

Guest's secret reserve inspires heist fantasy



COREY MINTZ

Marc Russell would prefer that I not tell you where his business is. "King and Spadina is good enough," he says, meeting me in the basement of an office building. "That's all people need to know."

In front of a door marked "mechanical room," a scanner reads his fingerprint before allowing us access to The Fine Wine Reserve.

My head, which regularly plays the theme from *Mission: Impossible* (the TV show, not Tom Cruise's noisy trilogy), turns up the volume.

Past an outer wall of two-feet thick concrete, are layers of air, plastic, mineral insulation and wetboard. Along with condensers, evaporators, dehumidification and fogging systems, the temperature is controlled within one degree Fahrenheit.

Russell's clients either live in condos with no place to store wine, or in houses with already filled cellars. They have 24-hour access to the facility, including a lounge, where, without Russell's permission, the underground supper club Charlie's Burgers was inaugurated.

He got the business idea after receiving a port that wouldn't be ready to drink for 20 years. "I was living in a condo and thought, how am I going to store this?" The former geologist spent two years researching the project full-time.

We walk down a narrow corridor lined with the wood-panelled wine lockers. Lamps barely illuminate. The end of the hall disappears into darkness.

Though entry-level lockers are inexpensive, the contents of the 5,500-square-foot facility are worth millions. One room is lined with Bordeaux. A tower of Romanée-Conti, "the most expensive wine in the world," is stacked to the ceiling. Recent vintages start at about \$2,800 a bottle.

The non-descript "mechanical room" sign is a found object, the low profile a matter of security.

"I quickly realized that it was appealing to my clients," says Russell. But as these valuables are perishable, traceable and weigh about 450,000 pounds, he proposes, "You've got to be crazy to try to



COREY MINTZ PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

The exact location of Marc Russell's Fine Wine Reserve is a secret.

heist a wine storage facility."

Crazy, huh? I can see the *Mission: Impossible* heist clearly.

If I were mastermind Peter Graves, I would be posing as a newspaperman, distracting Russell from Martin Landau, posing as a wine-collecting South American dictator. He'd have Peter Lupus, the strong guy, wheel in six cases of Romanée-Conti, insisting it be stored next to the others.

Phase two of the plan is Russell coming to my house for dinner. A modest man who enjoys a bowl of raw vegetables each night, he's made to feel at home by a raw salad of beef tartare with shaved broccoli, dressed with a Szechuan peppercorn sauce. It seems gimmicky, but the Chinese combination is a classic for a reason.

"I love wine," says Russell, "but I don't have a massive collection." He's not overly disappointed that his 2005 Chateaufort-Du-Pape is corked. It's a collateral loss that every wine lover needs to expect. "I got into this because of the science application of it all. I'm a science guy."

Meanwhile, inside the Reserve, our science guy, Greg Morris, emerges from the stack of wine cases, which is really a single, hollow box. He switches bottles with the real Romanée-Conti, then awaits the code to deactivate the security and escape through a ventilation shaft.

Unlike most who work with wine, Russell is an introvert, slightly bowled over by the extroverted dinner antics of Toronto sommelier Jamie Drummond and his girlfriend Laura McGonigal. In the *M:I* version, Drummond is really Landau again (taking any excuse to do a Scottish accent) in a mask.

Drummond asks if I have a decanter for his 1995 Chateau Margaux. I don't. But I do have an empty milk bottle. The bottle, lined with a truth serum, combined with McGonigal's batting lashes (echoing Barbara Bain's role of the enchantress) will get the code out of Russell.

The Bordeaux, regarded as one of the best in the world, breathes air for the first time in 15 years, as the room fills with the smell of butter and mushrooms for the next course I'm cooking. I bring the pan to the table and, let's say everyone but Russell tastes a mushroom, which contains an antidote to the drug in the milk bottle (*M:I* never had a problem with using make-believe science to fill logic gaps in the plot).

Russell is an incredibly nice guy. Suddenly I feel terrible that I'm fantasizing about robbing him. But it's inspiring to meet someone who has changed careers. It means that one day I might realize my dream of becoming a con artist/spy.

mintz.corey@gmail.com

TINI

THE NEXT BIG
THING IN WINE.

Now available at the LCBO.

TINIWINES.CA

