

Colorado Wine (Good) Company

When I come in to see John and Jen Nugent, they're bustling through preparations for their weekly 'Wine Cellar Wednesdays' event – grab any bottle off the shelf, order in to the bar, and enjoy free corkage while you meet the neighbors. The event gets a lot of traffic, so there's a lot of work to do; even so, they're glowing – not only did they buy a house in the neighborhood just a week ago, but their beautiful store is gaining momentum by the day.

Their store, the Colorado Wine Company, is different – and it's different in the best possible way. It has the sort of friendly neighborhoodness that invites habitual visits, and inspires everyone from the recent Two-Buck-Chuck grad to the most schooled oenophile to try something new. This is a place of long afternoon chats, giggly cheesemongering, and lots of tandem cross-eyed glass-sniffing. It's a little slice of wine heaven, tucked into a fun little jag of Old Route 66.

John and Jen met in LA two months before John was moving to Brooklyn for a job, and dated long-distance for eight long months until Jen followed him east. Though both were ensconced in comfy-salaried jobs, there was something missing; soon, they'd decided to take an enormous leap of faith and open their very own wine shop, though neither had done anything of the sort before. They read voraciously, visited wine store after wine store, took classes – and tasted. Encyclopedically. "A third of the apartment was covered in wine bottles tagged with little notes," John remembers.

At the time, there was a 5-year moratorium on new licenses in Brooklyn, so they knew they'd have to relocate to live the dream. After tossing around a few ideas, a friend reminded them of Eagle Rock – an up-and-coming neighborhood nestled in the foothills above downtown Los Angeles. Something clicked. They sold the Brooklyn apartment and made their way west.

Of course, it wasn't easy. First off, the licensing process was such that the two had to pay eight months' worth of rent on the storefront before they could even be reasonably sure they'd be allowed to open. Secondly, they'd decided to do most of the interior work themselves, leaving only the major liabilities in the hands of contractors. Vendors would line up the wines along the side of the bandsaw table; the couple would do the tasting in elbow gloves, covered in paint. On one memorable occasion, John gashed a deep wound in his hand minutes before an inspector was due to show up. "He had to drive himself to the hospital while I stayed at the store," Jen says, "and there was nothing else to do about it."

To hear them talk, the process of agreeing on a design and layout for the store – and then, quite literally, building it together with their bare hands – was the perfect training ground for working as a husband-and-wife team. Jen smiles when I ask her where her tastes and John's diverge. "We've grown together. Now, there's little divergence in our tastes," she grins. "We tend to like things that are a little bit weird." She describes wandering together through high-end, trade-only tastings, and that electrical little moment when

their eyes meet over something amazing “We’ll both say, ‘This smells like dried rose petals!’ After years of doing this seriously, you learn to appreciate something that’s really outstanding.”

In the time since they’ve opened – February 2008 will be the store’s third anniversary – they’ve gotten busy. Very busy. In the early days, visitors would come by more than occasionally just to do some personal, face-to-face naysaying. “One guy came by and said in a very matter-of-fact way, ‘Don’t bother. I ruined two marriages this way,’” John remembers. Proprietors of other wine shops would stop in with the sole purpose of convincing the couple to give up and shut down. A little more than two years later, the store never seems to be without a customer. The couple spends an average of sixty hours a week in the store itself, and then another few hours a day answering e-mail and bookkeeping at home. On days they’ve scheduled to meet vendors they’ll taste fifty pours, filling entire boxes with wine notes in a matter of months.

Happily obsessed with maintaining the “perfect” inventory – a balance between the new, the fun, the standby, and the fascinating, all without accruing a prohibitively massive inventory – the couple picks wines based on a complicated mathematical formula. “If we like it, it gets a smiley face,” Jen explains, thumbing through one of the thick little notebooks that catches the deluge. “If we’re so-so about it, it gets a straight face. If we don’t like it, a frown. That’s the system.” And it works, beautifully.

They tend to agree that the most enjoyable part of the work is interacting with customers. They deal equally with the nervous newbies that are facing an oenophile’s impending dinner party to the folks with million-dollar cellars and oddball niche requests. John and Jen have a lot of fun pairing wines with customers’ dinners (“What goes with fennel-seared duck’s liver in a pear glacée?”), and they always give someone new to wine a little guest-impressing factoid firepower when they pop the cork. The questions can be downright stymieing - one woman even came in to figure out what should she bring to a lunch with Santana. “We do a lot of educating here,” John smiles. Curled up on the taupe-and-chocolate leather couch with a redolent plate of cheese parked in front of you, it’s a sweet lesson indeed.

“The only question we really asked when we started was, ‘What can we do to make ourselves happy?’” John says. “The heart of the idea of this place was that there are people like us out there; that want the same thing in a wine store. We bet a lot on that. What we’re really going for is ‘fantastic simplicity.’” It’s very safe to say they’ve achieved it.

On the rare chance that John and Jen have a couple of consecutive days to spend traveling for wine, they don’t go north – they head south of the border. “Mexico’s great,” John enthuses. “It’s not crowded. It’s not expensive. It’s not snobby, and there aren’t lines. It’s drawing amazing winemakers from Bordeaux and California, and it’s just about four hours from Los Angeles.” He’s talking about the Guadalupe Valley, an enclave just east of Ensenada where beach culture and wine culture have come together in a fascinating synthesis. You’ll need to rent a 4x4 just to get to some of the wineries. Fresh lobster,

accessible winemakers, and music festivals abound. Wine made in the valley is almost entirely estate-grown, boasting the second-largest planting of Nebbiolo in the world and producing a very pleasing Chardonnay.

Oh, by the way – if you're going to lunch with Santana, bring along a Leonetti cab. I'm sure the pedigree helped (nine-year waiting list, anyone?) – of course, it went over fabulously.

- Annette O'Neil