

# La Casa Sena

## Wine and Spirits Shop

story by JAMES SELBY

photos by GABRIELLA MARKS

In the coming months, *localflavor* magazine is embarking on a series of articles featuring some of Northern New Mexico's independent fine wine stores. "Independent" is an apt description of the people who operate our local retail wine stores. You have to have the audacious passion of a Broadway producer to invest the capital necessary to get a license, let alone to purchase inventory chosen from the estimated 10,000 different grape varieties, which translates, exponentially, into hundreds of thousands of wines.

What is clear is that each neighborhood wine store—grand, storied, or mom-and-pop—is operated by individuals of unique and resolute vision.

A palpable transformation is occurring in the wine community here and around the country, not unlike that of the "farm to table" movement. Any chef worth her *fleur de sel* is adamant about sourcing her products, be they natural, sustainable, organic, or simply the best out there. Owners and managers of our fine wine stores are pursuant of the same prevailing desire: to bring this global, whirling life back into our own hands, to give credence to craft, and to heed what we consume. Spend time in any fine wine shop in the Santa Fe or Albuquerque area and you will find fervent "cork dorks" guiding customers away from industrialized brands and

toward grower Champagne, natural wines of Loire, garage pinot noir from California Central Coast. We can't all be farmers, winemakers, or sommeliers, but we can all participate in how and where we choose to spend our money. In this highly competitive business, there is, nevertheless, a collective spirit that unites these purveyors: the celebration of craft, honor of the land, and the art of winemaking.

Jim Cook, Wine Director for Santa Fe's La Casa Sena Wine and Spirits Shop and their adjoining restaurants, is the perfect person for a job with a breathtaking scope of areas to oversee: 2200 handpicked offerings, near 20,000 bottles of inventory, vintages from 1861, price tags as high as \$12,000 (or as low as \$12), an extensive selection of grower Champagne, restaurant wine lists, staff education, special events, and public tastings (held the third Saturday of every month). And, to be sure, he possesses the exceptional abilities necessary to do it. A former CFO for international corporations, Cook traveled extensively, living and supping in world capitals, before moving to this one. En route, his affinity for wine evolved from a social avocation into a profession. With his financial experience, Cook brings to the table extensive training under the auspices of the Court of Master Sommeliers and the French Culinary Institute, voluminous reading, and tasting, tasting, tasting.

You'd think with such erudition and worldly experience someone like Jim Cook would be, well, a snob. And he is. But only if you consider one who draws on professional expertise, strives to discern quality, and has the confidence—indeed, the responsibility—to make a judgment call to be a smarty pants. "We focus our selection on people who grow grapes and make wine," says Jim, "not on multinational organizations that do so." In reality, Jim is magnanimous toward all well-made wine and curious seekers, and you will not find him looking down his nose—unless, of course, it's in a glass and he's using it to establish the integrity of a wine. "The only bad wine," says Jim "is a boring wine."

Just a few steps away from the Plaza, two passageways tunnel the length of the store front on Palace Avenue to open onto a mews known as Sena Plaza, where independent shops and La Casa Sena venues occupy a former hacienda, circa 1830, bordering a fountain courtyard with meandering paths. Benches and wrought-iron tables are shaded by a towering cottonwood in warm weather,



Wine Director Jim Cook



and elegant rooms for fine dining are adjacent to the Cellar Lounge. La Casa Sena also has La Cantina, where Broadway-caliber performers serve up live tunes and casual fare. (The accomplished servers bring to mind a Lily Tomlin quip: "I supported my career as a waitress by working as an actress.") There's also the Wine Grotto, tucked in a covered patio behind the shop. In summer, sample three wines for \$10, glimpse the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi across the street, and nibble from a plate of cheese, charcuterie, or ceviche.

In the way that secular folk enjoy viewing a cathedral, even people without an interest in wine will appreciate La Casa Sena Wine Grotto. A magnum opus of cozy retail splendor, with its warren of rooms, the Wine Shop boasts floor-to-ceiling wooden racks, a glassed-off cellar for rare bottles, small leather armchairs, kiva fireplaces, and narrow interconnecting doors framed in wood, etched by long-ago artisans. Today's craftspeople have recently broken through into a vacant storefront, creating a new entrance to the shop from Palace Avenue and affording additional display. Temperature-wise, the place is something of an iceberg. Even with the expansion, each and every bottle will be in air-conditioned storage within the premises. About the climate control, Jim says, "It makes a difference."

One of Jim Cook's missions when taking the job a little over a year ago was to change the image of the shop as being some kind of forbidden temple. Assuredly, collectors and connoisseurs can lay hands on hard-to-acquire wines, including an exceptional collection of large format (magnums, Jeroboams, etc.) and a goodly number of 375 milliliters, or half-bottles. But there are also hundreds of wines priced for everyday consumption. In fact, in the new addition there will a specified section of offerings priced under \$20. "At its root all wine is fermented grape juice," says Cook. "We don't worship wine; we feel it is part of *la dolce vita*, and is to be enjoyed—daily, if possible."

Throughout the world of wine, there is a deceptively quiet movement occurring, one that has the region of Champagne on the verge of profound change. It is a movement in which growers of grapes craft and bottle wine themselves. They are referred to as *Champagne de Vignerons*, or "producers of grower Champagne."

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David-and-Goliath struggle with the larger, much-loved houses, whose names and labels appear in movies and on posters. In an effort to replicate a “house” style and meet demand, big brands industrialize production, source grapes and juice from cooperatives, even purchase already-made sparkling wine. Some aficionados say the resulting product, though consistent, has lost all sense of *terroir*, or place, and are too processed and formulaic. It’s the wine-world equivalent of the farmers’ market versus the grocery chain.

In exception to this trend are the grower wines. Starting in cost at around forty dollars a bottle, they are often less expensive than those of conglomerates who need to support advertising and distribution. “There are fine wines being made by big houses,” says Cook of vintage Champagnes and *tête de cuvées*, the most prestigious offerings, “the irony being they are buying grapes from these very growers.” With a merry *coup de grace*, Cook adds, “Of course, the farmers keep the very best grapes for their own wine.”

Because a farmer grows grapes and turns them into Champagne, are they necessarily any better than the big-name brands? “It depends on what you prefer,” says Jim, “a homogeneous product, each bottle the same, or a unique wine that speaks of the ground it comes from and the year of its harvest.” Some of the guesswork has been handled by a self-governing society of producers called *Trésors de Champagne* (“Treasures of Champagne”). To become a member, a *vigneron* must meet strict requirements, submitting wines more than once to a panel of peers who are qualified to approve the designation of “Special Club.” Nothing but the most exceptional wines in the best vintages will pass. In addition to those belonging to Trésors, scores of superb growers are bottling wines with the common goal to create a distinctive, hand-tended product, reflective of their highly-prized *grand cru* and *premier cru* vineyards. “In most cases, these are typically small properties,” explains La Casa Sena Wine Shop and Cellar’s store manager, Stefanie Gallegos, “with vines right outside the farmer’s kitchen door.”

La Casa Sena has made a sizeable investment directly importing more than thirty growers’ labels. “Many represented on our shelves cannot be found anywhere in the western region of the United States other than right here,” says Jim, not without some pride. “I’ve never seen a selection of Champagne like ours. Shall we try one?” he asks, disappearing around a corner. Returning with a stout, dark green bottle with “Special Club” embossed upon the neck, he pulls the cork and pours a sample. It is a brut from 2002 by a man named Henri Goutorbe, a silken filigree of golden malt, a mash

of blueberry, the waft of a buttery croissant playing a cadence on the tongue like the trill of a happy woman.

“That’s the last bottle of that,” says Jim Cook. “There is no more.”



*La Casa Sena Wine and Spirits Shop is located at 125 East Palace Avenue, in Santa Fe. They're open from 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 6 p.m. on Sunday. 505.982.2121 [www.lacasasena.com](http://www.lacasasena.com).*

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