

UNILL OUT ROOM.

Lack of space is no bar to starting your own cellar, thanks to a new crop of wine storage centres.

Summer's coming and you've got all your wine stored in the garage. You know the temperature inside is going to be in the mid-to-high 20s for months on end. Maybe it's time to find a proper place to store this budding cellar of yours? The unfortunate reality of Sydney living for the wine buff is that few homes have any suitable place to store expensive, high-quality wine for anything longer than short periods.

Follow the dog around the house on a hot day and wherever he flops is probably the coolest spot. But that's still going to be far too warm for your wine.

There's nothing worse than opening a treasured box and finding the wine is leaking past the corks. That's the first sign that you've let it get too hot. The trouble is, by the time you discover it, the damage is probably already done.

Cellaring has become big news in recent years: for investment, with a view to drinking, or both. So, it follows that a number of specialist cellaring businesses have sprung up around the country. Among them are the affiliated Liquid Assets in Melbourne, Australian Wine Exchange in Perth, Wineaway in Brisbane and WineArk in Sydney. They charge you a fee to store your wine under ideal and secure conditions.

Langton's, the wine auctioneer, was the first in Sydney to provide specialised, serviced wine cellaring when it moved to its present location in Pitt Street, Redfern, in 1992. Soon after, Millers Self Storage converted the basement of its Waterloo premises to air-conditioned wine storage. This facility has since moved to Wyncham Street, Alexandria, where Millers now has about 35,000 cases of wine, with a choice of fully serviced storage or accessible locker units, held at 16°C and 60 per cent humidity.

The Langton's cellar is now full and it has no plans to expand. At the same time demand is increasing, which leaves the way open for new operators such as WineArk, which has established itself as an outstanding operator over the past seven months.

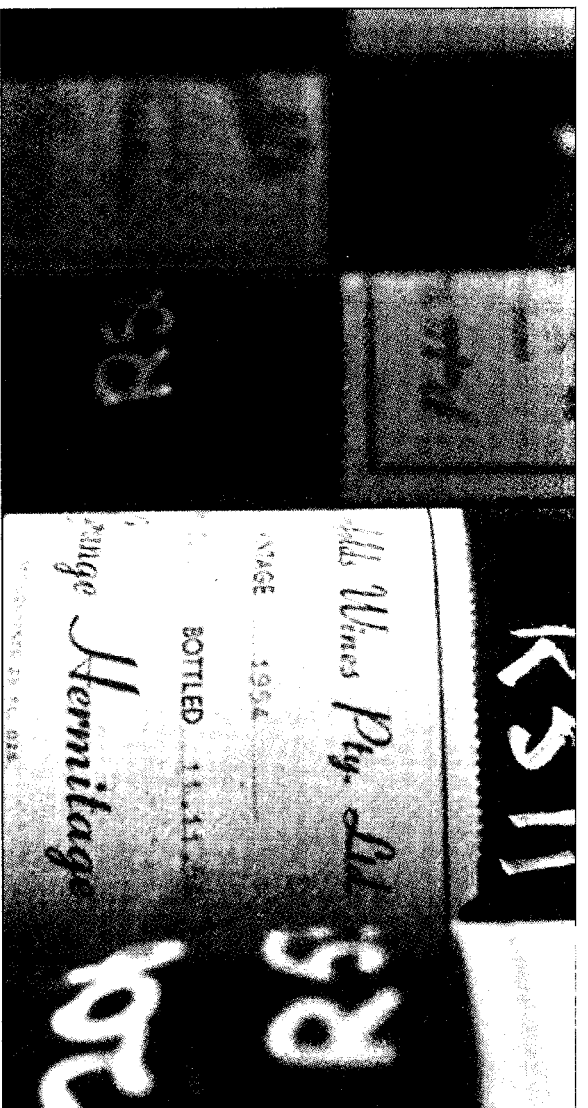
Enter Dean Taylor, stage left. A former architect, who worked with Philip Cox on the SuperDome and other stadiums, he has been a wine hobbyist for years. On his honeymoon in Margaret River, Western Australia, he decided to "bite the bullet" and start the business that became WineArk.

He formally opened WineArk in March this year, but was in business for about a year before that, with space in a Surry Hills warehouse. "I placed some notices on

billboards on various Internet sites and it went from there." WineArk's storage and office is on the Kennards Self Storage site in Booth Street, Annandale, opposite the former Camperdown Children's Hospital site. In just seven months in business, the place is 95 per cent full, with about 25,000 cases of wine under lock and key.

Taylor is obviously doing something right.

He's hoping to open a second storage facility on



Protect your assets: Valuable wines, such as Penfolds' Grange Hermitage, need to be cellared correctly.

present site, making room for another 12,000 cases. It's hard not to be impressed by the professionalism of WineArk. Kennards has 25 per cent equity in the business, "so we have a friendly landlord," says Taylor. At present, in what Taylor refers to as stage one, there is 600 sq/m of space in the bottom floor of the Kennards building. Wine Planet used to occupy the floor above. So it's insulated from the top and also from the sides, being partly below ground. The walls are 350 to 400 millimetres thick and the whole thing is built like a nuclear fallout shelter. Taylor reckons even if the air-conditioning failed in a heatwave, it would take days to register any change in temperature.

The temperature is maintained at 14°C (plus or minus one degree) and 65 to 75 per cent humidity. The lights are out and it is pitch-dark. All wines are stored in boxes. The cooling is a "balanced system", with eight different cooling points and low-velocity fans for minimal air movement. There are no forklifts, so there are no fumes or vibration.

"The only people allowed in are the staff. Clients can see where their wine is, but staff pick all the bottles," says Taylor. "There's a fully interactive on-line cellar management system so clients can access information on their collection and they can put their own tasting notes into it. They can order bottles to be delivered and we can send them an email to remind them that a certain wine is ready to use."

What kinds of wines do people store in there? Walking around the racks of boxes, I saw many cases of collectable Australian wines, such as Mount Mary, Penfolds Grange, Cullen, Giacomini, Henschke and Petaluma. Taylor says the typical bottle is "youngish, Australian and with an average value of \$50 to \$70, although there are some very old bottles."

WineArk has managed to appeal to the younger wine buyer, with the average age of its clients between 30 and

Taylor. "We would have close to 25 per cent women by now."

Many of WineArk's clients come along to the regular monthly tastings to learn about wine and their cellaring habits develop from there. "They join our club and coming to the tastings develops their confidence. They might start cellaring with just one or two cases and go from there."

The average collection size is 50 dozen. There are some collections of 1,200 and 1,500 dozen. And several restaurants, such as Bathurst Pavilion, use the facility, too. WineArk charges a top rate of \$1.45 a case per month, but for big collections, the price per case comes down. The lowest rate is \$1 a case. Handling fees are extra: \$6 a case for deposits and withdrawals, which also covers inventory management. Club membership is \$80 a year, which includes a seat at all tastings and such perks as lower storage rates.

An indication of the reputation WineArk has quickly built up is the fact that it handles distribution for such leading lights as Giacomini, Mount Mary, Bass Phillip, Clonackia and - starting with its next release - Torbreck. Sydney's newest cellarage is Cellarit, due to open in December. Operated by former Vintage Cellars rare-wine specialist Kevin Hopko and finance man Scott Witt, it has "expandable" premises at Wetherill Park. It's a climate-controlled cellar (14°C and 70 per cent humidity) within a warehouse. Cellarit's offers other services include such as on-line inventory access and next-day delivery to and from Brisbane and Melbourne at local freight rates.

Hopko and Witt, claiming to do things differently to others, promise lower fees and better service. They also plan a wine exchange.

With the rise of wine investors, provenance has become all-important. Your wine is worth more on the secondary market if you can prove it's been professionally cellared, says auctioneer Andrew Caillard of Langton's.