

Wine Spectator

WINE SPECTATOR

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MADE TO ORDER

Wine collector Jeff Smith rescues cluttered cellars

By Chris Rubin

When Jeff Smith enters a collector's wine cellar for the first time, he always feels a sense of mystery. "I feel like an archaeologist," says Smith, founder of Carte du Vin, "like Indiana Jones."

Even though there's rarely any danger, Smith encounters disarray and confusion. His job is to establish order.

Smith's Carte du Vin is a service created for collectors who need help keeping track of their collections. Once Smith works his magic, his clients know exactly what bottles they have, where each bottle is located and when each one should be opened.

Smith, who admits to being more of a consumer than a collector, came by his love of wine naturally. His father, Joe Smith, former chairman of Capitol Records, has a cellar that contains more than 6,000 bottles, and Smith grew up in a family where wine was almost always on the dinner table.

"I started tasting wine in my early teens," recalls Smith, 43. "We did the family trip to Europe in the '70s, and I remember on dinner in St.-Paul-de-Vence [in France] where the table was literally covered with wine bottles."

He also remembers being sent out with his sister on their bicycles to scout local liquor stores after his father had found a new favorite. "My dad was crazy for BV Reserve," Smith remembers. "We would ask the store to hold any wines we found until our dad could come in."

After his father moved and asked him for help taking inventory of the cellar, Smith came up with the idea for Carte du Vin. "I did some

homework and talked to some wine and computer people," Smith recalls. "He [Dad] stood on a ladder and called out the bottles, and I typed them into my laptop." Smith then formatted the pages, listed the wines by region and displayed his work in a custom-made book.

His brother-in-law's 2,000 bottle collection was Smith's next project. The business began when "friends saw his wine list that I produced and asked where they could have it done," Smith says.

His first paid client was an acquaintance who had a closet full of bottles of wine and no idea what was in it. "I put it on a spreadsheet," Smith explains, "and broke it down by region. I got paid and thought it was an OK payday, even from a guy without much wine."

While Smith doesn't have any wine credentials per se, he does have a unique mix of qualifications for the job. "There are many pieces of information on each label," Smith says, "and you have to know which ones count. And I know my way around computers. But a sense of organization is the most important. I always loved putting things in order."

As a preteen, Smith collected baseball cards and was very methodical about organizing them and filing them in a book, with one full page devoted to his favorite player, Roberto Clemente.

Likewise with music; his thousands of CDs are neatly filed – alphabetically, of course – in custom-made drawers and catalogued on his computer.

Smith's basic rate is \$2 per bottle, but this varies depending upon the services provided. Some collectors want more than just a list, and Smith is able to oblige. He can include scores of individual wines, suggested drink dates and appraisals (gathered from recent auction prices). He also provides a maintenance program to keep his clients' lists up to date.

Los Angeles-based investment manager and wine collector John Hotchkis wanted to avoid the tags that some collectors hang on the necks of bottles. After Smith's survey of Hotchkis' collection, there wasn't a tag in sight. "I have a grid, and I know exactly where everything is," says a satisfied Hotchkis.

There's little competition, Smith insists. "Most liquor stores don't want to do it," he says. "[And] most people who have nice collections don't want to do the dirty work."

Looking to the future, Smith envisions utilizing a barcode system that will automate the inventory process, and he plans to offer a wireless tablet that will allow tech-savvy clients to access their collections on the Carte du Vin server to update inventory in real time.

As for Smith, he has a 200-bottle Vinotheque at his modernist home in the Hollywood Hills. A self-described "small-time collector," he stocks older Sauternes, including Chateau d'Yquem 1967. His favorites to open now range from rosé Champagnes to '82 Bordeaux.

For those who require a list for their collections, the benefits aren't just practical. "There's also pride," Smith says. "Wine isn't widgets. It's sexy and romantic. ... My father loves to say to friends 'What shall we drink?' and then hand them the book."