

# Big House, Big Heart

SMALL WINE SUPPLIERS FIND  
THAT PERSONAL TOUCH AT  
SOUTHERN WINE & SPIRITS

by Meridith May

This story begins with a conversation I had with Mel Dick, Senior VP and President of the Wine Division at Southern Wine & Spirits, and the man who established the wine business for SWS over 41 years ago.

Mel told me about his impression of last year's Wine Experience, a grand-scale tasting event in New York. "There were two events on two levels," he began. "I made it a point to walk both floors and say hello to everyone we represented somewhere in the country. It was tremendous: I was able to have 'mini-meetings' with a huge number of suppliers. Some were surprised to see me; I think we all took note that there was not a lot of distributor representation there."

What many wine buyers may not realize is that Southern Wine & Spirits began as a wine company. "As we grew, people tend to figure if you're this big, you only work with the big companies," Mel pointed out. "But we actually have a tremendous number of boutique and mid-level wineries across the board in our portfolio. That portfolio may differ from state to state [Southern has distributorships in 29 states], but you can't help

but find great wine variety and even rare gems throughout our company."

#### Unparalleled Team of Wine Educators

With a national sales force of approximately six thousand, Southern invests in education like no other company. Mel Dick, who has been recognized the world over for his contribution to growing the U.S. wine market and was awarded France's highest civilian award, the Legion of Honor, for his contributions, has led the company's recruiting and development of top-notch wine sales and training personnel.

Ten Master Sommeliers on staff supplement ongoing sales efforts by offering seminars in Southern's training facilities as well as onsite in restaurant and hotel accounts for waitstaff and management. Through supported training programs, 250 of Southern's sales people have earned accredited wine degrees, including a select team of 20 Fine Wine Directors.

While many wine directors and sommeliers may turn their back on the SWS salesperson, assuming that they will be bombarded with only the "big" labels, THE TASTING PANEL decided to let some of Southern's smaller suppliers speak for themselves.

#### CASE STUDY:

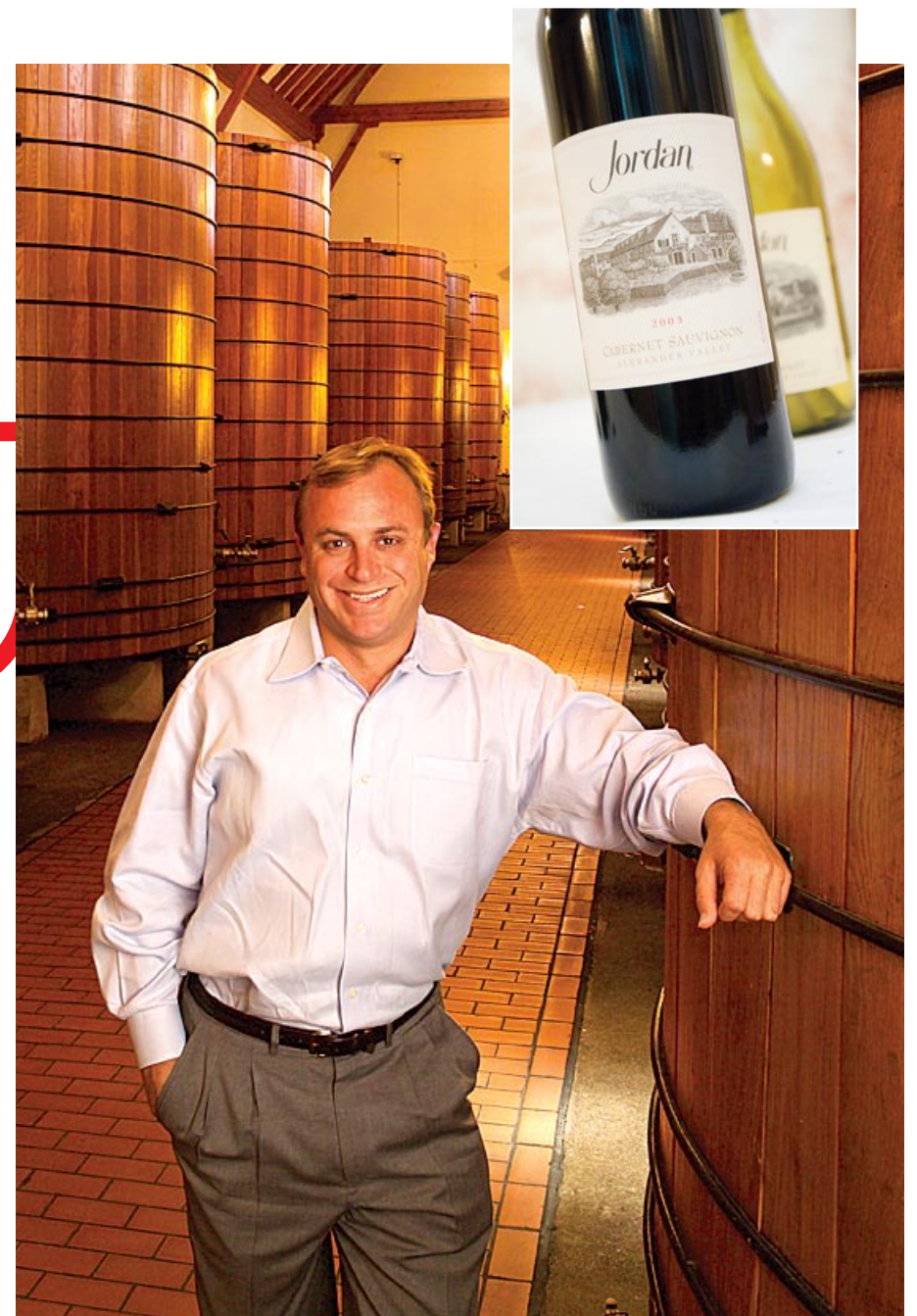
#### Jordan Winery

John Jordan's relationship with Southern dates back to his childhood. "Harvey Chaplin and Mel Dick played a big part in the initial launch of Jordan Winery," explains Jordan, the heir to the Sonoma winery.

John's parents, Sally and Tom Jordan, the winery founders, were friends with Mel Dick from the beginning. "I remember Mel when I was a little boy," recalls Jordan, now 37.

Jordan also shares a common career path with Wayne Chaplin. "We both were attorneys who went back to run our family business." In fact, the distribution agreement with SWS and Jordan Winery in California was mapped out by John and Wayne. "It was a bonding experience."

Despite the close and long-lived ties with the founders of SWS, Jordan insists that it is still the responsibility of the winery to ensure that business is in the proper working order.



John Jordan, proprietor of Sonoma's Jordan Winery.

"Distributors have an ever-thickening book of business now. In the old guard, there were lots of distributors who were repping many small brands. The new reality is that wineries cannot depend solely on the distributor. We have to bear part of the burden and get our own sales force out on the street. Jordan has five sales managers across the country.

"Many small wineries have not been able to adapt to this era of consolidation, so they think they are just getting lost in the system; but you can't rely on the wholesaler to help

your business unless you know how to deal with them effectively. Part of that is understanding the organizational structure, when to talk to them and to not go to the well too many times."

Jordan's success proves that he has that understanding, with a case production of 95,000 and distribution with Southern in 16 states. "We were able to adapt at a difficult time. In this economy and consolidation climate, family-owned wineries that produce more than 15,000 cases are becoming increasingly rare."