

Preserved, by design

Text: R.J. Weick

Wine has inspired poets, winemakers, and enthusiasts for millennia. Each barrel, bottle, and glass represent a pursuit, a labor of love, to capture a richness of heritage, terroir, story, and craft in a single vessel—characteristics of which are at times ephemeral. For nearly as long, those most captivated with the tradition have sought to preserve it, storing a metaphorical message-in-a-bottle for future wine connoisseurs to discover. From underground chambers filled with amphorae, bedrock-carved niches of terracotta jars in subterranean spaces, basement vaults lined with barrels, and masonry-arched cathedrals—such as the Cooperative Pinell de Brai in Spain designed

by noted architect Cèsar Martinell i Brunet in 1918—wine cellars have been an integral solution for the craft.

For Jim Cash, founder and owner of Revel Custom Wine Cellars in Michigan, it was his own passion for wine and exploration of wine regions, wineries, and vineyards that would ultimately serve as the catalyst for the creation of a patented line of custom, label-forward wine storage cabinetry. After years of building his own wine collection—and anecdotal moments of wrecked labels and broken bottles retrieved from racks—Cash said he found himself in a position where he could afford to build his own cellar, but could not find a pull-out drawer solution on the market.

“I just wanted a drawer to pull out where I could see four or five bottles at once and push it back in, and pull out another drawer to be able to see the labels and find what I was looking for. I was just going to try to find something like that to buy and I searched and searched and found that there wasn’t anything like that on the market, so I decided to create my own system,” Cash said.

“I was in the real estate and construction business prior to that, so I had connections with millwork shops and things like that so I contacted a group to work with and create my designs. That is how it started. I never gave a shred of thought to what it was going to look like; I just thought that this was a





better way for a collector to enjoy their collection,” Cash added.

Cash, a self-admitted creative problem solver and inventor, at the time served as President and Chief Operating Officer of Christman Capital Development Company in East Lansing, Michigan. Upon completing his personal cellar, which was designed strictly with function in mind, Cash filed for design patents for his initial storage cabinetry solutions, but still hadn’t given much thought to starting a business.

“I started ordering wine from one of my online suppliers—I was buying it by the case—and I kept asking for the original wood cases. The guy I bought the wine from said, ‘why do

you keep asking me for these boxes? Nobody ever uses them.’ I said I built a new cellar and I had slots in there for cases. He said, ‘can you send me some pictures?’ And then the next day I had a call from an attorney in Long Island who was sent the pictures by my wine vendor and she wanted to order one,” Cash said. “It was off to the races from there.”

Established in 2009, Revel Custom Wine Cellars is a designer, producer, and distributor of patented wine storage cabinetry for high-end, custom wine cellars where bottles and cases are presented in dramatic visual statement. Offering a proprietary and patented line of solutions, Revel Custom Wine Cellars are designed as functional, wine-cen-

tric gallery showcases crafted to each client’s needs in both residential and commercial settings. Throughout the years Revel Custom Wine Cellars has developed a portfolio of projects that blend function and aesthetics for the discerning collector as well as built upon its line of inventive design elements meant to maximize visibility and hold wine as central to the overall experience.

With its sliding pullout drawers featuring a patented dowel system serving as the cornerstone of its product line, Revel Custom Wine Cellars has since introduced the Wine Wheel™ towers to optimize corner space, rotating Revel-ution Towers that reinvent the racking system, and a Designer Series for a more contemporary style. Cash said the design of the pullout drawers were first and foremost, ultimately resulting in a number of different versions where the dowel system allowed bottles to rest and be stable in both a horizontal and vertical orientation, as well as at a 15-degree angle to display the labels. The patented system was also replicated with different spacing for wine boxes.

“We actually would go to wine shops and measure bottles and boxes so we could get the sizing right, but then the other big development for us was when I laid out my cellar on paper: one bank of cabinetry on the right-hand side, when it met the bank of cabinetry that was on the back wall, there was a big 30-inch empty spot,” Cash said.

“I had my guys design a wine wheel so we could make use of that corner space and that is pretty much all we did for the first five years, but along the way, our customers thought our cellars were so beautiful that they wanted to display them, so they started asking to have glass across the front so they could sit outside the cellar and look in,” Cash added.

From the commercial, glass-enclosed cellar designed for the Jackson Family Wines’ Lokoya Estate Wine Cellar in California, where 1,060 bottles are displayed in walnut sliding pullout drawers; and the Grand Rapids, Michigan-based, glass-enclosed cellar featuring 1,162 bottles in a contemporary-transitional style crafted in mahogany; to the more than 3,000-bottle residential showcase in Charlevoix; the introduction of glass has given clients a new perspective and appreciation for the cellars themselves, according to Cash. In the Charlevoix project, a tasting room is intentionally located between the window overlooking lake waters and the glass-enclosed cellar where Revel-ution Towers comprised of walnut panels and stainless dowels, signature wine rack, sliding pullouts, wine wheels, and LED lighting is visible.

“It has been a huge change. I’ve talked a lot of people out of putting seating in a cellar and the reason I did that is because when I built mine and started bringing people into



it to show them, its 55 degrees in there and within five minutes, people's teeth started chattering," Cash said.

"I found with my own experience, people actually appreciate their wine cellars more from the outside than they do from the inside and promoting those views has really helped people make better use of their cellars, their investment in their cellars, and be able to appreciate their collection more," Cash added.

While traditional elements, materials, and style endure for wine cellars, Cash also noted that clients have also started requesting more contemporary, transitional, and modern materials and design, which has led to the introduction of aluminum, steel, bamboo, and acrylic in addition to its glass and wood material palette.

"We design everything with function first and the initial designs were wood and back at that time, the typical cellar was stuck in the back corner of somebody's basement and the idea of a cellar was this dark, damp room with old-world style. I dipped my toe in the water with that with my cellar by just saying I





want at least a glass door so I can have views into the cellar,” Cash said. “The other materials work just fine in a cellar. It is more of an aesthetic consideration, but we only design things that are highly functional first. Quite frankly, everything we make that is steel could also be made from wood, but it is a client preference and consideration.”

Some of Revel Custom Wine Cellars other projects range from the modern cellar designed for a small, narrow space in Franklin, Tennessee featuring 716 bottles, walnut wood, RGB Color LED lighting with the ability to switch between white and color display modes; the lodge-style, industrial chic cellar featuring a blend of stone, steel, glass, concrete, and Fijian Mahogany for an 1,829-bottle collection in Oklahoma; a glass-enclosed, modern wine cellar featuring high-grade acrylic in a sleek, clean design; and the chrome-plated Designer Series wine towers holding 480 bottles of wine on fully rotating plates in Key Biscayne, Florida.

For Cash, it is the collectors themselves who inspire him on each project, and he enjoys the dialogue and the relationship built throughout the process.

“I learn a lot from them. Some of the most sophisticated collectors that there are, are our customers and I always make a point to talk to them about their collection and what they want to feature in their cellars. It is just a great dialogue and now I have hundreds of clients who have become friends over the time we have worked together,” Cash said.

“I have a very active brain, so I love the creative challenge of coming up with a design that is just fabulous for the customer or that solves a particular problem, ways to get around a beam in the middle of the ceiling, or that kind of thing,” Cash added.

With nearly 30 projects currently designed and waiting to go into production, Revel Custom Wine Cellars has also introduced a limited-edition product for their clientele: the Cigar Lover’s Gift Box. Cash said it is a direct outcrop-

ping of those clients he has spent time with in recognition of many of them having an affinity for cigars. The limited-edition product, which is a portable and fully functional luxury cigar humidor, features handmade hardwood, gasket-sealed compression latches, a Spanish cedar chamber for a Boveda humidification pack, an analog hygrometer, and carbon-fiber-topped, foam-fitted inserts for a bottle of wine or whiskey. It also holds 25 Churchill or Robusto-sized cigars, hand-blown Waterford glassware, a dual-flame Colibri cigar lighter, a Colibri cigar cutter, and a J.A. Henckels corkscrew.

“Wine and cigars seem to go together—I’m a cigar aficionado myself—and when I go visit a friend and sit out by the lake or sit out on the deck, I would end up carrying a grocery bag of cigars, cigar cutters, cigar lighter, wine, wine glasses, and it would just be a big old jumble of stuff that I would have to bring just to have a cigar out with a friend,” Cash said. “I thought wouldn’t it be cool if you could have a really nice, custom-de-

signed, beautiful box that would just have all that stuff in it and you could just walk in and open it up and there is everything?”

Revel Custom Wine Cellars collaborated with Benchmark Wood Studio Inc., a high-end custom cabinet and millwork shop based in Holland, Michigan, and Pak-Rite Ltd. of Wixom, Michigan, a full-service packaging design and manufacturing company, in development of the handmade wood box and foam-and-carbon-fiber inserts, respectively, for the Cigar Lover's Gift Box. From initial concept to final product, Cash noted the process itself took a long time and he spent months considering the handle alone.

“I started with the bottle. I know bottle shapes very well from the wine cellar business and I know they come in different shapes and sizes. I also learned through that process that a lot of cigar aficionados prefer to have a Scotch or bourbon with their cigars, so I needed to come up with an opening that was universal that didn't look tacky. I wanted everything to be set in foam for a custom shape that it sets in and so I went from there and moved around to the glasses,” Cash said.

“I needed to figure out an opening size that would fit both wine glasses and whiskey glasses—that was an extensive process—and then came the cigars. I wanted it to not just be

a carrying case for the cigars; I wanted it to be an actual functioning humidor and so we had to design a closure system and a mating of the lid and the box that is like an actual cigar humidor so it creates a good seal,” Cash added.

Drawing on experience with wine cellar doors sealing in humidity and temperature, Cash said it led to the gasket seal on the perimeter of the box and incorporating closure clasps that actually compress the lid down onto the body of the box. The next step was designing chambers using Spanish cedar for both large and small cigars and integrating a false bottom under the chamber to accommodate a humidification pack that would have to be changed every two months.

“We had to do CAD models of every item that goes into these boxes—3D, CAD models—and then we had to find a vendor that could create a foam insert that goes into the box that has three-quarters of these items submerged into the foam with a custom opening and then they emerged outward from the top of the foam enough that you can get ahold of them and also had foam in the top that presses down on them when it's closed,” Cash said.

“Lastly, everything in the box had to have a certain look. The touch, the feel, the look: every touch point, every aspect, has to car-

ry the image and so we didn't want the top surface of the foam to be foam, so we looked at a lot of different materials. We looked at a wood overlay, a wood layer to go on top to match the outside of the box and that was nice, but not quite what we were looking for and we settled on carbon fiber,” Cash added.

Since its introduction, the Cigar Lover's Gift Box—which is available in different furniture-grade hardwoods and custom-etched logos, initials, or artwork—has been custom-designed for professional athletes, a couple of well-known football coaches, a celebrity Napa Valley winemaker, and a foreign ambassador to the United States. Cash said while the boxes are currently reserved for wine cellar clients since he likes the idea of them being aspirational and very special like the cellars, there is also a waiting list available.

“I tell people all the time about wine cellars that design is the most important thing. I learned it very early on in my construction career where builders value building, designers value design, and I wanted to be a builder who valued design. That is what I try to be,” Cash said. “I really don't consider myself a designer. I really have approached the whole process as a creative problem solver; that is what propelled me into creating my wine cellar in the first place.”



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