

Best Cellars for Wine

by Jodie Jacobs (Reprinted from The Chicago Tribune 8-3-01)

The type of storage you pick is a matter of taste and space

Wait a second before you place that wine rack you just bought above the fridge. It may meet your decorating aesthetics, but wine experts say that the heat up there can be a wine killer. That countertop space near the window? Forget it. Ultraviolet light and bright lights are no-no's. So what is a person who likes to serve wine, drink wine, entertain with wine, maybe even start a wine collection, supposed to do?

Answers vary according to objective, budget and space, say wine consultants, storage designers and home builders.

First, no matter what the budget or space, you are not alone in wanting to show off or collect wine, say those in the know.

"Interest in wine storage has grown by a quantum leap," says nationally known wine consultant Johnson Ho, whose Knightsbridge Wine Shoppe & Epicurean Centre Ltd. in Northbrook was named "best wine shop" by Chicago Magazine in 1999. "What satisfied people 10 years ago would now be considered entry level. It's much more sophisticated—the design and the technical aspects such as cooling and lighting."

The increase in interest pops up in housing resales, remodeling projects and new construction.

"Building a cellar pays off like having a great kitchen pays off," Ho says. "It has great resale value. It has been known to be the tipping factor to selling a home quickly. I knew of a high-level executive whose home sold immediately because the husband fell in love with wine cellar. The wife like the rest of the house,

but the wine cellar clinched the deal."

Upscale home builders at such custom construction companies as Bannockburn-based Orren Picknell Builders, known for its award-winning North Shore themed (Organization House, Empty-Nester House) homes and Wheaton-based Cesario Builders, a Home Builders Association of Greater Chicago Excellence in Housing Design 2000 Gold Key winner, say that requests for wine storage space have increased dramatically. And the requests often go beyond small wine cooler appliances.

Tony Perry, OrrenPickell vice president, estimates that the company is now putting in wine cellars in about 15 percent of its homes and is putting wine coolers either under a kitchen counter or as part of a family room wet-bar set up in most other projects.

"Whether it's new construction or remodeling, people come to the design process with a wish list. And with increasing frequency, that list includes some wine storage," Perry says.

The increase has been more like 70 percent for Cesario president Anthony Cesario.

"We weren't putting them in. Now, of the last 10 homes we built, seven wanted wine cellars," he says. "We go the full range: a simple closet with a door and shelves that is basically utilitarian to fancy rooms with dumb waiters, dining area and rustic, old-style atmosphere."



Sour grapes: When good wine turns bad

A favorite saying of wine guru Johnson Ho, proprietor of the Knightsbridge Wine Shoppe & Epicurean Center Ltd. in Northbrook, is "life is too short to drink bad wine." To guide people who want to store their wine so that it doesn't turn bad, Ho offers the following storage suggestions:

- A person can start simple with a wine rack in a dark, cool corner. Basements are best. Put it at a northern wall but not near heat such a furnace, water heater or heating ducts. A basement's natural temperature will be about or below 60 degrees. Above 65 degrees is iffy. At 75 degrees, the wine starts to spoil. Storage should be stable—next to a washer or dryer is not good.

- Horizontal storage is ideal. It will keep the cork moist and resilient so it keeps air out of the bottle.

- Absent a basement, a wine cooler, which is like a small refrigerator that goes under a countertop, is recommended. It typically holds 30 to 60 bottles.

- Wine can also be kept in racks in a small closet but the closet should be insulated and have active cooling system.

- If a person wants to have a small rack into a cabinet, it should have a door. Wine should not be exposed for any length of time to light.

- The worst place a person can keep wine bottles is in a kitchen. Sunlight and heat are two worst things for wine. Putting them above the refrigerator is the worst thing a person can do because of the heat.

- When building a wine cellar think about needs and wants—functionality and what makes you happy. If the idea is to use a wine cellar as a backdrop, put in double-paned doors. Dining in a cause people and food will be cold unless the temperature is turned up, which is not good for the wine.

- If building a cellar, have a consistent, cohesive concept, not a cluttered look.

- Don't underestimate future needs. It is easier and cheaper to have a larger capacity that needed in the beginning than to redo later. Racks can be added later.

- Finally, don't put all your wine budget into the cellar. Save some to buy wine

Defining goals

Before builders and consultants can come up with suggestions, however, they want to know something about the client's goals. And those, they say, can range from just wanting to properly store wine or have space for a collection to incorporating the storage into an entertainment or personal lifestyle.

To Riverwoods electrical contractor Eric Nixon, it was all of the above. Motivated to learn more about wine so he could knowledgeably entertain clients at restaurants, Nixon would stop at Ho's Knightsbridge wine shop. The education changed his life.

"I used to put the bottles in the kitchen racks and leave them there. As I learned about wine, I learned about the storage issue," says Nixon,

who evolved from a casual wine buyer to wine collector and member of wine and food appreciation groups. He records his wine buys, tastings and usage in a computer program. Nixon's collection and space needs grew over time.

In contrast, a Lake Forest couple started from scratch after moving into a custom-designed home.

"It had always been my husband's dream to have a wine cellar. But we procrastinated. Now it was the right time," says the wife, pointing out that their son was finishing college and they had the space.

The catalyst was a dinner at a friend's posh early 1900's Lake Forest estate. The party included going downstairs to choose a wine for dinner from

an impressively appointed cellar and anteroom.

"We said, 'we want one,'" the wife says.

They turned to Ho when they heard he had advised their party host about wine purchases and cellar design. They opted for simple but elegant with a customized redwood storage system that can hold 2,600 single and crated bottles.

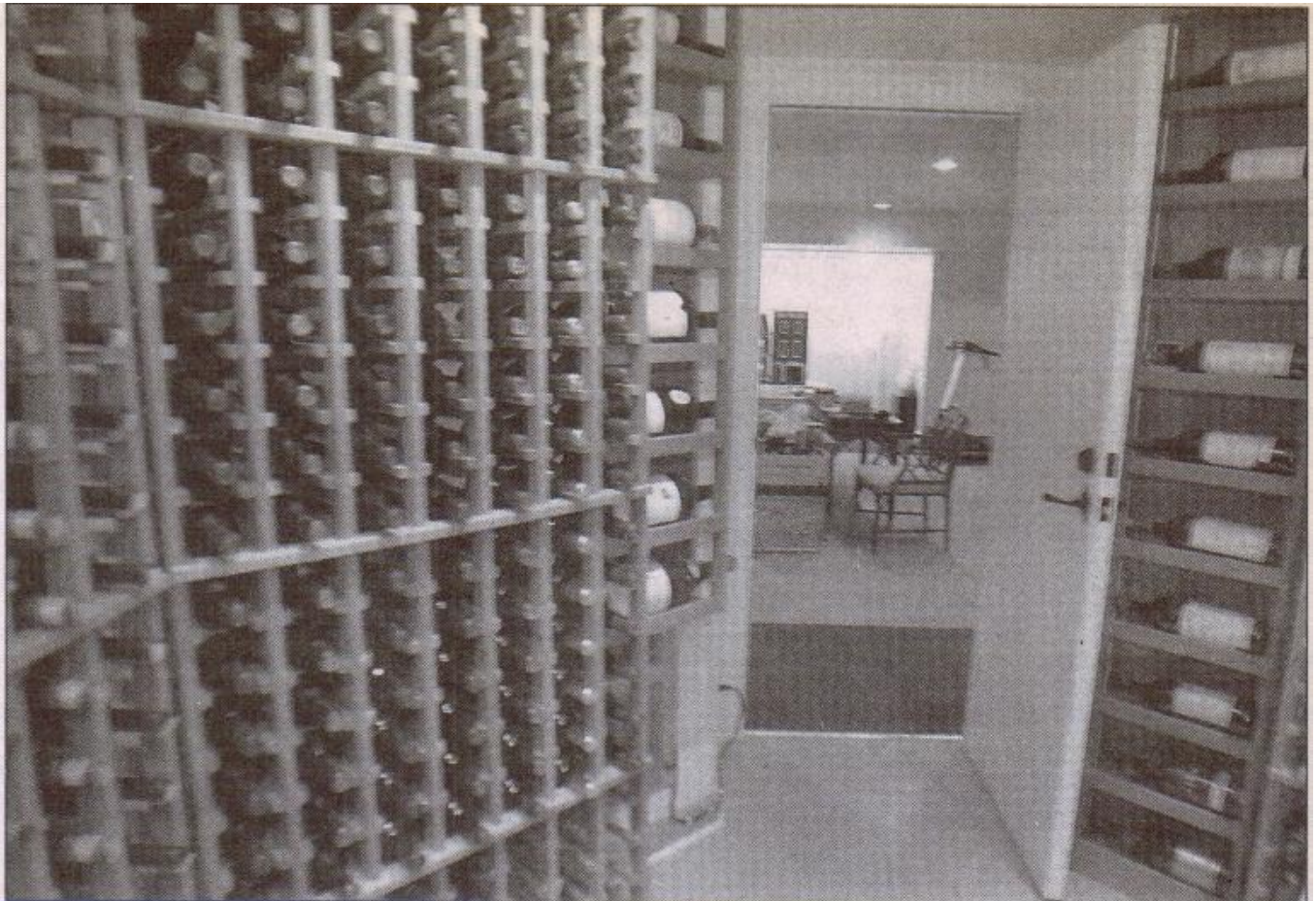
Racks wrap around the cellar and also cascade from the back wall down to a center island workspace. Cases are stored on roll-out shelves on the entrance wall.

"Now, drinking wine has become a wonderful ritual. My husband comes home after a long day at work and once he finds out what we're having for dinner, he comes down to the cellar, picks out a wine—he may consult a book first.

Then, we enjoy our wine at dinner," she says.

The Lake Forest couple divided a furnace and storage area, added insulation, wall boards and Italian floor tiles to finish a basement space about 15 by 14 feet for their wine cellar. They tucked a wine anteroom with recessed shelves and seating alcove under their stairs.

Nixon, who used a vented 1,200-bottle capacity credenza in his first Riverwoods house, a basement-less ranch, changed to a 5-by-6-foot, closet size, 1,500-capacity wine cellar when he built an addition with a basement. Insulated and below grade, the basement cellar temperature typically stayed in the 50-degree range but would rise to about 62 degrees in August.



Tribune photo by Jim Robinson

A circular wine cellar in Lake Forest. Wine storage usually involves investing in a cooling system to obtain optimal temperature and humidity control.

Space for 2,100 bottles

The warmer-month temperature was on the safe storage range but not at the optimal 55 degrees that some experts prefer for the long-term storage of exceptional wines. The wine cellar in his new house has space for 2,100 bottles (individual and cases) and has a cooling and humidity unit.

“As I collected, I had to look at how I could best fulfill my need in the space I had,” Nixon says. “One of the nice things about building a house is that I was able to have my optimal wine cellar. Now I do have the space so if I see something out there I want, I’m not worried about purchasing it and not having a temperature-controlled environment.”

In some instances, wine aficionados have asked builders to dig out space underground for a cellar.

Discussions with Jay Fritz, owner of J. Fritz Wineries in Sonoma County, Calif., convinced Wheaton lawyer Doug MacPhail that a hole in the ground was the way to go.

“I heard from my friend in California that all that people in Italy do is dig a hole in the ground and they have a wine cellar,” MacPhail says.

When he and wife, Gert, had Cesario Builders construct a home in the town’s recently developed Muirfield Park in 1994, they asked that an approximately 8-by-9 section adjacent to the basement under a proposed mud room and porch be excavated for a wine cellar. MacPhail furnished it with modular racks from William Sonoma that hold about 288 bottles but can be expanded. The below grade’s steady 61 degrees without a cooling system meets his criteria.

“I was buying more wine to serve with dinner, but I did not have a wine cellar, so it was hard to keep it. All I had was a rack upstairs. But because the temperature would vary I couldn’t buy more than a

moderate amount,” he says. “I wanted a natural temperature.”

Digging a wine cellar under an outdoor structure also worked for a Lake Forest couple. While building their home, a French Normandy-style chateau about three years ago, they extended a tower’s circular design below ground.

“My husband always loved wine and wanted a cellar but never had the proper space until we built this. In our previous house what we had was more of a wine closet. This is a true cellar,” the wife says.

About 12 feet in diameter, the cellar is lined with a redwood storage system designed by Ho to hold about 1,200 bottles individually and in cases. The floor is cement with a pea gravel pit center that is watered by a tube from the cellar’s cooling system to add humidity. The cellar is maintained between 55 and 55 degrees. Humidity is between 60 and 65 percent.

Because below-grade temperatures mean that cooling systems don’t have to work as hard or may not even be needed, builders say they are doing more wine rooms in basements than above grade. But they are occasionally asked to work with spaces in or next to kitchens or family rooms, particularly where there is no basement. Pickell’s clients tend to want wine storage next to an appropriate entertainment area, according to Perry.

“They might have a billiard room next to a wet bar and have a wine cellar right off that and sometimes an anteroom where they can do tastings and have an exhaust fan so they can have a cigar with a glass of port,” he says.

Wine storage in some form has become an integral part of many remodeling projects, according to Kitchen Distributors of America cabinet designer Rachel Jurs-Lauderdale, who works out of KDA’s main Chicago-area branch in Itasca.

“People are definitely talking more about wine storage. It’s usually the first thing people want to incorporate, given the opportunity to change something about their kitchen—even if it’s on a small scale. If the space is small they will choose that rather than a cabinet dedicated to a waste basket or compactor,” Lauderdale says.

Creating a budget

Along with the space-location question, designers suggest that people consider how much money they are willing to spend on wine storage.

“Think about what you want the space to look like,” Lauderdale suggests, pointing out that size and design affect costs.

Going too small, however, could cost more in the long run, according to Ho. “People underestimate how much storage they will need. It is more expensive to add space later,” he says.

He and Lauderdale recommend investing in a cooling system to obtain optimal temperature and humidity control.

Cool idea

Estimating that a cooler system would cost about \$1,000 for a small closet space, \$2,000 for a medium-size closet and about \$4,000 for a larger room, Ho says, “You can do it fairly cheap if you don’t care if it is noisy. Quiet is more expensive—\$ 4,000 or \$5,000 and up.”

Bottle coolers can range from about \$600 to \$5,600, according to Lauderdale. “It depends on how fancy or plain people are willing to go. Clear glass is cheaper than smoked. A plain finish is cheaper than elegant casing or cabinetry,” she says.

Wine storage systems also vary in price from a few hundred

dollars to several thousand depending on closet or room size, type of wood used (pine at the low end, redwood in the middle, mahogany at the high end), style (shelves or racks), arches, curves, soffits, counters and other accoutrements.

“Customized wine racks range from \$1,000 for small and basic, \$1,000 to \$2,000 for medium size and \$3,000 to \$10,000 for large systems. But that is basic. The cost is double that if showy, all heart [even-colored core] redwood, with decorative finishing trim,” Ho says. “There are trade-offs. There’s quiet and gorgeous with all the bells and whistles, such as a waterfall (cascade of single bottle racks), curves and arches, which is a lot more money than efficient and noisy, which may not have the best look but is a solid effort.”



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