

Cellar & Wine

by Kia McInerny

A Very Cool Three-Room Design

"You'll find some of the best cellars in Scotland," Montecito collector John Tilson says. "Cellars should be very cold and dark, with high humidity."

John, founder and publisher of www.undergroundwineletter.com, has been collecting and drinking wine for over 40 years. Early wine acquisitions were stored under a cool, dark staircase in his former residence. He now has three underground rooms he designed for his collection.

While some experts suggest the ideal wine-storing temperature is 50-55 degrees, John prefers a range of 47-52 degrees. Refrigeration seemed challenging at first. Noise and vibration from an air-cooled unit proved unacceptable. John's contractor then adapted simple equipment to cool the rooms using re-circulating pool water.

Humidity is 60-70%. "You can lose wine through evaporation," John says. "High humidity is the best protection to maintain corks. That's why wine found in an ocean or lake sometimes has near perfect storage and can still be drinkable even after very long periods of time."

John chose alderwood racking in lieu of old-growth redwood, commonly used for its softness and patina. The lighter wood complements the pale stone floors and alabaster sconces John and his wife acquired in Italy.

The first room contains rare and unusual vintages. On display are such gems as 1926 Chateau Latour, Grand Cru Burgundies from 1929, and a 1966 Petrus. A smaller champagne room houses legendary champagnes, rosés and magnums of Ridge Monte







Bello. A third room contains fine Burgundies, both white and red, from 1982-2008. California, Spanish, German and Italian wines are represented there, as well as vintage Ports and other French wines.

Stacks of wine in their original wooden cases are part of an organization project that is underway. The unadorned wood and iconic lettering of such names as Romanée Conti and La Tache add warmth to the ambiance.

As for cellar management, John prefers to browse the cellar himself when it comes time to locate a given wine. "Some of my wine is computerized," he says. "But a computer is for people with static cellars." He compares his collection to a garden, which needs tending. "Like my garden, my cellar is a living thing" he says. "I drink some wines, remove some, and add some. It's always evolving."

Innovations in Cellar Design

Having recently completed unique personal cellars in Santa Barbara and Montecito, respected cellar designer Tom Warner finds advances in materials, software and climate control exciting.

"The new trend in interiors is to use fully sustainable materials," Warner states. To that end, he says he is "creating bamboo cellar systems that are unique, beautiful, solid and environmentally responsible."

Tom's first step in meeting a client is to inquire about their wines. "I ask them to complete a one-page collection profile, showing their current collection, and what they anticipate it will become." For clients drawn to a modernist aesthetic, metal and glass elements may be



used. A traditional design features a vaulted ceiling of used brick.

It's not all about beauty. The recent "Green Build" show in Chicago featured examples of high-tech encapsulated insulating products Tom believes will cut cooling costs by 50%.

Other developments include innovations in software that track and inventory the wines, as well as afford off-site climate monitoring. Several, like CellarTracker's web-based system, involve a sophisticated, yet simple-to-master system of barcode tracking.

"Let's say you're flying home from Paris to California for a dinner party, where you plan to serve several classic vintages," Tom muses. "You can check your computer en route to select the wines you intend to serve, then re-calculate the value of your collection in real time, based upon the latest auction prices in Hong Kong or New York."

Drama in Space and Lighting

A sense of drama and efficient use of space were guiding principles for another Montecito collector, who began collecting French wines while living in England. "I used diamond racking for maximum impact," he says of the cellar within his hilltop home, currently offered for sale and listed by Rebecca Riskin & Associates.

Open space above the soffits heightens the effect. An ironwork chandelier underscores the diamond pattern on walls, while small ceiling canisters allow good visibility for reading labels.

The floor is limestone over concrete slab. "I haven't had 'spiller's remorse' yet," the owner says. "Limestone contributes natural coolness to the room."

An early focus for the collector was first-growth "Claret" from the Bordeaux region. Later acquisitions include Napa superstars like Kistler,



Harlan Estates, Screaming Eagle, Bryant Family, and still later, the best from other California appellations such as Paso Robles' Isosceles from Justin, and Santa Barbara County's Melville and Brewer-Clifton Pinot Noirs.

A finish carpenter was hired to install the racks. "I used Rhone bottle slots," the collector notes, ensuring that all wines, irrespective of shape, will fit.

Aesthetics was perhaps the easiest task. Challenges surfaced in the form of exhaust pathways for the hot air. A separate exhaust system was mounted in an adjacent utility room to solve the issue.

With optimal room temperatures on the chilly side, this collector installed a fireplace, bar and comfortable seating just outside his cellar for tastings.

A virtual cellar program once offered by Robert Parker provides inventory tracking. Although tech support and updates are no longer

available, the collector is able to download Parker's tasting notes, and blend in his own. "I can look at my cellar on my computer screen, and see filled or available slots," he says. "If I want a wine, I click 'consume.'" The program sorts wines by producer, varietal or region, and creates customized reports that include Parker's rating, drink from and drink by dates, among other details.

Once the design work is done, it may be time to fine-tune the collection. Our last collector suggests a mathematical approach. "If you believe, on average, great Bordeaux will be best in twenty years, fine white Burgundy ten years, California Cabs fifteen years, and great American Chardonnays five years, given a three-thousand-bottle collection, I would be looking at a ten-year average maturity with optimal storage. That's three hundred bottles a year that must be consumed." He adds: "I am starting to drink down my collection."

A nice problem to have.

À votre santé!

