



BY KENNETH YARDY

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# Pour form

## IS BOTTLE SERVICE THE VERY DEFINITION OF BEING OVER-SERVED?

**Q.** I keep hearing that the latest thing in nightclubs in the US is bottle service. What's it all about and how does it impact on liquor licensing laws here?

**A.** Bottle service is not new, but it has been refined lately in nightclubs. Think of the cowboy movie where you see the bottle of whiskey served at the card table in the saloon and that's the original 'bottle service'. It is a constant theme in movies because it looks cool and makes the people at the table look tough and elite and gives them a status not afforded to the average punter. It hasn't really changed a lot since then.

Over the last few years, bottle service has been heavily promoted in New York nightclubs and quickly spread to the clubs in the other big cities of the US. It's a bit like VIP restaurant service. You pre-book your table at your chosen nightclub about a week in advance and are rewarded with a private area, often avoiding queues and cover charge, and often you will be escorted to the table by one of the staff. Yes, it is a rock star experience. You are obliged to pay for a bottle of spirits or Champagne for every four to six persons at your table, with all the mixers and cocktail requirements at the table. After a server pours the first drinks, you and your party then pour your own.

## “It's nightclub ‘business class fare’ in both style and price”

When you go up and dance, your area is private and secure, and you can invite other friends in. What you are doing is renting your own little area of the nightclub. It's nightclub “business class fare” in both style and price. The sting is that you pay about 10 times the retail value for a bottle of spirits, ie. a bottle of brand vodka can be \$300-\$500 per bottle! However, the practice has been linked with some service issues and some cities are attempting to ban it.

With Australia's responsible service laws, there are some issues which need to be addressed. Whilst it can be compared with ordinary wine service (where the bottles of wine are left at the table), the problem with spirit bottle service is the number of 'standard drinks' in each bottle. Accordingly, the server should be in the area to ensure that RSA is complied with, as well as ensuring that intoxication does not occur. 'Bottle service' is not a licence for the 'upgraded' patron to get drunk or behave badly. It is a legitimate method of service,

just as when one person buys a round for a group of friends. This special service can bring extra profits to operators and hopefully the pricing is set so it does not encourage binge drinking. It is actually the opposite of 'happy hour'-style promotions, in that bottle service promotes other services (privacy and exclusivity) through substantially increased alcohol prices.

The real issue is to promote control with bottle service, as drunken patrons swigging from spirit bottles is not pretty, and will mean government action against your licence and your staff.

If you have any liquor licensing questions, contact Yardy Legal at 497 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW 2010. T: 02 9318 2288 [www.yardy.com.au](http://www.yardy.com.au) Questions are published anonymously.

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