

Two fully climate-controlled home cellars (this picture and left) fitted with Cellarack bin- and single-bottle racking systems; designed by Cellarwine, North Balgownie, NSW 1800 086 347.



keep sake

Lights out, keep your **L** cool and tread softly in the cellar says Cerise Haartsen, if you want your wine collection to stand the test of time, and age with grace

Cellaring a bottle of wine does not necessarily make it better. These days, we're demanding more fresh and fruity tasting wines, which are designed to be drunk young. Generally speaking, it's not worth cellaring cheaper wines – those under \$20. But for wines made for putting away, a few years in the bottle can bring on a transformation similar to alchemy. This will only happen, however, if you're careful to provide the conditions needed to properly cellar wine.

COOL, DARK AND HUMID

Light, heat, humidity, vibration are all important factors. The dark, cobweb-filled cellar is not just a romantic notion. Light will eventually damage a good wine, so bottles should be kept in a dark place. Dark conditions are usually associated with cool temperatures, and temperature is the key concern. The ideal temperature for storing wine is about 14°C. Even in the short-term, temperatures over 25°C can seriously alter a wine's taste. So try to avoid leaving your bottle of chardonnay in the blazing sun on your next picnic in the park. But more important than actual temperature though, is the variation in

temperature your wine may experience during the course of a calendar year. During this time, the precious bottles ride a climatological roller coaster – with summer days at 40°C and winter nights near freezing. At the end of it all, your wine is going to feel pretty much like you do – exhausted and prematurely aged. Therefore, a steady temperature is needed, with a variation of no more than 2 or 3°C for best results.

You'll also need to consider humidity. Corks, if not kept a little moist, will dry out and shrink, causing leakage. To help keep corks moist, bottles should be stored on their sides, but ambient humidity also plays a part. Relative humidity should be at least 60 per cent, with the ideal being about 70 per cent. However, if it's too humid, labels will lift off bottles, giving an annoying air of mystery to future wine tastings.

The remaining points to consider are vibration and security. It is important to keep wine still, as movement upsets the sediment that can build up in red wine. So store your bottles away from high foot-traffic areas and, obviously, try not to move the wine about too much. ▶

10 GREAT WINES FOR CELLARING

- 1 **Hardy's Leasingham 2001 Riesling, \$14**
Here's all the hallmarks of a fine young riesling – fresh limes and citrus, acidity, good length – sealed under a Stelvin cap. Buy a case and drink a bottle every spring. It should keep for up to 20 years.
- 2 **Tahbilk 2000 Marsanne, \$12**
Another vibrant young wine, marsanne has more breadth and weight across the mouth than riesling, but it has acidity and flavour to match any white. Leave it alone for eight years.
- 3 **McWilliam's Mount Pleasant Elizabeth 1998 Semillon, \$17**
A classic pale, lemon-and-lime semillon from the Hunter. Deftly balanced, with all the components to suggest long cellar life. Try it in five, 10, then 15 years' time.
- 4 **Zema Estate 2000 Cluny, \$26**
A blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and malbec, this Coonawarra red is all berries, herbs, chocolate and cedary oak right now, but in five to eight years' time it will be round, plush and rich.



Sydney architect Andre Baroukh built wine storage (above) behind bi-fold doors, away from windows. Above right: concrete reinforcing steel mesh made cost-effective racking for this home cellar.



◀ Some people may well try to do this for you, however; hence the issue of security.

Wine kept under lock and key protects it not just from thieves but also from your own temptation, particularly when you're feeling a little magnanimous after a successful dinner party. I am speaking here from personal experience: more than a handful of my most treasured wines have I generously (foolishly!) opened late at night, when not one of us was in any condition to properly assess it. Keeping wine 'off-site' could be a solution to this particular problem (more of that below).

A SITE FOR CELLARING

Ideally, we would all have cellars under our houses and live in cool climates of appropriate humidity – but we don't, of course. It's unthinkable to dig a cellar if you live in a third-storey apartment. There are a number of solutions though, so I'll start with the most desirable and finish with the worst-case scenario.

Ignoring the possibility of having a cellar built, climate-controlled cabinets – even rooms – for storing wine can be bought or established nowadays. Depending on their size, cabinets store between 25 and 500 bottles. Temperature and humidity can, in some models, be adjusted to suit local conditions.

These cabinets really do offer keen wine-lovers the chance to cellar and subsequently enjoy bottle-conditioned wines in their

own homes – and they even come with locks. Prices range from about \$2000 up to \$10,000 for a large, nicely polished timber-veneered design. Cabinet suppliers include Cellarwine, 1800 086 347; EuroCave, www.eurocave.com; Transtherm, www.transtherm.com; and Kitchener Wine Cabinets, (03) 9421 0227.

Off-site wine storage is another option that's become quite popular of late. Companies such as Wine-Ark (www.wine-ark.com) and Liquid Assets (www.liquidassets.com.au) offer climate-controlled wine storage for any number of bottles. Fees, of course, depend on the quantity of wine being stored. Increasingly this service is used by a strange new breed of people who like to invest in wine. (I, on the other hand, have always thought wine was for drinking...silly old me!)

But if expensive storage seems an odd way to divert funds that could otherwise be spent on wine itself, consider these possibilities. Remembering the cellaring guidelines we spoke of earlier, seek out parts of the house with suitable protection – avoiding kitchens, heating vents and north-facing walls.

While it's better to keep white wine *in* the fridge rather than on top of it, avoid storing it there for more than a month, as the low humidity inside the fridge can dry out corks and cause oxidation. Red wine, if you must keep it in the kitchen, ►

10 GREAT WINES FOR CELLARING

- 5 **Knapstein Clare Valley 1999 Shiraz, \$25**
Sweet, rich berry fruit with lots of dustiness, it should only need five years to become the dinner companion of your dreams.
- 6 **Coldstream Hills 2001 Pinot Noir, \$34**
Mouth-filling, a little decadent and very fine-grained, this is one for keeping. Drink one now and put three away for up to 10 years.
- 7 **Stanton & Killeen Vintage Port, \$25**
Look for '94 and '95 vintages of this special port, which combines shiraz with touriga grapes. Rich and Christmas cake-like, it will take on a great complexity over the next 21 years.
- 8 **Tahbilk 1999 Shiraz, \$20.**
This central Victorian shiraz is a proven cellar fella – balanced masculine flavours of earth, spice, musk and tar will improve in the bottle for the next 10 years.
- 9 **Leasingham Bastion 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz, \$12**
A classic from the Clare Valley, it will throw a deposit or crust and become smoother and more delicious over the next five years.
- 10 **Zema Estate 2000 Shiraz, \$26**
Cherry pith and rich fruit resonate in this Coonawarra red. Very dry and dense right now, leave for eight years.

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◀ should be stored well away from sinks, ovens, dishwashers and so on.

In fact, kitchens are terrible places to store wine for more than a few months. Try old linen cupboards or disused fireplaces instead. If I had a dollar for every time I saw an old bottle of red lying in someone's living room bookcase, I'd be a wealthy woman. I rarely have the heart to tell them that their prized wine is likely to be ruined. Anything left for 10 years to 'mature' in this way is going to show signs of bad storage: it will be 'cooked', thin, alcoholic, have washed-out colour, and a low neck level, indicating the cork has faltered and the wine oxidised.

Keep bottles on their sides and buy enough of each wine to be able to try it from time to time to see whether it is improving or falling apart! After all, old wine is not necessarily good wine.

WINES FOR THE KEEPING

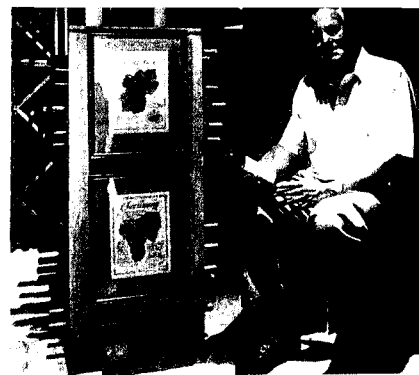
Certain white wines – riesling, some marsanne and certain semillon – are suited to medium- and sometimes even long-term cellaring. Riesling's young, fresh, citrus flavours become honeyed and almost toasty with age.

Many Australian winemakers are now sealing their riesling bottles with a screw cap (the Stelvin cap), which not only makes the wine easier to open, but eliminates cork taint, a mould that makes the wine taste and smell of wet cardboard. Stelvin caps ensure that the wine will be in perfect condition, subject to successful cellaring of course, for many years to come.

Marsanne is another white variety to consider cellaring. Its typical mouth-searing acidity when young, mellows after five to 10 years of age to a more rounded, rich and nectary taste. But the most remarkable white wine, when it comes to bottle age, is Hunter Valley semillon. As a baby it is lemony and a little tart, but with age (five to 15 years) it becomes complex, almost oaky.

A word of warning, however: do not bother cellaring chardonnay. Australian examples of this grape rarely improve in the bottle. Keep the best ones for a year or two at the most. With any more time they turn into awful, flabby, tired wines.

Red wine is what most of us associate with cellaring. Cabernet sauvignon (or the cabernet blends, such as cabernet



PERSONAL COLLECTION

Shortly after Robert Gregg (above) began collecting wine, he decided that a proper cellar was essential. Using a room under the house, Robert installed a racking system for about 1600 bottles from the Wine Society. He now uses WineBase software (www.winebase.com.au) to "track quantities, bin locations, prices, vintages and other parameters" when sourcing wines. But his main source of information is Winewise (www.winewise.com.au), which provides independent assessments of most wines available in Australia. "When starting a collection, seek advice from a wine merchant," Robert suggests. "Start with say 100 bottles, then replenish and build your collection as you become more knowledgeable. And, above all – enjoy!"

merlot) are ripe for putting away. This red grape variety produces a lot of tannin – those flavours that taste gruff and rough in the mouth, like sucking on a tea bag. To settle them down and make the wine smoother and more drinkable, tannins need time in the bottle (up to 20 years in some cases).

Shiraz is another variety that mellows with age, although it needs less time than cabernet to soften. Generally, five to eight years will do for most of these wines.

Surprisingly, some good vintages of Australian pinot noir, such as 2000, are well worth a few years in the bottle. In fact, pinots often go into a little slump after bottling and need a year or two to re-emerge, confident and resplendent.

Of course, no wine cellar is complete without some vintage port. Buy varieties from the north-east of Victoria or the Barossa. Keep them for 21 years exactly, and drink them in the late afternoon, with dark chocolate, dried muscatel grapes and good cigars. At least, that's what I like to do...

Next month Ceric tours Australian wine regions and demonstrates how location affects a wine's character.