensable. Judd has been working in the

grocery business for 27 years, and he's overseen Hess since the store began selling spirits 2 ½ years ago. She manages the store-within-a-store – a portion of the 10,000-square-foot grocery – with the help of five part-timers.

"Rhonda's best skill is her reaction to customers' needs," he says. "She can answer any questions that come up and she's done a great job learning about alcohol for someone who doesn't drink, which I think is phenomenal. She stays up on new items and does a great job setting up tastings."

Customers often gather at the store to sample the latest offerings from Vermont distillers – most recently Smugglers' Notch Distillery and Caledonia Spirits, which featured its Barr Hill Gin. ("It's really good," Judd says.)

When she's away from the store, Hess enjoys spending time with her two children, 8 and 11, and baking. Pressed for her specialty, the 34-year-old hesitates. But Judd is quick to offer an answer: "Cupcakes," he says.

Regulars at the store range from Hardwick

locals to seasonal visitors. Hardwick is about 45 minutes from Jay Peak and 40 minutes from Stowe – "right in the middle," Judd describes. And right in the middle of the beauty of the Green Mountain State, which suits outdoorsman Judd just fine. The Caledonia County town of a little more than 3,000 puts the 46-year-old where he prefers to be.

"I like to do anything outdoors," he says. "Especially any kind of deer hunting."

When he's not exploring the area in his free time or spending time with his wife, Heather, or his 14-year-old niece, he's minding the store. And, at times, finishing Hess's sentences.

"We work well together because we have the right people in the right place," he says. "Rhonda makes my job easy. I don't have to keep a close eye and oversee it all the time. If she has a question, she comes to me and we figure it out. And being a new (liquor sales) facility, we're still learning."

Which is why Hess, a self-described student of spirits, is a value to Hardwick. 

Written by Bill Burke | Photography by Matthew Thorsen