



Stew Leonard's blends fantasy and farm freshness in a jolly land where animatronics, ice cream, fish and meat converge in sensory experience that both adults and children enjoy as both practical and fantastical. In addition to the headquarters store in Norwalk, Conn., Stew Leonard's has stores in Danbury, Conn. and Yonkers, N.Y and Newington, Conn. The Stew Leonard's experience has expanded in wines and there's a very good reason that was born not just from business sense but of pure taste.

The inspiration: In 1999, an aged rib-eye Kansas steak, the store's fresh corn and tomatoes combined with his sister's fresh ciabatta bread set the wheels in motion for Stew's current passion. As Leonard Jr. explains, he walked in to a liquor store to pick up the wine to accompany his dinner fixings. "There was nobody in the store. All I heard was the Yankee/Red Sox game on and everybody back there watching the game. I had to figure out what wine to get and I didn't know much about wine at the time. The signage wasn't good. There wasn't good service. I really was intimidated," Leonard Jr. says.

"So, I just grabbed a few bottles. I was sitting home having dinner and I loved the steak, loved the corn, loved the bread and loved the tomatoes. The only thing my wife and I weren't too tickled about was the wine that I picked. I said, "We could do this better. With our customer service philosophy at Stew Leonard's and that I grew up with," he explains. With his sister Beth agreeing to open a store, he says, "Well, that was the beginning of a love and a passion that I still am involved in today is this wine business. I just love it."

The Beverage Journal chats with CEO Stew Leonard Jr. about his foray into wine and wine travel with his wife Kim, the Stew Leonard III Children's Charities which promotes children's education on water safety issues and nutrition, and Haitian earthquake relief efforts.

Stew Leonard Jr. "Drink the **Good Wine Now**"

Before there was Whole Foods or Sunflower markets, Stew Leonard's existed as the original consumer farmer's market shopping experience. Known as the "World's Largest Dairy Store" and one of the most renowned grocery stores with annual sales of nearly \$300 million and almost 2,000 employees, Stew Leonard's is an icon for those growing up in Connecticut and a must-see for those from away.

by: Dana Slone

When you are not drinking an icy cold glass of dairy product, what are you reaching for?

I'm excited about the Malbecs from Argentina, and some of the blends from Chile: the cabernets, merlots that they are blending down there. A lot of the wines that we are buying are some of our exclusives...like the one that I'm crazy about is this Escala Del Cielo right now. It's \$12.99, which is a Malbec. I get all excited about those wines, and then I'll get into some Sauvignon Blancs from New Zealand in the summer. I like some of the Shiraz out of Australia. I'll dabble around in California a little bit if somebody tells me there is some boutique-y type of neat wine.

Can we get an example of wines you like from California?

Well, this Vineyard 29 out there. There's a cabernet that is just, I mean, uh, lights out (laughs) really good. My wife and I don't want to share any of that when we have it at dinner.

What are some highlights of what's in your personal wine cellar?

Oh, you know what I have? It's the Stag's Leap 1973 that won the 1976 Paris Tasting. I've got a bottle of it. Isn't that cool? A friend, a good customer of ours gave that to me as a gift for my wine cellar. Then there is some signed port I have from Quinta de Vargellas in Portugal. Everybody who visits his winery has to write a poem. That's hanging in the cellar with the bottle of port that he gave me. Because you know what was funny? When you go there, the only time you don't drink port is at breakfast. The bees even like to come and just lick your skin because it's so sweet. He was pulling bottles out from before I was born. So my wife and I wrote a little poem about how we had this great trip but the only thing we didn't like about our visit was there was no port at breakfast. As we were leaving he picked out some little gem-of-a-bottle and on it he wrote "Stew, here's some port for you to enjoy at your next breakfast." You just walk through the cellar and smile all the time.



Stew and his wife, Kim, in Portugal

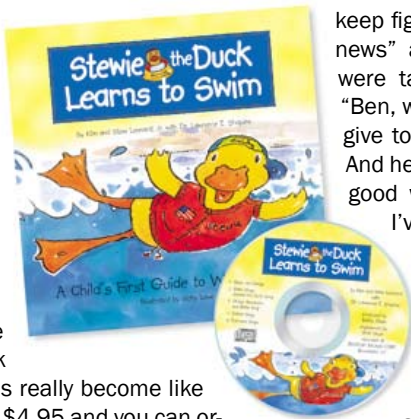
I see you are working towards becoming a sommelier?

I've taken a Sommelier course out in Manhattan. I've been through the WSCT intermediate and advance. I was studying for the diploma part of it. I took that certified wine specialist course. My wife passed - and I flunked. But you know what's really nice? My wife went through all this training with me. We've been to vineyards all over the world. We've made some tremendous friends in Italy and France and California and Spain and daughter now is working for Gallo in California.

We know you do a lot of work in the community and you have the Water Safety Foundation.

One of the things we are really proud of is our new relationship with the Red Cross. We've been doing a lot with them this year. We also just went over the 100,000 mark on our little book "Stewie the Duck Learns to Swim." That has really become like a national best seller. It is \$4.95 and you can order it on our Web site (<http://stewietheduck.com>). We're so proud to get that message out to everybody (to promote water safety).

Also, we have 107 Haitian team members working at Stew Leonard's. In light of the recent earthquake, what we've done from the children's charities foundation is we've contributed \$25,000 to our 107 team members and they're wiring the money directly to their families in Haiti.



Are you ever going to open that bottle of '73 Stags Leap?

I had a dear, close family friend. He was a friend of my father's. He lived out in Long Island and he loved wine. He collected wine all his life. He found out he had cancer. I was in my 30's at the time and I called him up just to say "Hi, keep fighting and I heard the news" and all that. As we were talking, I said to him "Ben, what advice would you give to somebody my age?" And he said, "Stew, drink the good wine now. All my life I've been collecting. I go into the doctor he tells me I have cancer; he gives me six months to live and said 'We are starting chemo right away and you can't have any alcohol'. All I did was collect. I never drank it." Every time I go down into my cellar and I go to grab a bottle and go "Eh, maybe I shouldn't really open that bottle. Let me save it"... I always end up grabbing it and I get that corkscrew out real quick...

WARNING to FUTURE VISITORS of QUINTA DE VARGELLAS

*Quinta de Vargellas is amazing,
our stay was better than we dreamed;*

*The laughter never ended
as the flow of great Port streamed.*

*But, amidst the years of history
and Taylor's rise to number 1;
There's a warning I must give you
as your visits just begun.*

*You'll wake up in the morning
and you'll breathe that Douro air;
But, when you sit to eat your breakfast,
you'll find no Port is offered there!*

*Vargellas' walls echo with rich history and
many dignitaries have signed this book;
But, why no Port is served at breakfast?
Each one has over-looked!*

*You'll touch the vines and also learn
they even have an Olive Oil;
You'll hear about traditions and
get to walk this famous soil.*

*Gillygane commands the menu and
Alistair's Chip Port will start the night
But in the morning, you'll have a lonely
breakfast... not a Port will be in sight!*

*The lunches are delicious, the Port will
lubricate your soul and set it free;
Then more Port will be drunk at dinner
and you must taste the chocolate with LBV!*

*Yes, Vargellas is spectacular,
my wife, Kim and I had a ball;
Our store's will always have a Taylor Port
display standing mighty tall.*

*But as future guests of Quinta de Vargellas,
we feel obliged to give this warning;
Drink up at lunch and dinner because,
there's no port served in the morning!*

February 2006