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KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT

For serious collectors, getting a wine cellar organized can be a technological feat for an expert.

By David Shaw

Several years ago, when dessert time rolled around after a simple but splendid dinner at the Hollywood Hills home of a big-time wine collector I'd just met, our host suggested I go to his cellar and "pick out something sweet."

The dinner wines had been Very Serious Big Names, and he assured me – with a knowing smile – that I'd have no trouble finding something equally glorious to end the meal.

Wrong.

Literally panting with anticipation, I headed for his cellar only to discover that everything was so disorganized and chaotic, with bottles jammed in next to each other in no particular order, and cases piled and stacked so randomly and precariously, that I quickly retreated, realizing I was far more likely to *break* something good than *find* something good.

I've since had similar experiences with other collectors, and I don't understand it. Many of them don't understand it. Many of them don't even know what they have, where they have it or how to find it.

Yes, I understand that if you buy a lot of wine and are not basically an orderly person, your collection can get out of hand. But if you really love wine, it seems to me, you'd want to keep track of it at least well enough to be able to drink what you want, when you want it.

My cellar has about 1,200 bottles. Each bottle is racked individually on a simple, letter-number grid system, and each slot has a small metal tag denoting that spot – 12G or 18P or whatever.

I'm an ignoramus when it comes to technology – among many other things – so I don't know how to do an Excel spreadsheet. But I've entered every bottle into a computerized document that includes its exact location in my cellar, the date I bought it, the price I paid for it, the ratings from critics (where applicable) and what the best-guess years are for optimum drinking.

I keep a printout of my inventory in my cellar, and every time I take a bottle out or put a bottle in, I scribble a note. A couple of times a week, I use my notes to update my inventory.

It's simple – and it's fun. To me, it's part of the pleasure of wine. But I'm (a) anal-compulsive and (b) not rich. Still, I was surprised to find out recently that many people with collections far larger than mine actually hire someone to do for them what I quite happily do for myself.

That someone is Jeff Smith.

Depending on just how disorganized a client is – and how much he's willing to pay – Smith will do some or all of the following: He'll put his client's wine bottles into racks, organize them by grape and region and create a database that includes the same information I use. He'll then put all that information in a leather-bound book, on a CD-ROM and in a Palm organizer or other personal digital assistant – and post it on his Web site, accessible to the client alone, by password, from anywhere in the world.

Smith will also periodically update the inventory – and buy wine for the client. With the client's money, of course.

In the case of a visitation by one of the four horsemen of the wine collector's apocalypse – death, divorce, fire or earthquake – Smith's valuation of a client's collection is also useful for insurance, estate and other purposes.

"I had one client tell me he had 3,000 bottles – 'plus or minus 10%,'" Smith says. "He has really good wines, so I said, 'That's 300 very expensive bottles that you don't know if you have or where they are. That's like saying you can't find a Mercedes in your living room.'"

Smith charges \$2 to \$3 a bottle, depending on which services his clients want – with discounts for larger collections – and he charges \$100 an hour for a quarterly inventory update. When he buys wine for a client, he guarantees them the best prices available and charges a fee of 5% to 10% of the purchase price. Smith, 43, who formerly worked in marketing for various entertainment enterprises, got started in his year-old enterprise by accident, doing a favor for his father.

His father, Joe Smith, a former record company CEO, is the man who signed the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, James Taylor, Frank Zappa, Alice Cooper, Van Morrison, Randy Newman, and Peter, Paul & Mary – among others – to their first recording contracts.

In other words, he was a Very Big Man in the music business. He was – and, at 75, still is – a Very Big Man in the wine world as well, with a 7,500-bottle cellar that includes multiple vintages of La Tache, Henri Jayer's red Burgundies, Cheval Blanc, Guigal's single-vineyard Rhone wines, Grange Hermitage and all the First Growth Bordeaux and California cult Cabernets.

Joe Smith was savvy enough to bind the Eagles to him by introducing them to the joys of 1962 Lafite (after which they had it written into their contracts that promoters had to give them '62 Lafite at every concert). With his wine, though, Smith is as disorganized as he is smart. "I belong to 25 different wine groups, but whenever I went to dinner, I could never find the bottle I wanted," he says.

The elder Smith is so passionate about his wine that when the 1994 Northridge earthquake hit, his first thought wasn't to ask his wife, "Are you OK, darling?" but to race to his pool cabana turned wine cellar to see if the wines had been damaged. As it turned out, he says, "more than 400 great bottles were broken." He immediately put the rest of his collection in storage while his home and cellar were being repaired. He then visited his wines every day – "like visiting a sick relative in a hospital. I'd talk to them. I'd say, 'Don't worry, boys. We'll get you home soon.'"

Five years ago, when Joe Smith built a new house in Beverly Hills, he wanted his wines to have a better home too. He asked Jeff to help. At first, Jeff just intended to put the wine away in a more organized fashion and make a record of it. But he quickly realized he could do more.

Then his brother-in-law asked for similar assistance with his 2,000-bottle cellar. Then a family friend said, in effect, "Hey, me, too," for his 350 bottles. Soon, word began to spread among collectors, and the next thing Jeff knew, his Carte du Vin business was born.

"I know a lot of people who can fix their cars or tend their gardens, but that's not how they want to spend their spare time, and they have the money to get someone else to do it for them," he says. "The same is true of their wine collections."

In a sense, Smith is something of a gardener himself. He buys and plants and prunes – helping clients figure out what wines they need to complete their collections, as well as which wines they should drink up or sell off.

"I told one guy to throw out about 15 cases of Chardonnay that were more than 10 years old and not worth drinking," he says.

Smith's clients speak of him in superlatives.

"What Jeff does is just indispensable," says Freddie DeMann, a producer and artists manager whose clients have included Madonna, Michael Jackson and Shakira. In fact, DeMann says, after Smith organized and computerized his 1,000-bottle cellar, "I told him it was the best thing that had ever happened to me, except for my grandchildren and Madonna."