



# Napa, Sonoma, Arden Oaks?

A home winemaker collects accolades for his award-winning wines

By Amy Albright Palmer

**I**n the custom-made wine cellar of his Arden Oaks home, Stuart Spoto is happy to share the steps involved in his home winemaking business.

Standing among French oak barrels filled with red wine from the fall harvest and next to his desktop lab, Spoto shows handwritten entries in the journal he uses to track the quality of the wines as they age. It's here that he works to formulate blends to bring out the full-bodied, tannic quality he enjoys in red wines.

"He loves every minute of it," said Spoto's wife, Christy.

Spoto learned the art of winemaking at his father's side, practicing the many steps involved from chemistry to temperature control. As his skills have improved, Spoto and his father, Henry, have tried to best one another at a home winemakers' competition in Napa.

"It was like a little rivalry for a while," Stuart Spoto said.

In 2002, Henry Spoto won "best of show" in the red wines category in the Home Winemakers Classic in Napa and was written up in *Wine Spectator* magazine. Two years later, his son won.

"Stuart won and put me in the dust," said Henry Spoto. "I've been nothing ever since," he joked.

Now, the hobby born of friendly competition has turned into a side business for Stuart and Christy Spoto, who recently became licensed to operate the first home-based winery in Sacramento County and sell their wines commercially.



Christy and Stuart Spoto in their wine cellar

Spoto is winning praise and awards for the quality of his wines, working to expand his sales and dreaming of the day that his side business will grow into a full-time line of work.

"He's makes spectacular wine," said Matt Woolston, who owns the Supper Club restaurant with his wife, Yvette.

Woolston, who has known Spoto for nearly 12 years, said Spoto's wines were always good, but they were "a little more fruit-forward with a little less tannins.

"Now Stuart's wines are getting a little more serious," Woolston said. "His cuvee can compete with most

wines in California, whether it's Napa or Mendocino or Sonoma—whatever."

Christy Spoto said she and her husband decided to begin selling wines commercially when maitre d's began showing interest in the bottles they took out to dinner with them.

Woolston said SpotoWines are not necessarily mild reds.

"They're bold wines. They're not table wines that you just crack open a bottle—they're the kind of wines that you open and savor a glass for 15 minutes," he said.

Spoto has arrangements with vineyards in the Napa Valley's

Oakville and Rutherford regions to get his Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Syrah grapes each year.

"I think that's probably the key to our operation—that is, we have contracts with some of the premier vineyards in Napa," he said.

Making wine takes over the Spotos' home when word comes that the grapes have ripened to the proper sugar levels.

"You can have a day's notice and they'll call and say, 'They're ready,'" said Christy Spoto. Her husband once

had to leave a golf tournament to pick up the grapes.

In Napa, Spoto rides out in the vineyards on a tractor to check out the grapes before they are picked and taken Sacramento.

“It’s really kind of cool,” he said. “We do it three or four times during the picking season.”

After Spoto crushes the grapes and removes the stems, the winemaking continues for two or three weeks. He monitors the wine for the proper fermentation and “pushes down the cap”—or mixes the skins and seeds back into the liquid—to help bring out the flavor and color.

The wine is then left to settle in stainless-steel tanks in Spoto’s garage before it is transferred to French oak barrels in the cellar where it will age.

“It’s not rocket science, but there are a lot of little steps,” he said.

In the years he worked with his father, Spoto said he went from “chief bottle washer to assistant winemaker to taster.” Spoto credits his father for teaching him how to keep the process extremely clean to prevent the growth of any bacteria in the wine.

Henry Spoto said strict discipline and careful attention to details were part of his family tradition.

“My father was born in Sicily. He was pretty tough on me, so I’m pretty tough on him,” Henry Spoto said.

For now, Stuart Spoto continues in his full-time position as vice president of technology for Brownie’s, working with architects and engineers. He never took viticulture or enology classes at UC Davis, where he got his degree in civil engineering. He said the study of winemaking was not as big a deal back then as it is today.

While Spoto Wines is an official, bonded winery—the same as any winery in the state—the county limited the scope of the operation as a condition of licensure, including no foot traffic, no signage and no tastings on site.

“They pretty much put restrictions on it to maintain the residential character and limit the impact of having a business here,” he said.

The Spotos’ teenage daughters, Ari and Alexi, are learning the steps involved in making wine.

For kicks, Alexi helped her father make a small batch from some Merlot and Syrah grapes grown at their home. They crushed the grapes with bare feet and named it “Lulu’s Red,” after her nickname.

“I think the whole winemaking process is interesting,” said Alexi, 14. “I’d like to get into it when I’m older and carry on the family tradition, and possibly make that my minor in college.”

Stuart Spoto hopes that he’ll grow Spoto Wines to the point that it can be his primary business in 10 or 15 years, perhaps with a small production site in Sacramento, and then one day, at his own winery in Napa. That, he said, would be a dream come true.

“What a good combination, if you can be successful at a hobby you love,” he said.

*Spoto Wines are available for \$65 to \$67 a bottle at David Berkley and The Supper Club or on the Web site [spotowines.com](http://spotowines.com). ●*