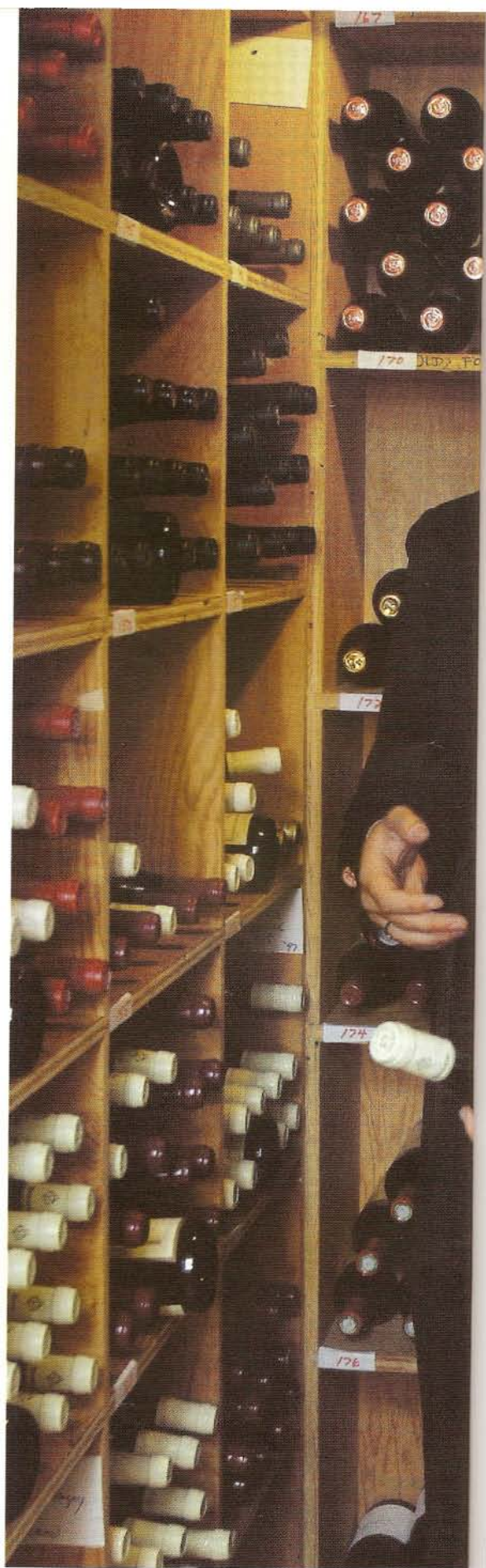
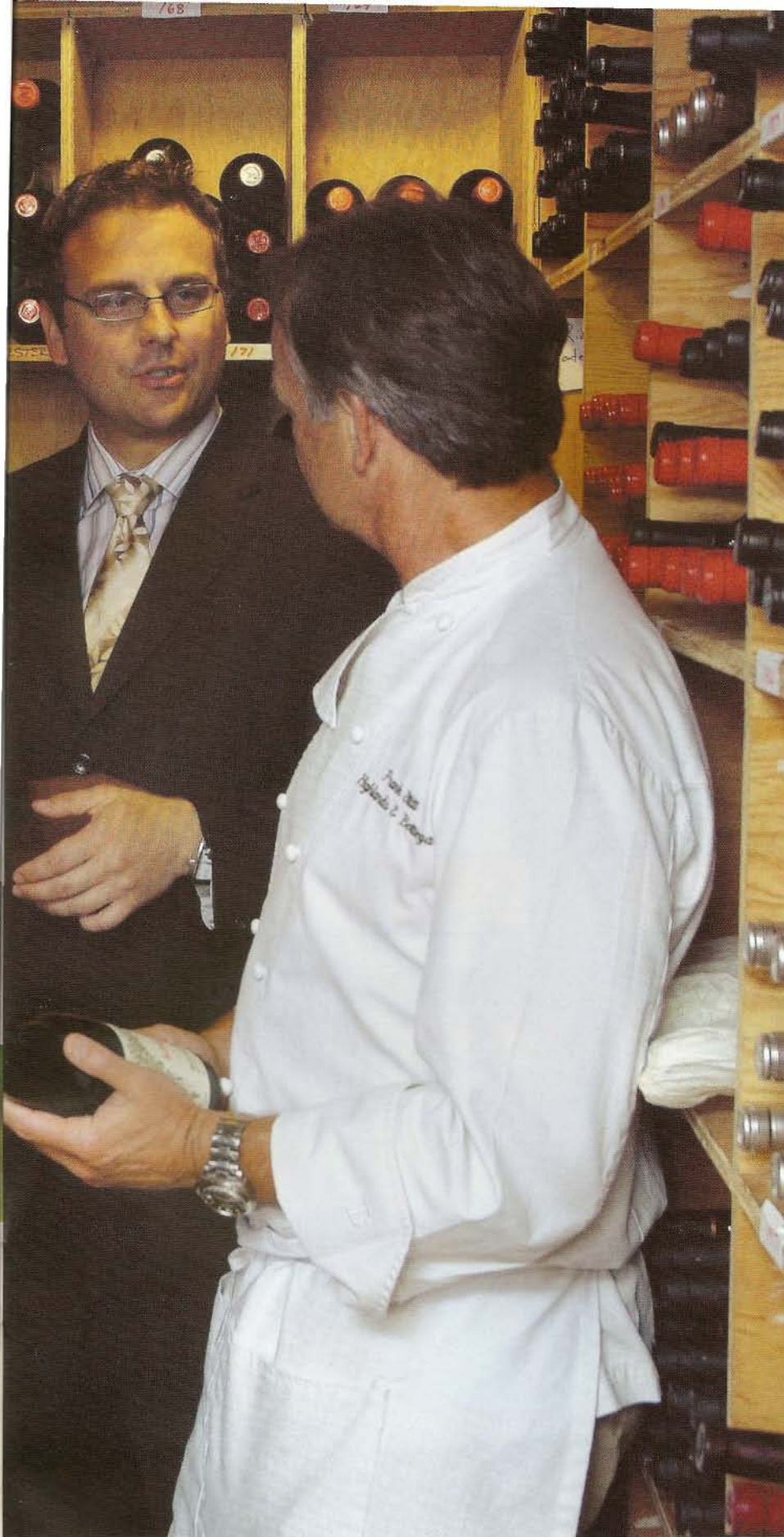


STITT'S *Sommelier*

PUTS FINE WINE ON THE TABLE

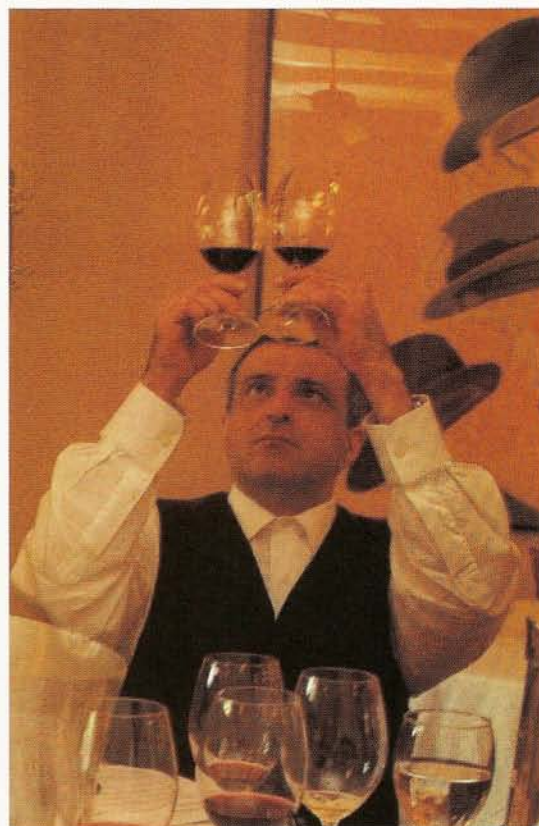
You begin on the rolling countryside of Tuscany, with its rigid rows of cypress trees standing at attention alongside expansive wheat fields and carefully cultivated olive groves. You continue on to France, to the sandy soil of Haut-Beaujolais and the steep slopes of the Northern Rhone. Along the way, you make stops in Portugal at the cavernous Douro Valley, and in Chile at the foothills of the breathtaking Andes Mountains. Still ahead are Australia, South Africa, Spain and, of course, Northern California's Napa Valley.





Left: Frank Stitt (right) and Sean Meyer peruse the cellar collection at Bottega. A Napa Valley transplant, Meyer moved to Birmingham to serve as resident wine expert for Stitt's restaurants.

Below: Meyer leads a wine-tasting seminar for employees at Highlands Bar and Grill.



WHAT TO TRY

Sean Meyer, sommelier for Frank Stitt's Highlands Bar and Grill, Bottega and Chez Fonfon, picks his favorites:

From Highlands Bar and Grill:

- Champagne, J. Milan "Symphonie" 1998, \$118. Spectacular with oysters and other shellfish.
- Ladoix, Edmond Cornu "Les Carrières" 2003, \$85. Plenty of fruit and fragrance for even the most discerning collector of Burgundy.
- Grenache, Sine Qua Non "SQN" 2002, \$190. As rich and opulent as it is impossible to find, these wines have become legends among collectors and critics.

From Chez Fonfon:

- Cassis, Domaine du Bagnol 2004, \$43. Light, crisp and lively. The perfect match for trout and other light fish.

- Riesling, Domaine Weinbach 2004, \$49. Pairs well with nearly every first course on Fonfon's menu.
- Côte-Rôtie, Jasmin 1999, \$90. Powerful, rich and spicy. Pairs well with lamb and duck.

From Bottega:

- Rosazzo, Livio Felluga "Terre Alte" 2002, \$81. A perfect balance of rich fruit and fresh floral and mineral notes. Try it with shellfish risotto.
- Langhe, Rocche dei Manzoni "Bricco Manzoni" 1999, \$68. For lovers of Barolo and Barbaresco, this wine offers an outstanding value.
- Barbaresco, La Spinetta "Vigneto Valeirano" 2001, \$192. Powerful yet exotically fragrant. Perfection.

from Page 12

It is a global adventure of the senses that can be experienced without ever leaving your home.

In the world of wine, context is key, says Sean Meyer, the new sommelier for the trio of Birmingham restaurants owned by chef Frank Stitt. "Without it, it's just a beverage."

It is a world firmly inhabited by Meyer, who serves as resident wine expert for Highlands Bar and Grill, Bottega and Chez Fonfon.

Officially, Meyer's job is "to make sure that each restaurant is as profitable as it can be through beverage." Beyond the bottom line, however, his role is to help customers travel the world through their taste buds, and cross the bridge between merely drinking wine and truly experiencing wine.

"There's this real, rooted sense that a location, a tradition, an idea, can really translate itself to the wine of the



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'In the back of my mind, most of my food is all about being balanced and harmonious enough so it's going to be a wine-friendly match.'

region," Meyer says. "Being able to communicate that to a guest gives it a context. You take a moment to reflect on where a wine is from and the local tradition. It assists in making the rest of the world go away."

Stitt, whose fondness for fine food is well known, says he is equally passionate about wine. That is why he decided last year to hire his first sommelier.

"I'm very sensitive to wine. In the back of my mind, most of my food is all about being balanced and harmonious enough so it's going to be a wine-friendly match," Stitt says. "Sean understands that. It's nice to

have somebody who is really thinking very intellectually about food and wine combinations."

A native of Minneapolis, Meyer came to Birmingham after spending two years in Napa Valley as the sommelier for Bouchon restaurant, the famed French bistro run by legendary chef Thomas Keller. That alone was enough to entice Stitt.

"As far as a pedigree, he couldn't be coming from a better group," Stitt says. Given Meyer's experiences at Bouchon and in Napa Valley, "typically somebody like him would be going to New York or Chicago or Miami or Los Angeles to work. So I



Meyer says he hopes to extend the wine tastings he already conducts for employees (above) to the public.

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Meyer says wine lovers shouldn't be afraid to take chances on unfamiliar names and varieties.

from Page 15

feel like we really got somebody who is a star here in Birmingham, who can really add credibility to our wine program."

Meyer, 33, hopes his influence will be felt beyond the doors of Stitt's restaurants. He wants others in Birmingham to join him in this journey through a red-and-white world. He says he is working with national distributors to bring new wines into the local marketplace, and he has plans to begin public wine-tasting classes. He already holds such events for restaurant employees.

"I want to increase the playing field in Birmingham," Meyer says. "Hopefully, people will see more types of wine than they ever have before and have more selection.

"What I'm after is to provide a canvas of education, and familiarity with wine in general. That way, you provide

a base of education where every time somebody takes a sip of wine, they learn something."

The educational experience can extend to home-schooling as well. Meyer says a home wine cellar is an excellent way for people to sample a wider variety of wines and increase their knowledge of vineyards from throughout the world.

Getting started is easy. Numerous companies sell free-standing units that are approximately the size of a conventional refrigerator and can hold several hundred bottles at a time. Meyer suggests trying International Wine Accessories Inc., at www.iwawine.com, where the most elaborate units can run nearly \$10,000.

"You can get them in beautiful hardwoods and put it in any bar area, or even the kitchen," Meyer says. "The advantage to those is they gener-

ally have thermostats on them, and they are temperature-controlled in the entire unit."

The more serious connoisseur might prefer a walk-in showcase cellar that can be custom built to a particular room or in a basement.

Meyer says space is not an overriding concern for the creation of a quality cellar. An area 7 feet high, 6 feet wide and 10 feet deep would be sufficient to hold more than 2,500 bottles.

The most important aspect of maintaining a home cellar, Meyer says, is keeping the temperature consistently in the mid-50s. He says the ideal temperature is 55 degrees, with a fluctuation of no more than 3 degrees warmer or cooler.

"The biggest thing to focus on is not so much the temperature at which you're keeping the wines – as long as

'Some people collect wines just to collect them, like collecting coins. But a wine cellar should be something you spend. You drink what's in your wine cellar, for your own personal enjoyment.'

it's cool – but temperature variation. That's where your problems come in," Meyer says. "You have a small air bubble in the bottle, and that will expand and contract based upon temperature. So if you have too much temperature variation, corks will push out of bottles and you'll get all sorts of leakage problems.

"Buy a thermometer that records highs and lows, and before you start moving wine into that area, make sure your temperature is tracking within 3 degrees high and low. So if you're keeping the wine at 55 degrees, make sure it gets no warmer than 58 and no

cooler than 52. Otherwise, your wine will be compromised."

Stocking the cellar can be a bewildering process for a novice collector, but enthusiasts should follow one basic guideline: "Rule No. 1, buy what you like," Meyer says. If it's California cabernet, "then fill your cellar with all the cabernet you can find.

"There are so many people out there who will spend scads of money on Bordeaux, because Bordeaux is the collectible thing. You're supposed to collect Bordeaux. It's what wine collectors do. Then they find out they don't like Bordeaux. Well, if you don't

like Bordeaux, then don't buy Bordeaux. It's that simple.

"Some people collect wines just to collect them, like collecting coins. But a wine cellar should be something you spend. You drink what's in your wine cellar, for your own personal enjoyment. People should dedicate their cellar to what they like to drink."

But you should also take some chances on unfamiliar names and varieties. After all, Meyer says, one of the joys of a personal wine cellar is the opportunity to experience the world without walking out your front door.

"Set aside a portion of your

see Page 39

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Frank Stitt's
Bottega cellar.

from Page 17

cellar for rotating bottles, and make sure that it's filled with stuff you've never heard of," Meyer says. "Then, before you drink it, see if you can read a little bit about it, so you go into it with an understanding of what you're about to drink and the region that it's from."

Meyer also recommends finding a wine critic whose tastes seem to be similar to your own. Among the reviewers he suggests are Stephen Tanzer (www.wineaccess.com/expert/tanzer), Allen Meadows ([\[hound.com\]\(http://hound.com\)\), Robert Parker \(\[www.robertparker.com\]\(http://www.robertparker.com\)\) and the Wine Spectator \(\[www.winespectator.com\]\(http://www.winespectator.com\)\).](http://www.burg-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

"It doesn't matter who it is, because most of the critics are pretty consistent in what they like and don't like. Just make sure that you agree with them," Meyer says.

Stitt says it also is important to establish a relationship with local wine merchants. "Then taste with your friends and take notes," he says. "That way, you develop your palate in assessing wines in a logical and

pragmatic way.

"There needs to be a practiced, studied approach to tasting in a very critical way. Then you can go back to who you buy your wines from and tell them what you liked and what you didn't. Because it's all about your own personal taste."

Meyer agrees.

"There is a great deal of subjectivity in wine. What matters is being able to identify what you like. Because a wine cellar should be all about what an individual wants to put into it." ■

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