



Alcohol Beverages Retail Licenses

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In Wisconsin, a person must generally have a [retail](#) license to [sell](#) alcohol to a consumer (retail sales) unless a specific exception¹ applies. State law requires separate licenses to make retail sales of [fermented malt beverages](#) (beer and beer-based wine coolers, “beer”), and [intoxicating liquor](#) (distilled spirits and wine, “liquor”). Retail licenses are issued by the city, village, or town (municipality) where the retailer’s premises are located. In limited circumstances, the [Department of Revenue](#) (DOR) may issue retail permits authorizing specific entities to make retail sales of beer or liquor. [Retail licenses](#) (or permits, if issued by DOR) are issued for a specific geographic area that is described in the retail application, referred to as the “licensed premises,” or “permitted premises” (if issued by DOR). Sales made by retailers must occur face-to-face, on the licensed or permitted premises.²

Alcohol beverages retail licenses are generally grouped into categories based upon two characteristics. One characteristic is the **type** of alcohol beverage the license authorizes a person to sell to consumers;³ the other characteristic is **where** the purchased alcohol may be consumed.⁴ This issue brief provides an overview of the retail sales activities authorized by each retail license.⁵

BEER RETAIL LICENSES

Class “A” Beer Licenses (Stores)

A Class “A” beer license authorizes the retail sale of beer in its original package, container, or bottle for consumption off the premises where sold (**off-premise consumption**). This license also authorizes the licensee to provide up to two free beer taste samples that do not exceed three fluid ounces each, to any one person for consumption on the premises.⁶ Class “A” beer retail licenses are most commonly used by package stores, liquor stores, convenience stores, and grocery stores.⁷

Class “B” Beer Licenses (Bars, Taverns, Restaurants, Hotels, Resorts)

A Class “B” beer license authorizes the retail sale of beer for consumption on the premises where sold (**on-premise consumption**) or for **off-premise consumption**. Class “B” beer retail licenses are most commonly used by bars, taverns, restaurants, hotels, and resorts. According to DOR, current law⁸ authorizes a Class “B” beer retail licensee to fill growlers at a customer’s request, while the customer is waiting.⁹ A municipality may also issue a [temporary Class “B” beer license](#), or a “beer picnic license,” to [specific types of organizations](#) for picnics or similar gatherings and other specified events.¹⁰

LIQUOR RETAIL LICENSES

“Class A” Liquor Licenses (Stores)

A “Class A” liquor license authorizes the retail sale of liquor in its **original** package or container for **off-premise consumption**. A “Class A” liquor retailer may also provide a limited number of free taste samples of distilled spirits and wine for on-premise consumption. Specifically, a licensee may provide one free distilled spirits taste sample that does not exceed 0.5 fluid ounces, to any one person per day for on-premise consumption. With respect to wine, a licensee may provide not more than two free taste samples in an amount of not more than three fluid ounces each, to any one person per day for on-premise consumption, unless the municipality that issued the license prohibits the licensee from providing free taste samples of wine. “Class A” liquor licenses tend to be held by package stores, liquor stores, convenience stores, and grocery stores.¹¹

“Class A” Cider-Only Licenses (Stores)

A “Class A” cider-only license authorizes the retail sale of cider for **off-premise consumption**. In order to obtain this license, the applicant must first have been issued a Class “A” beer retail license for the same premises. Because cider is included in the state’s definition of wine, taste sample regulations related to wine also apply to cider.¹²

“Class B” Liquor Licenses (Bars, Taverns, Restaurants, Hotels, Resorts)

A “Class B” liquor license generally authorizes the retail sale of liquor by the **glass** and not in the **original** package or container for either **on-** or **off-premise consumption**.¹³ Liquor may only be sold by the **glass** for off-premise consumption if the licensee seals the glass with a tamper-evident seal before the liquor is removed from the premises. “Class B” liquor licenses are subject to a [quota system](#) that limits the number of licenses that a municipality may issue. In general, a “Class B” liquor license may only be issued to a Class “B” beer licensee.¹⁴

A “Class B” liquor license also authorizes the retail sale of wine in the **original** package or container in any quantity for **off-premise consumption**. If the “Class B” liquor license is issued to a [restaurant](#), the licensee may sell one bottle of wine to a patron that is an opened and original bottle for both on- and off-premise consumption, if the wine is sold with food and is recorked by the licensee. In addition, a municipality may by ordinance allow a “Class B” liquor licensee, other than a winery, to sell distilled spirits in the original package or container for off-premise consumption. A municipality may also issue a [temporary “Class B” wine license](#), commonly referred to as a “wine picnic license,” for the sale of wine to [certain types of organizations](#) for picnics or similar gatherings and other specified events.¹⁵

“Class C” Wine-Only Licenses (Restaurants)

A “Class C” wine-only license authorizes the retail sale of wine by the glass or in an opened original container for **on-premise consumption**. Similar to a restaurant that holds a “Class B” license, a “Class C” wine-only license also authorizes the retail sale of one bottle of wine that is an opened and original bottle, for both **on-** and **off-premise consumption**, if the bottle is sold with food and recorked by the licensee. A “Class C” wine-only license may only be issued to a restaurant in which the sale of alcohol beverages accounts for less than 50 percent of gross receipts and that either does not have a barroom or has a barroom in which wine is the only intoxicating liquor sold.¹⁶

¹ For example, a brewer may sell beer to consumers under its brewer’s permit and a winery may sell wine to consumers under a direct-wine-shipper’s permit. [ss. 125.29(3)(e) – (g) and 125.535(1), Stats.]

² Sections 125.01, 125.272, and 125.51(6), Stats.

³ Quotation marks in the retail license’s name indicates which type of alcohol it authorizes. If the quotations are around the letters “A” or “B” it is a beer license; if they are around the Class and letter (e.g., “Class A” or “Class B”), it is a liquor license.

⁴ The letter in the license’s name indicates where alcohol may be consumed. One trick to remember the difference is, “A is for a way. B is for bar.” [League of Wis. Municipalities, *Municipal Licensing and Regulation of Alcohol Beverages*, 11-12 (2021).]

⁵ For more thorough discussions of the statutory requirements and limitations placed upon retailers, see the following prepared by DOR: (a) [Fact Sheets](#); (b) [Common Questions](#), (c) [Publication 302: Wisconsin Alcohol Beverage and Tobacco Laws for Retailers](#); and (d) [Publication 309: Retail Alcohol Licensing Information](#).

⁶ With respect to Class “A” beer, “Class A” liquor, and a “Class A” cider-only licensed premises, free taste samples may be provided only between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. [ss. 125.06(13), 125.25(1), and 125.25(2)(am) and (e) 3., Stats.]

⁷ Section 125.25(1), Stats.

⁸ Section 125.26(1), Stats.

⁹ This interpretation is consistent with the U.S. Department of Treasury Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau’s (TTB) explanation of what a growler is and how it may be filled. [See [Beer FAQ Bq.](#)]

¹⁰ Section 125.26(6), Stats.

¹¹ Sections 125.06(13) and 125.51(2)(a) and (am), Stats.

¹² Sections 125.06(13) and 125.51(2)(d), Stats.

¹³ A “Class B” liquor license issued to a winery only authorizes the sale of wine by the glass or in opened containers for on-premise consumption, or in the original package or container for off-premise consumption. The license does not authorize the sale of beer or distilled spirits. [125.51(3)(am), Stats.]

¹⁴ This requirement does not apply to temporary “Class B” liquor license applicants. [s. 125.51(3)(f), Stats.]

¹⁵ Sections 125.02(18) and 125.51(3)(a) and (b) and (3r), Stats.

¹⁶ Sections 125.02(18) and 125.51(3m) and (3r), Stats.