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## Secure your liquid assets

*Store your prized wines in a made-to-order cellar*

by Deborah Abrams Kaplan

**Store prized wines securely in a made-to-order wine cellar**

The "buy and hold" strategy works well for many stocks. And it works just as well for many wines - provided they're properly stashed. With a wealth of wine knowledge and supply in the Bay Area, wine cellars don't need to be confined to wineries or restaurants. A home wine cellar is your best bet for protecting your liquid investment. "It's like throwing money away if you're not going to do that," says Ralph Sands, senior wine buyer at Redwood City's K&L Wine Merchants.

Maintaining the optimal conditions in a wine cellar means age properly. Plus, a wine cellar adds home value. "It's a long term investment, and you get a big return on your investment in terms of selling," says Trish Stokes, a Bay Area cellar designer with Wine Cellar Innovations.

### Planning

Wine cellars can be as small as a closet, for those who don't have room for something bigger. Premanufactured cabinets, holding anywhere from six to 700 bottles, are widely available and can fit in a closet, pantry or other small space. A larger area, such as a basement, or a made-to-order space in a custom home, offers more options. There's no square foot minimum, but you want to be able to hold at least 1,000 bottles in a custom space, says Marty Siegan, co-owner of Wine Cellar Pro in San Rafael.

While many Bay Area contractors have installed wine cellars, cellar designers recommend working with a specialist who can not only plot out the room, but act as a project manager, overseeing the electrical, cooling, and racking selections plus installation. "I'll measure your space and figure out your refrigeration needs," says Stokes. "I work with you on wood options, stain coloring, lighting, flooring, and talk about your wine collection."

Before contacting a designer, consumers should know how many bottles they plan to collect, as well as the types of bottles (750 ml bottles, magnums, champagne bottles or larger format bottles). The designer will ask whether the owner wants functional, basic storage, or a showcase for their wines.

Call the designer when the room is being framed. "The wine cellar doesn't get installed until the house is almost done - it's one of the last things to do," Stokes



says. However, between the initial consultation and the installation, it can take six weeks to a year to order and get cellar components custom-built.

Like other wine cellar designers, Stokes works with the contractors to correctly build the room with a vapor barrier, adequate insulation, greenboard drywall and insulated lighting. Costs for a wine cellar depend of course on size, but also how detailed and exotic the woods and finishing touches are. "I could take the same space and spend \$10,000 or \$100,000," Stokes says. Patrick Wallen, owner of Artistic Cellars in San Rafael, says his wine cellars average \$13 to 15 a bottle, including installation.

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- Trish Stokes, Bay Area cellar designer

### **Building process**

A wine cellar should be built up from the frame to ensure a well- sealed, insulated, controlled environment. "You want to create a plastic bubble, its own special environment, like a fish aquarium," says Stokes. The room should be highly insulated: "If they don't put in the proper installation, the refrigeration system will burn itself out," says Stokes. She also recommends using greenboard drywall, which is water resistant, and a vapor barrier, to control humidity. All of this, along with a refrigeration system, helps maintain the temperature at 55 degrees, with 70 percent humidity - optimum conditions for wine storage.

Many building a wine cellar in a basement or other similar room think they can skip the refrigeration unit, since the chosen room stays cool. Wallen says that while the room may feel cool, a thermometer there rarely registers 55 degrees, and fluctuates depending on the weather. Without climate control, "it's called a passive cellar, and seldom does that work." At 55 degrees, the wine's aging process is predictable; at warmer temperatures, the wine matures faster. "If you build a climatecontrolled wine cellar the correct way, you could leave a bottle standing upright for five years and the cork will remain moist," says Wallen.

Wine cellar placement in the home, as well as economic factors, determine which type of cooling system to use. One is a relatively inexpensive wall-mounted box unit, but because it requires an exhaust for the warm air, it isn't appropriate for all cellars. With a price range of roughly \$550 to \$4,000, "they're kind of like appliances," says Siegan. "If you have a problem with them, you throw them away."

A split system and a ducted air system are more expensive, but can better control the environment. These systems are more appropriate when a cellar is in the middle of the house. A designer can select the best cooling system for that room. Just as a cellar's walls are insulated and sealed with a vapor barrier, any

glass on the cellar door also should be insulated. Choose an exterior grade door with weather stripping.

### **Racks**

Aside from the wine bottles, what most people notice is the racking. Redwood is most common - it looks nice and doesn't mold - but the racks can be made from any material. Wallen prefers using clear heart redwood, unfinished, so there's no odd odor. He discourages owners from using diamond bins and bulk-stacking the bottles. "That's about the worst thing you can do in the wine cellar," he says, noting that with 500 wine bottle styles in the 750 ml classification, the bottles won't stack well on top of each other. He said that air should circulate around each bottle, as the labels can get moldy otherwise.

The other problem with stacking bottles in the Bay Area is earthquakes. Some designers use an earthquake rack that tilts bottles back two to six degrees. But the custom-made racks usually are 13.5 inches deep, holding the entire bottle, so some question whether this tilting is necessary. "All the racks are screwed to the walls, to the studs," says Wallen. "When Loma Prieta hit in 1989 I didn't get one call that had a rack system that lost bottles. The ones that ate it were the bulk stack guys."

### **Lighting, walls and floors**

Other than fluorescent lighting, Siegan says that any type of illumination is fine. "You want lamps that aren't hot. Most of the time they're not going to be on, so it doesn't make a difference if they're on for 10 minutes." Stokes uses LED lighting which produces no heat. For the ceiling, she recommends thermally fused or IC-rated can lights, so the insulation can be wrapped around them to prevent fires. To highlight the bottles and racks, Wallen recommends painting the walls and ceilings a dark color, with satin or eggshell finish. For the floor, he uses any kind of tile or wood (if the floor is insulated, otherwise it can warp). Designers caution against using carpet, since it can mold in the high humidity.

### **Decorating**

The fun part is adding the decorate touches, whether it's an etched glass door or a hand-painted mural. While some owners put special tables for wine tastings and meals in their wine cellars, Stokes recommends against that. "You don't want to be sitting in your wine cellar and eating dinner because it's too cold," she says. "If you have lox and caviar, and a jacket on, fine. But otherwise your food is going to get cold." Instead she recommends putting a decorative, insulated glass wall in front of the wine cellar, next to the dining area.

### **Resources:**

- Artistic Cellars  
415.492.1450  
[www.artisticcellars.com](http://www.artisticcellars.com)

- K&L Wine Merchants  
650.364.8544  
[www.klwines.com](http://www.klwines.com)
- Wine Cellar Innovations  
408.888.5198  
[www.winecellarinnovations.com](http://www.winecellarinnovations.com)
- Wine Cellar Pro  
800.660.5758  
[www.winecellarpro.com](http://www.winecellarpro.com)

## **Starting a wine collection**

In the Bay Area, wine collecting is a serious pursuit. For those just getting started on a collection, this is a great time to do it, according to Ralph Sands of K&L Wine Merchants in Redwood City and San Francisco.

"There's never been a time like we have right now in terms of quality of wine," says Sands, senior wine specialist and Bordeaux expert.

Sands recommends that new collectors establish a relationship with a wine shop, where a specialist can help refine the selection based on the person's preference. He likes to start customers on a case or two of different varietals. "I like to mix it up," he says, noting that it gets boring to drink the same thing all week. He also tells his customers to taste as many wines as possible while keeping an open mind.

For a starter case, Sands keeps the price reasonable, usually less than \$25 a bottle. "You don't start people with Lafitte until they can appreciate it." Sands chooses wines that are outstanding examples of the varietal and region, something representing that wine's traditional taste. Customers should take notes on what they liked and didn't like, which helps him refine subsequent recommendations.

A starter case for Sands usually includes a Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa, a Merlot, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, two Chardonnays (one barrel-fermented), two Sauvignon Blancs (again, one barrel-fermented), a Bordeaux, a Burgundy, a Champagne and a dessert wine.