

Building a Wine Cellar

Conserving your “liquid” library

BY CRAIG MCMANUS

A natural evolution for serious wine collectors is to consider building a wine cellar. For the wine enthusiast, maintaining the quality of a collection of fine and rare bottles is paramount.

If you love great wine and have decided to make the investment to buy bottles or cases of wines that need to mature, a temperature and humidity-controlled space is essential. Certain wines, like good vintages of red Bordeaux and California Cabernet Sauvignon, require several years to soften and mature. While you can drink these wines young in their rough, tannic stage, aging will soften and round out the tannins and allow the wine to develop complexity. This aging process may require a year or years, depending on the vintage, and how tannic or “backward” the wines will be.

When I mention to my customers that they might want to consider protecting their growing collection of wine in a temperature-controlled environment, they often respond in the negative, feeling a wine cellar to be cost prohibitive. It need not be.

I was about 22 years old when I first decided to create a “wine cellar” for the few dozen bottles I had put away for another year. Since I had limited funds, I improvised. I found a cool, dark space in my basement and set up a wine rack. I knew a cellar should be located on the north wall (the coolest part of a basement) away from any heat sources, like furnaces and dryers, and in a dark environment, free of vibration. The space under my stairs was just perfect...back then.

The temperature fluctuated with the seasons, not exactly optimal conditions. I later created a small room around the racks, insulating the walls with thermal and vapor barrier insulation, and, eventually, added an air conditioner. The wines were now at the right temperature, but the air conditioner was zapping the humidity from the air, drying out the corks. Finally, when I had the money, I invested in a professional cooling unit and all was safe and sound with my growing collection!

My cellar evolution was all about trial and error. Today, there are many professionals in the cellar-building business who can help you create

your own wine cellar without all the hassle of doing it yourself.

Wine is a living thing. To allow wine to age gracefully, one must cellar the bottles in a stable environment where the temperature and humidity remain between 55 and 58°F and 70 and 80 percent, respectively. Lower temperatures will stop a wine from aging, higher temperatures will cause a wine to age too fast and lose fruit and flavor. Too-low humidity will cause the corks to dry out and the wine to oxidize. Too-high humidity, while it will not damage the wines, will rot the labels.

If you love to cellar wine and have an appropriate spot in your home to create a cellar, go for it! You can always buy aged bottles at auction, but you do need to know the provenance of the wines, how and where they were stored. You will also usually pay a significant premium buying great wines years after release; so, I suggest, if you have a place to store them, buy wine when released at the lowest possible price and age it yourself.

Of course, you can build your own wine cellar—I did and the results were very satisfying (once I bought the right cooling unit). If you have some basic carpentry skills, there are plenty of resource materials available to show you how to build, insulate and cool a wine cellar. Or, leave it to a professional who will determine your exact needs for a cellar and help you to stay in a set price range for the project.

However you build a cellar, make sure you make it larger rather than smaller. You will be surprised at how quickly a cellar will fill up!

Having your own wine cellar can be a very rewarding experience. I have spent many an evening sifting through my old bottles, always surprising myself with a few forgotten relics in the depths of the cellar. If you love wine and want to cellar your own, I would highly recommend building or having your own cellar built. Just don't expect all of your friends to want to hang out in it. No one wants to party in 55 degrees and high humidity! ▶

Craig McManus is the proprietor of Wine Ventures, a retail wine and gourmet shop in Tenafly. He has lectured, taught, and written on the subject of wines and spirits for almost 25 years.



SELLER OF CELLARS

Designed by Chris Kravitz of Custom Wine Cellars, this extravagant wine cellar features an extensive collection and tiled flooring in a climate-control environment.

IN GOOD SPIRITS

INVENTORY CONTROL

The wine cellar in this Englewood home is designed for the serious connoisseur, and is built to house an extensive selection with a computer cataloging system, climate control, and extended counter for wine tastings.



MICHAEL BOCCHIERI

ASK THE EXPERT

Chris Kravitz builds both luxury and functional wine cellars for many wine enthusiasts. His Custom Wine Cellars (CWC) operation covers all bases of wine storage, from planning the cellar with the client to basic construction and finishing details. Chris answers some of the most common-asked wine cellar questions for (201) readers.

What is the average number of bottles you would suggest a cellar be built to hold?

A typical number would be for about 1,000 – 1,500 bottles. However, we've built cellars for as small as a few hundred bottles and as large as 10,000 bottles. It all depends upon the needs of the customer and their consumption and collecting habits.

What is a good starting point for someone who wants to build a "beginner's cellar?"

First, assess your needs, capacity, budget, projected future consumption? Then, call a qualified wine cellar contractor who can review options with you and provide suggestions.

How much space does the average 1,000-bottle cellar require?

The average space for this quantity would be approximately 8 by 10 feet.

What affects the cost of construction of a wine cellar?

Room preparation: insulation, vapor barrier, wall

coverings, lighting, flooring. Temperature and humidity control. Racking: artistic vs. utilitarian design, as well as choice of woods, materials.

How can you structure the cost of a cellar to stay within a budget?

Adjust the cellar's capacity, the design of the racking and cooling systems, the type of flooring, lighting, doors, moldings, etc.

What type of cooling units do you suggest?

Most people choose a self-contained system such as "Whispercool" or "Breezeaire". We also offer split and ducted systems for those with more demanding applications.

How long does it take to complete the average wine cellar?

From design to completion takes an average of 10-12 weeks, but actual construction time is usually between three and five days.

What is the most exotic wine cellar you have worked on?

We recently completed a project for an 8,000-bottle, four-room cellar that incorporated custom moldings, hidden cooling systems, ornate arches and pillars, custom doors, tumbled marble flooring as well as automated lighting and audio systems. We worked with the architect, builder and homeowner to incorporate the cellar into the overall design of the home.

What is your opinion on the self-contained

wine cellar units? When would you suggest these types of units over a wine cellar?

For customers with limited space, budget or smaller collections, a self-contained unit may be a good choice. The downside of these units is that they are not expandable and may only provide a temporary solution.

What is the average cost associated with the construction of a wine cellar?

Self-contained cooling units start at approximately \$1,500. Exotic cooling systems may cost as much as \$10,000 or more. Custom racking starts at about \$4 per bottle and top quality custom jobs typically average \$10-12 per bottle.

Room construction costs vary greatly depending upon existing conditions. In new construction or renovation of a house, use contractors already working on the site to build the basic cellar, and then have someone like Custom Wine Cellars add the racking, cooling system and finishing details.

Artistic touches add expense. Recessed lighting and chandeliers, mosaic tiles and flooring, stucco and masonry work, custom-wood doors, stained glass, wrought iron, fiberglass and artwork all increase the cost for the project.

For further information, contact Chris Kravitz, Custom Wine Cellars, 338 Old Mill Road, Valley Cottage, N.Y., (914) 393-4204, info@custom-wine-cellar.com.