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Revel Custom Wine Cellars owner Jim Cash shows one of his company's custom wine rack systems at his home in East Lansing.

FORM, FUNCTION AND WINE

East Lansing's Cash to launch retail wine cellar line

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Depending on how you look at it, Revel Custom Wine Cellars was either a happy accident or an abject failure on the part of founder Jim Cash.

"I was actually trying to not start a business," said Cash, who designed a wine cellar for his own use about six years ago and ended up with a hugely successful business venture. "But once I got to the point where I was, and people were telling me they've never seen anything like this before, I sort of had no choice."

Cash's ultra-premium wine cellars quickly caught on with well-heeled aficionados.

After operating the company as a hobby for several years, he retired in August 2013 from his executive-level job at Christman Co., a Lansing-based real estate and construction firm, to concentrate on Revel.

Since then, the East Lansing resident said sales are up 500 percent. The company has no advertising budget, relying instead on word-of-mouth referrals and exposure from Wine Spectator, Forbes and other publications that directly reach its target demographic.

Now, it's about to take a step that could greatly widen its market.

Cash said Revel will launch a manufactured wine cellar line that will be



A "Lazy Susan" wine holder made with wooden dowel racks to hold wine bottles is one of the many features of the Revel Custom Wine Cellars system for high-end wine collectors.



MATTHEW DAE SMITH/FOR THE LANSING STATE JOURNAL

Revel Founder and CEO Jim Cash.

sold through retail outlets worldwide. It now offers only custom-made wine racks that can sell for more than \$100,000 each.

“We’ve been frequently asked if we have a more contemporary style product, something more urban, with a steel-and-glass kind of look,” he said. “We’ve developed a concept for a new product that responds to that aesthetic. It will have comparable function and quality at a lower price point.”

Cash wouldn’t discuss price points, but said the cellar line will be far less expensive than his existing line.

Filling a need

Revel Custom Wine Cellars grew out of Cash’s wine collecting hobby.

When he reached the point where he could afford to have the wine cellar of his dreams, he went shopping for one, only to discover that no one was making it.

With a traditional wine rack system, “all you see is a bunch of cork ends of bottles looking at you. I could never find the bottle I was looking for. All I could see is a bunch of corks.”

Cash’s original design uses drawers that present bottles label-side-up. For the corners, where two racks come together, he developed a turntable system similar to a kitchen lazy Susan, eliminating wasted corner space.

“I just started sharing pictures with people I knew,” he said. “One thing led to another, and I started getting calls from people saying, ‘Hey, could you do one of those things for me?’ Different celebrities started hearing about it, and it just sort of went from there.”

Cash doesn’t name names when it comes to his clientele.

But those celebrities include Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and other well-known entertainers, along with various high-profile business tycoons, according to Forbes.com. At least two vineyards in Napa Valley have installed Revel wine racks, Cash said.

Made in Michigan

Revel’s cellars are made by a custom woodworking company in Holland, Mich.

The shop has doubled its production capacity and has the room to expand even further — enough to accommodate “four or five times the business we have now without breaking a sweat,” Cash said.

The cabinets are assembled in Holland “right down to the last detail” and shipped to clients via a moving company, he said. In all, about 75 cabinets have been delivered around the world.

“Our product is at the high end of the price-quality spectrum,” he said. “They are usually two to three times more (expensive) than our nearest competitor.”

The new line will use aluminum, wood and wood-derived products sourced from Michigan and assembled in Holland. Some variants will be “highly environmentally friendly,” using recycled, recyclable or renewable materials, Cash said.

The racks will be sold as custom installations or kits.

“We’ll be doing a launch within the next couple of months,” said Cash, who declined to be more specific. “We see a pretty tremendous amount of growth potential.”

The 60-year-old Cash runs the operation from a suite in downtown East Lansing, five blocks from his home. The company has a representative in New York and distributors in California and Florida, but virtually everything else is contracted out, much the way Apple operates.

The local economy has benefited from Revel in sectors such as legal and accounting services, graphics and printing, Cash said. And in Holland, the venture has directly created jobs.

He declined to speculate on whether Revel might eventually build products in the Lansing area.

“I think it’s very nice dynamic that Michigan has such deep roots in agriculture and furniture-making and now has a rapidly growing wine industry,” he said. “To have a product like this associated with Michigan ... says a lot about Michigan.”

EXPANDING ITS REACH

Revel Custom Wine Cellars, known for hand-crafted wine racks that can cost more than \$100,000, is preparing to launch a manufactured wine cellar line that will be sold through retail outlets.

The new product will use aluminum, wood and wood-derived products sourced from Michigan. Some variants will use recycled, recyclable or renewable materials.

JAMES CASH

- **Age:** 60
- **Home:** East Lansing
- **Family:** Married to Carol, daughters Rachel and Marissa.
- **Occupation:** Founder of Revel Custom Wine Cellars
- **Background:** Retired last fall as executive vice president of Christman Co.’s construction arm and president of its capital development arm. U.S. Army, 1971-73.