



# 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 exception<sup>1</sup> applies. A retailer must obtain separate licenses to make retail sales of [fermented malt beverages](#) (beer and beer-based wine coolers, “beer”), and [intoxicating liquor](#) (distilled spirits, wine, and alcoholic cider, “liquor”). Retail licenses are issued by the city, village, or town (municipality) where the retailer’s premises is located. In limited circumstances, the Department of Revenue’s [Division of Alcohol Beverages](#) (DAB) may issue retail permits authorizing specific entities to make retail sales of beer or liquor. [Retail licenses](#) are issued for a specific geographic area described in the retail license application, referred to as the [licensed premises](#) (or permitted premises if issued by DAB).

Alcohol beverages retail licenses are generally categorized by: (1) the **type** of alcohol beverage the license authorizes a person to sell to consumers;<sup>2</sup> and (2) **where** the purchased alcohol may be consumed.<sup>3</sup> This issue brief provides an overview of the retail sales activities authorized by each type of retail license.<sup>4</sup>

## 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**). It also authorizes the licensee to provide between 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., up to two free beer taste samples that do not exceed three fluid ounces each, to any one person for consumption on the premises. Class “A” beer retail licenses are most commonly used by package stores, liquor stores, convenience stores, and grocery stores (stores).<sup>5</sup>

### 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**. According to DOR, current law<sup>6</sup> authorizes a Class “B” beer retail licensee to fill growlers at a customer’s request, while the customer is waiting.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Class “B” beer retail licenses are most commonly used by bars, taverns, restaurants, hotels, and resorts.

## 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 between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., a limited number of free taste samples per day, to any one person who is 21 years or older, for on-premise consumption, as follows: (1) for distilled spirits, one free taste sample that does not exceed 0.5 fluid ounces; and (2) for wine, not more than two free taste samples that do not exceed three fluid ounces each.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Class “A” beer licenses, “Class A” liquor licenses tend to be held by stores.

### “Class A” Cider-Only Licenses (Stores)

A “Class A” cider-only license authorizes the retail sale of alcoholic cider for **off-premise consumption**. In order to obtain this license, the applicant must first have been issued a Class “A” beer license for the same premises. Because alcoholic cider is included in the state’s definition of wine, taste sample regulations related to wine for “Class A” liquor licenses also apply to alcoholic cider.<sup>10</sup>

## “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**. If the liquor is sold by the **glass** for off-premise consumption, the licensee must seal the glass with a tamper-evident seal before the liquor is removed from the premises. 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**. “Class B” liquor licenses are subject to the [quota system](#), which limits the number of “Class B” liquor licenses that a municipality may issue. In general, a “Class B” liquor license may only be issued to a Class “B” beer licensee.<sup>11</sup>

If the “Class B” liquor license is issued to a [restaurant](#), the licensee may sell one bottle of wine that is an opened and original bottle for both on- and off-premise consumption, if: (1) the wine is sold with food to be consumed on the premises; (2) the licensee provides a dated receipt of the purchase of food and bottle of wine; and (3) the wine bottle is recorked or the cap is reattached<sup>12</sup> by the licensee. In addition, a municipality may by ordinance allow a “Class B” liquor licensee 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.<sup>13</sup>

## “Class C” Wine-Only Licenses

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**. If the “Class C” wine-only license is issued to a restaurant, the licensee may also sell one bottle of wine that is an opened and original bottle for both **on-** and **off-premise consumption**, if: (1) the wine is sold with food to be consumed on the premises; (2) the licensee provides a dated receipt of the purchase of food and bottle of wine; and (3) the wine bottle is recorked or the cap is reattached by the licensee. Prior to the enactment of [2023 Wisconsin Act 73](#), a “Class C” wine-only license was only available to certain qualifying restaurants. Now, the “Class C” wine-only license is available to any person otherwise qualified to hold a retail license.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For example, since the enactment of [2023 Wisconsin Act 73](#), brewers, wineries, manufacturers, and rectifiers (producers) may now sell alcohol they produce to consumers directly under its permit. If a producer meets specified production thresholds, that producer may also make retail sales of alcohol other than those it manufactures. A producer may also establish between one and three full-service retail outlets as authorized under current law. [[ss. 125.29, 125.52, and 125.53, Stats.](#)]

<sup>2</sup> Quotation marks in the retail license’s name indicates the type of alcohol it authorizes the licensee to sell. For a beer license, the quotations are around the letters “A” or “B” (Class “A” or Class “B”); for a liquor license, the quotations are around the word Class and the letter (“Class A”, “Class B”, or “Class C”).

<sup>3</sup> 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).]

<sup>4</sup> For more thorough discussions of the statutory requirements and limitations placed upon retailers, see the following DAB materials: (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](#).

<sup>5</sup> [s. 125.25\(1\), Stats.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [s. 125.26\(1\), Stats.](#)

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation is consistent with the U.S. Department of Treasury Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau’s explanation of what a growler is and how it may be filled. [See [Beer FAQ Bq.](#)]

<sup>8</sup> [s. 125.26\(6\), Stats.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [s. 125.51\(2\)\(a\) and \(am\), Stats.](#)

<sup>10</sup> [s. 125.51\(2\)\(e\), Stats.](#)

<sup>11</sup> This requirement does not apply to temporary “Class B” liquor license applicants. [[s. 125.51\(3\)\(f\), Stats.](#)]

<sup>12</sup> To recork the bottle of wine, the licensee must securely reinsert the cork into the bottle to the point where the top of the cork is even with the top of the bottle, or securely reattach the original cap to the bottle, and the cork is reinserted or the cap is reattached at a time other than during the hours the licensee must be closed. [[s. 125.51\(3r\)\(a\)3., Stats.](#)]

<sup>13</sup> [ss. 125.02\(18\) and 125.51\(3\)\(a\) and \(b\) and \(3r\), Stats.](#)

<sup>14</sup> [ss. 125.02\(18\) and 125.51\(3m\) and \(3r\), Stats.](#)