

# wine cellars, hous

everything  
you need to  
know to savor  
your wines or  
build your  
collection

by thomas m. ciesla

The wine cellar—a place that conjures up images of rows upon rows of dusty bottles quietly slumbering in a dimly lit subterranean room. For over more than 40 centuries, wine has united civilizations and enjoyed celebrative status in art, literature, and myth and legend, in addition to being honored by such writers as Plato, Socrates, Horace and Plinthe the Elder.

Wine cellaring—as we know it today—became practical with the marriage of the sturdy glass bottle to the cork stopper. Since then, wine cellars have traditionally been located wholly or partially underground, usually beneath buildings. Here in Houston, however, life on the coastal plain has forced wine lovers to redefine the wine cellar by creating above-ground “cellars” to store their wines.

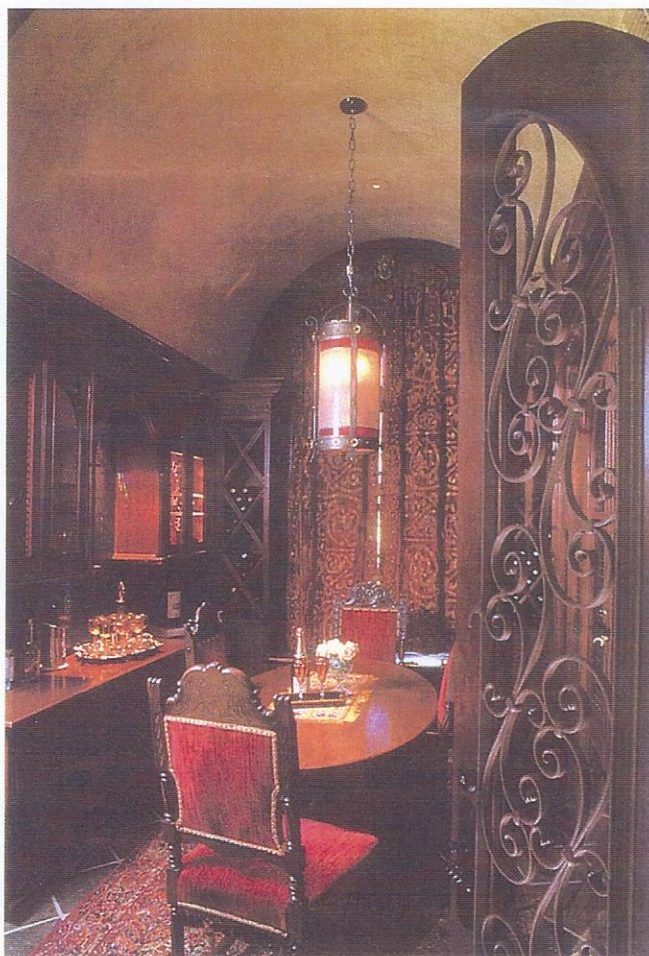
Blending just the right amount of creativity, old-world craftsmanship and modern technology, Houstonians have been able to create functional cellars without losing any of the Old World romance.

## CELLAR BASICS

A wine cellar is more than just a cool hiding place for wine, it is a symbiotic environment uniting the best of the design and engineering worlds.

Cellars have two design aspects that require considerable forethought: the aesthetic and the functional. Some wine lovers prefer a private enclave that focuses on function over flashy finishes. Others view their wine cellars as an entertainment facility, replete with marble, inlaid wood, etched glass doors and medieval-sized dining tables.

A wine cellar design should address six basic issues: temperature, humidity, darkness, vibration, cleanliness and angle of storage. Temperature is, by far, the most important factor in a wine cellar, with 41-64 degrees Fahrenheit being an



*Wine rooms add charm to a home. Temperature control is important. Fluctuations in temperature cause wine to “weep” around the cork. (photo by Beryl Striewski)*

acceptable range, and 55-58 degrees Fahrenheit the ideal. More important than the actual temperature, however, is the rapidity of fluctuations. If your cellar slowly varies from 55 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter to 68 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, no great harm is done, (though theoretically your wine will age twice as fast at the upper temperature). If this fluctuation occurs daily, or weekly, the wine will expand and contract in the bottle, affecting the integrity of the cork and eventually allowing the wine to “weep” around the cork, as evidenced by a sticky deposit around the capsule.

Cork life is also affected by humidity. A relative humidity of 50-80 percent is acceptable, with 70 percent being the ideal. Excess humidity will rot labels and cardboard boxes. Insufficient humidity will allow corks to dry out and allow air to enter the bottle. This combination of cool temperatures and high humidity

within a wine cellar demands that special attention be paid to condensation control by installing proper vapor barrier protection, using water resistant gypsum board (green board), and sealing all concrete and masonry surfaces. If recessed light fixtures are used, only fixtures that allow proper sealing against moisture penetration should be selected.

Since wine cellars aspire to mimic the “cave environment,” darkness and calm are important attributes of any wine cellar. Ultraviolet light will penetrate even dark green glass and hasten premature aging of wine. White and sparkling wines are especially sensitive to light damage. Vibration from machinery or road traffic is harmful to all wine but especially to the sediments in red wine. While excessive vibration is rare in homes, avoid placing your cellar adjacent to laundry rooms or large air-handling units. If you have an active

family, the closet below the stairway may not be the ideal location for a wine cellar.

Cleanliness refers to keeping your wine cellar free from dirt, debris and insects. It also means freedom from smells and bacteria, such as the kind generated by fruits, vegetables, cheeses or any other food capable of fermentation.

## PLANNING YOUR CELLAR

Most homes don't have wine cellars included in the blueprints, so chances are you'll have to steal existing space. The size of your cellar is usually dictated by your home's floor plan and how much square footage can be comfortably dedicated to a wine cellar. Even experienced wine collectors are faced with this dilemma.

Howard Pitman, CEO of Wimberley Valley Winery, a Texas winery with a tasting room in Old Town Spring, has enjoyed collecting wine for decades. For his first wine cellar, he converted an entry closet resulting in storage for 200 bottles.

“Unfortunately, it didn't take long for me to fill up that cellar,” Howard explains. “I had to purchase a wine cabinet to hold the additional bottles.”

Howard even borrows space in wine cellars of friends to hold his growing collection. “I buy a lot of wine,” he says with a smile.

What size cellar will you need? A typical closet will hold between 200 and 400 bottles. An 8 by 10-foot room can easily accommodate up to 2,500 bottles. According to Mike Stanton of Houston-based Galt Wine Cellars, a company with clients in 22 time zones, “The most common mistake people make is underestimating the amount of space they'll need. It's not uncommon for us to be called in to expand an existing cellar.”

If someone wants the convenience of having a nice selection of wines on-hand for entertaining or personal consumption, a converted closet may be perfect. If, however, you plan to become a serious collector, purchasing wines that require years of aging, even a 1,000-bottle cellar may be too small.

James deGeorge, a retired real estate developer is familiar with the nuances of building wine cellars. Mr. deGeorge was introduced to wine in the 1970s by restaurateur Tony Vallone. “I was a regular when Tony's restaurant was located in an old house near what is now the Galleria. One day Tony put a glass of wine down in

# on style

front of me and said, 'I just want you to try this.' I had never tasted anything so delicious in my life! Within a year I built my first cellar. Back then there were no standards available, so I designed the cellar based on my experiences in Europe."

Decades later deGeorge remains pleased with his wine cellar, though he does admit that even with a capacity of around 2,000 bottles, there never seems to be quite enough room.

## DEVIL IN THE DETAILS.

Before you start tearing out any walls, remember that building a wine cellar is a highly specialized remodeling project. Bob Jackson, of Bob Jackson Wine Cellars, became involved in wine cellar design as a result of a successful remodeling career. "I enjoy building wine cellars," Jackson says, "because the people have such a passion for the project. Working with a client, we take a drab space and turn it into something that lights up the home and the people within."

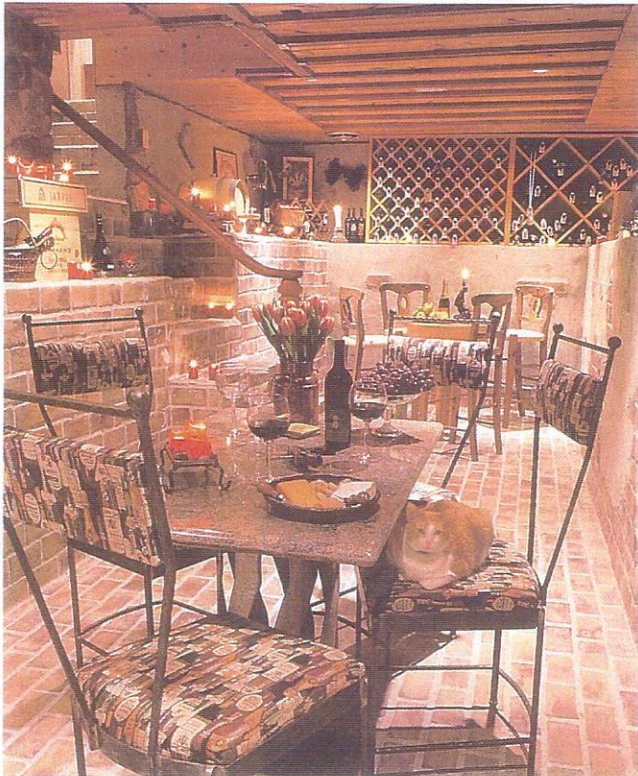
But Jackson cautions that it's the details that make or break or wine cellar project. Proper insulation, specialized equipment, racking styles and finish materials determine the

aesthetic and functional value of the space. He recommends that folks do some homework to become familiar with the possibilities available. "The Internet is a great resource to help people understand the basics," Jackson adds.

Racking systems can be configured in endless varieties. But, according to Eddie Lakier of Vintage Systems, a firm that has built hundreds of wine cellars in Texas, the best approach is to include single bottle racks along with bins and space for case storage to assure flexibility over the years.

Lakier cautions clients about bin storage, however. "Bins work well for straight-shouldered bottles, but bottles with sloped shoulders have been known to slide out of bins if stacked more than 3 feet high."

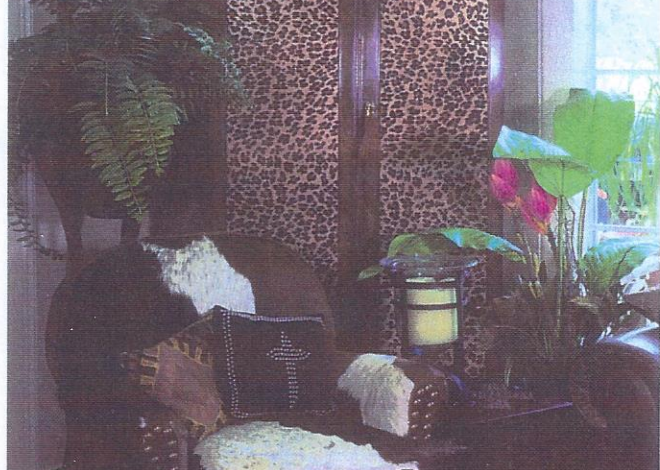
The subtleties of a properly built wine cellar are beyond the reach of the average wine lover; this is a job best left to the professionals. Each project involves a careful choreography of demolition, build-out and finish work, requiring anywhere from three to five weeks. Working within an existing closet will take less time than if walls must be torn down to expand the



*A good wine cellar needs a relative humidity of about 70 percent. It should be located away from vibrating machinery, such as air conditioning units. (photo by Janet Lenzen)*

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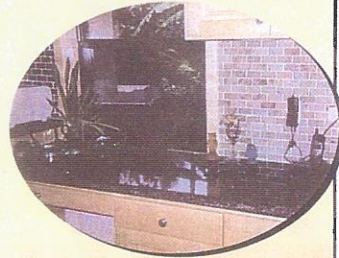
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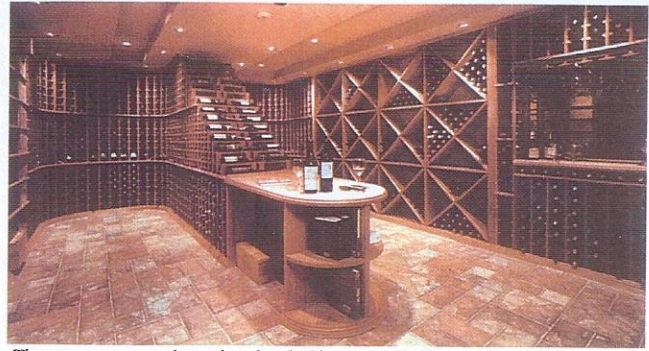
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The most common mistake people make is building a cellar that's too small, says Mike Stanton of Galt Wine Cellars. This cellar, available through Galt Wine Cellars, allows room for growth of a collection. Note the dramatic "waterfall" display of wines in the room's center.

space. The cost also increases if walls are moved, or special finishes are required. The price of converting a typical 50 square-foot closet will average around \$7,000. Move walls and the price can easily double.

#### STOCKING THE CELLAR

While the contents of a wine cellar will naturally reflect the tastes of the owner, most cellars tend to contain wines from the major wine making regions of the world such as France, Italy, California and Australia.

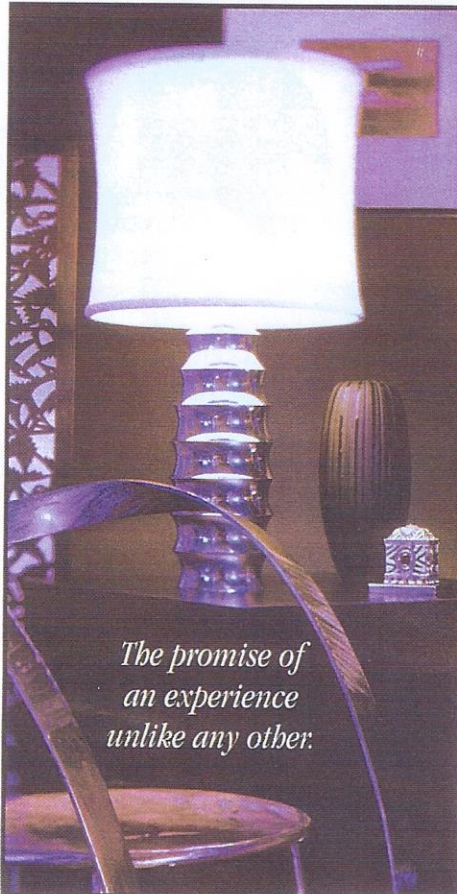
Charles "Bear" Dalton, wine manager for Spec's Liquors, offers collectors some practical guidelines for choosing wines. He says the majority

of wines produced today are designed to be consumed while still young.

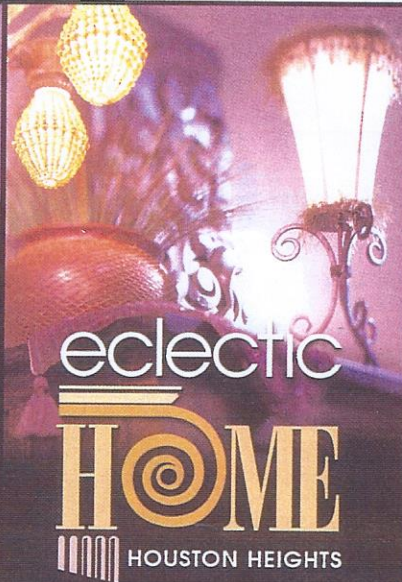
"Most wine has had enough aging by the time it's released." He then adds: "only around 4 percent of all wine is age-able." Age-able wine will hold up in the bottle for two-to-five years. Of these wines, only a small percent are age worthy; that is, they will actually improve over the decades.

How do you know which wines to buy? According to Bear, "You need a wine that has good fruit, balance and good acidity to benefit from extended cellaring. You should also look for a winery that has a track record of consistent vintages."

Bear concludes that the best



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wines for cellaring are the red Bordeaux's, followed by red Burgundies, and some Syrah-Grenache-Mourvedre-based wines. White wines include Chardonnay from Burgundy (and a few from the US and Australia), white Bordeaux's and dry white Loire wines.

**WHEN YOU CAN'T BUILD**

For those who are unable to build their own wine cellar, other options are available. Wine cabinets, equipped with temperature and humidity controls, are available in a variety of styles and range in size from 200-1,200 bottles. Prices start at around \$2,000.

As Mike Stanton explains, "With access to all the major wine cabinet manufacturers, Galt Wine Cellars serves as a broker for our clients. We can also provide custom cabinets from our shops in Houston."

A second alternative to a wine cellar is off-site storage, a relatively new phenomenon in the Houston area. Companies such as Amazing Spaces and Private Mini Storage offer storage lockers ranging in size from four to-144 case capacities. Prices range from around \$10 a month for a four-case locker to around \$200 a month for the largest lockers. ■

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