

The Cellar Masters

By David McLeugal

Wine can be anything — from the most vapid plonk ever sloshed in a tumbler to a celestial essence that (for one brief shining sip) seems to solve the Problem of Evil. But, as different as they are, all wines share one characteristic; they all must be stored someplace cool and dark until they are ready to drink.

For the pedestrian end of the spectrum — for the vast oceans of *vin ordinaire* out there — storage is simple. Any arid corner or damp basement will do because the wine is not going to be around that long. But, for wines that are expressions of a higher cosmic order — wines that require years of bottle aging at a constant temperature and humidity to reveal their glories — storage can be a problem requiring ingenuity, planning, inspiration and artistic insight.

Cellar builders David Spon and Paul Wyatt have each devoted themselves to solving that problem.

Spon on the East Coast and Wyatt on the West Coast have earned reputations as two of the country's leading designers of custom wine storage systems. Their storage systems are meant to be much more than the glorified refrigerators seen in specialty catalogues. They are environments that people use as libraries, meeting places, statements of personal accomplishment, party rooms, even as retreats for a few hours of 'wine dark' meditation. At the very least, these rooms help redefine our conception of what a wine cellar is. At their best, they are works of art that begin to show us what a wine cellar can be.

DAVID SPON: Winespace with a Kick

David Spon found out he was drawn to a career in wine when he signed up for a class in wine technology and appreciation at Penn State during the mid-1980s.

"That course was like a religious experience for me," Spon says. "That's where I found my calling for wine."

After graduating in 1985, Spon worked at a number of jobs in the greater Washington, D.C., area, but he found his path and the path traveled by well-made wines continually crossing. He met Jack Edgerton, a Baltimore wine retailer, through the simple expedient of becoming a regular customer. After a few weeks Edgerton, who was impressed with Spon's interest and expertise in wine, asked if he might want to help him sell wine in his free time. Spon jumped at the chance.

"This guy was super," Spon says, "really knowledgeable. He let me buy all of my wine at cost and started sending me to trade tastings." Spon was hooked. After working for Edgerton, other wine shops and a wine distributor in Virginia, he decided in the summer of 1988 to



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start his own business. The launch had little in common with the high-rolling, capital-driven business ventures typical of the 1980s.

"I maxed out my credit cards to get started," Spon says with a laugh. With the money from his credit cards, matched by funds from two partners whom he has since bought out, he founded Wine Cellar Concepts, Ltd., in McLean, Virginia. Three years after his enological awakening at Penn State, he had entered the arena of fine wine cellar design and installation.

Since then, Spon has made a name for himself by designing what he calls "Grand Rooms" — wine cellars that "have some kick to them: large-bottle displays, stained glass, rough-cut marble walls, large tile mosaics." He wants to build cellars that do a lot more than just store wine.

"I don't do traditional chateau wine cellars, which are more rustic, darker. I lean toward brighter and more livable rooms," he says. He believes people want to spend time in their cellars, asking the rhetorical question, "Can you spend five or six hours in a dark, cobwebby cave doing a dinner party?" The answer to that question has a large influence on his designs.

His first significant opportunity came in February of 1989 when Steve DeLonga, an area businessman, liked one of Spon's designs and told him to go ahead and build it. He proceeded to tear up one-third of DeLonga's finished basement and install a 3,500-bottle cellar complete with a carved-glass entry, walls of rough-cut pecan marble and a hand-painted table in the shape of a cluster of grapes. "That was really my big break," Spon says.

He loves these architectural effects. Other cellars of his sport such niceties as stained glass windows, entire dining rooms, and one 8x10-foot mosaic of the grape harvest made of 12,000 pieces of multicolored tile.

David Spon's clients are enthusiastic about his creations. Ron Cornelison, a businessman from Alexandria, Virginia, appreciates how Spon was able to take relatively undeveloped ideas and make them real.



Steve DeLonga's 3,500-bottle 'Grand Room,' designed by David Spon (pictured left), features walls of rough-cut pecan marble and a hand-painted, grape cluster-shaped table.

"It was important for us to have someone who can translate rough ideas into a practical cellar design," Cornelison says, "and that's where David excels. He has creative design ideas, and can take the fundamental [physical limitations imposed by wine storage] and create a versatile and unique cellar."

Spon thinks "the fact that I'm a true wine person" helps to set him apart. "Wine people are different from non-wine people, and wine is a passion for me." This gives him insight that he uses to guide the way he approaches new design projects. "I know what my clients want," he says. "I understand how wine people think."