



Winery Feels Right at Home

When wine experts said wow, Arden Oaks vintner took his cottage industry commercial

By Edgar Sanchez - Bee Staff Writer

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Stuart Spoto knew he had a special talent for winemaking, and connoisseurs confirmed it.

When he and his wife, Christy, would go out for dinner in Sacramento, they would take along a bottle of one of his homemade cabernet sauvignons.

After collecting a corkage fee, sommeliers and maitre d's would sample his wine, then announce it was so exquisite they wanted to buy some.

Spoto Wines were not for sale then, but they are now.

"As more and more people enjoyed and liked the wine, it prompted us to consider selling it," Stuart Spoto said recently in his Arden Oaks home.

Though it has no commercial signs to identify it, the elegant dwelling is the only licensed winery in a residential neighborhood in Sacramento County.

"Our business is very low key and discreet," he said. "It doesn't interfere with our neighbors."

A county business license restricts Spoto to selling no more than 100 cases of wine per year or a total of 1,200 bottles, an output that suits Spoto just fine for now.

Winemaking is a part-time endeavor for the 47-year-old civil engineer, an executive with Brownie's Digital Imaging, a Sacramento firm that provides reprographic services for architects and engineers.

At the start of each harvest in the Napa Valley, Spoto is in daily telephone contact with vineyard managers who supply his high-end grapes.

His vacations from Brownie's coincide with peak ripening, usually in September or October.

"When the grapes are ready to be picked, I drive to Napa in my pickup and buy them for up to \$4,000 a ton," he said. "To make really good wine, you have to start with high-quality grapes."

Spoto absorbed that lesson from his father, Henry Spoto Jr., his winemaking teacher.

"My father started making wine at home in 1968, when I was 8," Stuart Spoto said. "For my dad, it's still a hobby. He's still making wine at home."

In a telephone interview from his Davis home, Henry Spoto Jr., 75, said: "Stuart is making better wine than I am. He's a very hard worker, very attentive to the job."

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Christy and Stuart Spoto make 1,200 bottles of Spoto Wines a year in their Arden Oaks home.

Sacramento Bee/Michael Allen Jones

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Using his father's old grape-crusher, Stuart Spoto began making wine in 2000, with his wife's help. From then on, each time the Spotos went out to dine they toted their own wine. Each time, they were showered with accolades for their winemaking.

"People of stature would tell us, 'This is great wine! Where can you buy it?' " said Christy Spoto, a mosaic artist.

While in Chicago on a business trip four years ago, Stuart Spoto walked into Tru Restaurant with his customary bottle of wine. The renowned eatery has a wine list with about 1,700 entries, according to its Web site.

"I was told up front that my bottle would not be opened unless I paid a \$50 corkage fee," Spoto said. "I paid the \$50. The sommelier poured himself a glass of my wine. Moments later, he asked me, 'Is this wine for sale?' "

Encouraged by such flattery, the Spotos went commercial in 2004 after some initial resistance from the county. "County officials said, 'You can't have a winery in a residential neighborhood,' " Stuart Spoto said.

"Why not?" he asked, explaining he was already making wine at home. "All I want is to sell it."

In the end, the in-home winery got the county's blessing with several restrictions, including that it receive only one walk-up customer at a time.

Today, having spent "tens of thousands of dollars" on the wine-making apparatuses that occupy his garage and his basement, Spoto has the equipment and the commitment to excel.

"I've upgraded a lot of my processes to refine and streamline the winemaking process," said Spoto, who gets his wine bottles from Oakland.

The result is a masterpiece, said Matt Woolston, owner and chef of the Supper Club Restaurant of Sacramento, which serves Spoto Wines.

"Spoto Wines are big, full-bodied wines," Woolston said. "They are bold wines that stand up to all the big-time wines out there."

In November, Spoto Wines' Reserve Cuvee QV4 scored 87 out of 100 points in a comparison of top Napa Valley wines conducted by the Wine Spectator. Scoring 88 points in the same rating was the Screaming Eagle cabernet sauvignon, which at the time sold for \$500 a bottle, compared with \$65 a bottle for Cuvee QV4.

Like his father, Stuart Spoto has won awards for his wines, which he sells through his Web site: www.spotowines.com.

"My goal is to expand Spoto Wines and possibly include my daughters in the business," he said. "Once Spoto Wines is widely successful, I would love to move my operations to Napa."

Their children appear to be preparing for that day. The couple's older daughter, Ari, 19, has taken wine-appreciation and viticulture classes at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, where she is a freshman.

Her sister, Lexi, 16, a student at Rio Americano High School, helps her parents with the winemaking chores.

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Younger daughter Lexi, 16, left, a



student at Rio Americano High School, helps Stuart and Christy Spoto with the winemaking duties. Stuart Spoto hopes to expand the business and include his daughters.

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Christy and Stuart Spoto make 1,200 bottles of Spoto Wines a year in their Arden Oaks home.

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