

A Wine Cellar for Every Home

In early October, wine enthusiast Alan Statman received a mouth-watering invitation to taste rare vintages that a friend had been aging for a decade. But when the glasses were hoisted, instead of sensing rich fruits and rounded tannins, “it tasted like I would expect sewage to taste,” said Statman, who practices corporate law in Cincinnati.

What happened? The wines had been stored in a basement that wasn’t cool or humid enough. With some 1,500 bottles that would have been worth an average of \$250 each if they had been properly stored, his friend may have lost \$375,000 worth of wine.

Worst of all, for about \$3,000, the loss could have been prevented. All it takes is some insulation and a special cooling unit to create a wine cellar that might not only preserve a wine’s value but even enhance it. “Great storage often adds a significant premium---10% and upwards,” says Richard Brierley, head of New York wine sales at Christie’s.

Wine cellars aren’t just for the rich anymore and you don’t need a naturally cool, humid stone room under the manse, either. Advances in insulation and cooling have led to handsome, compact cabinet cellars suitable for preserving wine in the tiniest apartment. People who want a custom cellar with, say, a tasting table that accommodates six have more coolers, gear, and racks to choose from than ever before.

Proper storage lets smart oenophiles buy bottles that are young and cheap. Statman, who keeps his wines in an 1,800 –bottle showplace room featuring Italian floor tiles custom painted with cherubs and grapevines, bought a \$150 Bordeaux in 1991 that’s worth about \$750 today. It’s not hard to accrue \$20 bottles that could be worth \$100 when they’re ready to drink.

Of course, not every wine benefits from cellaring. The average dinner wine can sit on the kitchen counter for months unharmed. But that’s not true of the finer stuff. “Wine is a fragile liquid and needs to be kept correctly,” says Mark Wessels of Addy Bassin’s MacArthur Beverages Wine & Spirits in Washington. Wine that is too warm—say, 70F or more—can “cook” into a syrupy muck. Low humidity can cause corks to dry out. That may let air into the bottle, causing oxidation that spoils the wine. Vibration in a cellar can keep solids in the wine suspended when they should clump together and fall to the bottom of the bottle. Otherwise, the wine can give you that dry-tongue feeling.

Mere refrigeration won’t do the job. The standard fridge is generally too cold, and the thermostats are not accurate enough and don’t regulate humidity. Cabinet cellars, which can hold up to 800 bottles, are one good solution. At a cost of \$1,000 to \$3,500, they come in styles from sleek steel and glass to Victorian oak. Many have enough flair to sit smartly in your dining room.

If you base your choice on storage capacity, beware: Some manufactures make their units appear to hold more bottles by making the cubbies smaller. These racks won’t fit Champagnes, Rhones, or even some chardonnays. So it’s a good idea to take the dimensions of the bottles you want to store and make sure they’ll fit. Also be careful about bottle counts. One cellar has a 520-bottle capacity when bottles are stacked, but when racks are installed, it holds only about 360.

Another caveat: Make sure you can get the cabinet where you want it to go. “One out of 12 units come back because they don’t fit through the door or down the stairway,” says Robert Orenstein, president of International Wine Accessories. To keep from getting stuck with a \$1,000 round-trip shipping bill, hire the shipper to measure your home first. It usually costs about \$50. Then, if the cabinet cellar doesn’t fit, says Orenstein, the mover covers the shipping.

None of that is a problem if you custom build a cellar. Custom-building becomes cost efficient if you plan to store 1,000 or so bottles. That’s because the same \$700-\$1,500 chiller used in an 800-bottle cabinet can cool a 1,500 bottle walk-in cellar. The rest of the materials—2-inch-by-4-inch framing, a plastic vapor barrier, foam insulation, wine racks, and insulated doors—can cost less than \$500.

At that price, “you are not going to get the aesthetics,” says Art Lokar of Estate Wine Cellars in Livonia, Michigan. For many collectors, the aesthetics are as important as the wine. “Everyone wants to feel like they are walking into an old place in Europe”, says architect Susan Geier of Encinitas, Calif., who designs wine cellars. “From oozing mortar to 400-year-old imported French tiles on the walls and arched cabinets”.

Still, even the fanciest cellars can have problems. Few builders understand the special requirements, like the proper installation of the vapor barrier (table). Flub the barrier, and moisture escapes into a home’s walls, where it can rot the house from the inside. “People call us because the floor tile in the room above is caving in,” said Tony Wilke of Wine Cellar Innovations, a leading wine rack maker. Other common errors: cooling the cellar with underpowered air conditioning instead of refrigeration, skimping on insulation, and failing to use low-heat lighting that reduces the chance of condensation or drips.

For a basic wine cellar, specialist craftsmen tend to be pricey. “We find you are best off hiring a handyman,” says Orenstein—but only if you supervise to make sure the job gets done right. Both Orenstein’s company, IWA (800-527-4072), and competitor Wine Enthusiast (800-356-8466) offer free design consultation, including building instructions and help with floor plans. Specialists tend to charge at least \$5 per bottle storage, about five times the fee of a handyman under your supervision.

Robert Beson, president of Sagimore Capital, a real estate investing company near Detroit, hired a specialist to build his dream cellar, and he listened when he was warned that most people underestimate their needs. Beson nearly doubled his plan to accommodate 2,900 bottles in a room with a tasting table for six, antiqued plaster walls, and tumbled marble floors.

It took some seven months and about \$70,000 for Beson’s cellar to be constructed, and it is already largely filled with wine. “I suppose I got carried away a little bit, but I am glad I have it now,” he says. Surely his friends, with whom he shares bottles from his vast collection, will drink a toast to that.

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