



A peek inside the Little Nell's hush-hush Red Light Lounge



# WHAT HAPPENS IN THE CELLAR...

In Aspen, the Little Nell's wine cellar is more than storage. It's an invite-only tasting room, shrouded in secrecy.

By Mark Seal

**A**re you worthy of The Room? Are you passionate about wine? Do you look at the left side of the wine list before checking the prices on the right? Are you discreet in your consumption, preferring to drink, say, a \$7,000 bottle of 1975 Romanée-Conti Burgundy in privacy, rather than amid the stares and glare of a public restaurant?

If so, then come with me. I'm following a new king of the Aspen, Colorado, wine scene, Carlton McCoy, wine director of the Little Nell hotel, into a secret, subterranean lair of hopes, dreams, and 22,000 bottles of fine wine. I've finished dinner in element 47, the

Little Nell's lauded restaurant, which for many diners is where an evening ends. But for a select and lucky few, the dinner is merely a passageway into a mysterious netherworld: the most unique wine cellar in America, if not the world.

"People think it's sort of a setup," says McCoy, the hotel's suavely bald and bespectacled 31-year-old wine director, as we leave the elegant confines of the restaurant, walk through a set of swinging doors, and step into the hotel's cacophonous industrial kitchen, filled with strange smells, slick floors, and noisy personnel.

"You've just paid all this money to have a phenomenal dining experience, and before you know it you walk through these swinging doors and you've got a server having dinner over a trash can and another maybe cursing," says McCoy, narrating our descent like a field guide. "You go through the back and there's maybe coffee grounds on the floor; continue down the stairwell and you're seeing employee-appreciation stuff on the wall, and you're saying, I thought I was going to a wine cellar!"

Down two sets of stairs, through another door, and we're in the hotel's parking garage. "Luckily, it's the Little Nell's garage," says McCoy. "So it's Porsche, Ferrari, Mercedes."

We walk across the garage and are soon standing in front of what seems like yet another ordinary door, "a very government-looking door in a very government shade of blue," says McCoy. "But you can sort of hear hip-hop music playing. Now you're thinking, What is going on?"

McCoy opens the door to a small, dark anteroom, and once my eyes find focus, I can see what McCoy calls "a dark bordello-looking black-and-red room." Then he opens a second door and we're there: The Room, a.k.a. the Red Light Lounge. More movie set than wine cellar, the pair of chilly adjoining spaces are illuminated by warehouse-red lights, ac-

where nothing stood before. McCoy grew up in Anacostia, a section of Washington, D.C., then known as the murder capital of America. He learned the culinary arts in a high school program for underprivileged youth and rose to become the second African-American to earn the coveted Master Sommelier diploma. When he arrived at the Little Nell, in 2011, he had some extremely big shoes to fill. More master sommeliers have passed through the Little Nell's wine program than at any other hotel or restaurant in America, including two legendary hunks of Colorado wine: Bobby Stuckey (Little Nell, 1995–2000), the cool, square-jawed Aspen wine god who left a vale of tears when he abandoned Aspen for no less than Thomas Keller's Napa Valley flagship, French Laundry, and Richard Betts (2000–2008), the long-haired Lothario of the grape whose impish grin and yoga-toned bod made many a ski bunny swoon as she sipped his Chardonnay.

What could McCoy do that these living legends had not? It came to him one off-season, when the hotel was closed and the brass was gone. "So there's no one to tell us no," he says. Seeking a way to show the hotel's massive wine collection, McCoy and his best friend, the Nell's assistant food and beverage director Csaba "Chubby" Oveges, decided to create a tasting room in what had been an ordinary wine cellar in an out-of-the-way corner of the hotel's basement. "We paid off a carpenter with cases of beer, and convinced him to work on our tasting room," says McCoy.

When the beer was consumed, the tasting room arose: "We brought in a team of 20 to build nice wooden arches," he continues. "Lorenzo



The Little Nell's 31-year-old wine director, Carlton McCoy

cented with wooden arches, and filled with infinite shelves of wine bottles, wine glasses, and wine paraphernalia. Those who have imbibed in this hallowed place have signed the walls in black Sharpie. "People don't want to leave," says McCoy. "Guests dub it Baby Vegas, in that you sort of lose your sense of time. Before you know it, you've been down here two or three hours. You walk in and sort of stumble out, and you're like, What was that?"

"That" is a triumph of ingenuity, a wine nexus created

**ACCESS**  
Loyal, frequent guests to Little Nell are welcome in the Red Light Lounge. A first-timer needs to gain entry. Wine director Carlton McCoy handles all reservations. He can be reached at [cmcoy@thelittlenell.com](mailto:cmcoy@thelittlenell.com).

Trefethen [vice president of Trefethen Family Vineyards] donated two barrels to create a phenomenal tasting table. A little charcuterie, some local cheeses, and it's a party."

To this he added what the new Aspen prizes most: privacy, exclusivity, to be a place that only a select few know about, much less have the ability to gain entry.

"The Red Light Lounge is the most intimate, sexy lounge you will ever visit in a garage," says Aspen local Nancy Patton. "That's about all I can say because the first rule of the Red Light Lounge is 'You don't talk about the Red Light Lounge.' Or at least I hope no one does."

It opened quietly in summer 2014, at the *Food & Wine Classic*, a three-day culinary Woodstock where thousands of food and wine lovers, along with an array of industry leaders, vintners, and experts, flock to Aspen in a ravenous rage of eating and drinking while attending seminars, cooking classes, tastings, and symposiums. The regular attendees knew nothing about the Red Light Lounge, but the VIPs were invited to a series of secret parties. With admission granted by a passcode that changed nightly, the Red Light Lounge speak-easy was born.

One guest set the tone opening weekend. "He disappeared for a couple hours to go to parties," says McCoy. "Found his way back to the cellar. And before you know it, he was drinking a bottle of 1990 Chave Hermitage. He grabbed it off the shelf, opened the— He had a corkscrew on him, and started going at it. I charged his account: This is a \$5,000 bottle."

From there, the cellar was off and running. "We have people come in and say, 'I do want to spend a lot of money. I want to drink fine wine, but I don't want everyone in the restaurant seeing me do it,'" says McCoy. "So you start the dining experience in the restaurant and you have a nice bottle of Champagne, maybe a simple

bottle of white Burgundy.... And then you're like, Now, I want to taste some great wines. So you go down to the cellar and we do a comparative tasting.

"We once did a comparative tasting of all of the 1990 vintage of all of the vineyards of DRC. We did Richebourg next to La Tâche next to Romanée-Saint-Vivant next to Romanée-Conti.... This is the first time I've ever seen this done or heard

**"WE HAD MASSIVE CONTAINERS OF CAVIAR. HOUSE-MADE CRÈME FRAÎCHE. WITH P2, THE NEWEST AND RAREST VINTAGE OF DOM PÉRIGNON. IT WAS INSANE."**

of it being done. Side by side. Just to give you an idea, one of those bottles of wines is probably \$20,000 to \$30,000—"

"Easy," interjects "Chubby" Oveges.

"This is not something that someone wants to be seen in public doing," says McCoy. "This can only happen in the Red Light Lounge. It's that one place in Aspen where you can do whatever you want and no one knows. There are no cameras in the cellar."

Few knew about the dusk-until-dawn blowout at last year's Classic, where 30 industry leaders let loose. "We were there until three in the morning; [superstar Spanish chef] José Andrés was slicing Ibérico ham. We had three dueling mixologists behind the tasting table." And there were no

looky-loos allowed in the cellar in July when the owner of Dom Pérignon Champagne held a national-release party for P2, the newest and rarest vintage of the world's most famous Champagne. "We can invite some of the wealthiest people in the country to the cellar," says McCoy. "We had massive containers of caviar. House-made crème fraîche. Potato chips made from potatoes from Glenwood Springs. *Insane*. With Dom Pérignon.

"We've had people spend a couple hundred bucks and we've had people come down and spend 50 grand," he continues. (The average is \$3,000.) "Schramsberg sparkling wine did a 50th-anniversary party in the Red Light Lounge. [Sommelier and winemaker] Rajat Parr did a release of his vintages of Sandhi down there...."

But not everyone is invited. "There's a standard," says McCoy. "We don't want guys coming down and drinking tequila and just having a party. This is for people who want to drink fine wine in a fun environment."

To gain entry, you must convince the gatekeeper that you are worthy. "I don't want some random hostess to make the reservation," says McCoy. "I want them contacting me and only me. That's how these clients operate. They don't want to talk to four people to get the head guy. They want to go directly to the head guy. What we have to decide is if the type of experience the guest wants is appropriate for the Red Light Lounge."

Once vetted, you swing through the double doors, through the kitchen, down the stairs, across the parking garage, and descend into the rabbit hole where time stands still.

You are worthy of The Room and the new world of wine that awaits you there. ♦

*Investigative reporter Mark Seal won a 2015 Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award for his DEPARTURES story on Aman resorts.*