



SHARON WILD highlights the guidelines behind wine selection and storage and finds an array of specialist wine storage facilities in which to house those prized collections.



**M**ost of you have probably heard the statistic that approximately 98 per cent of all wine bought

is consumed within 24 hours of purchase. It is obvious by the statistic that the experience of enjoying a fine, aged wine is a relatively elusive prospect. The topic of cellaring wines, however, is a preoccupation of many and one that triggers much discussion and debate. Investing in wine for the long-term can be truly rewarding – in terms of enjoyment or as a result of profiting from its sale. Gaining these benefits from wine investment is not straight forward; it is a process that begins with the issue of which wines to invest in. As many wines are consumed upon their purchase, they are specifically crafted to be ready to drink upon their release. There can be quite a difference in the construction of a wine that is cellar-worthy to one that is intended for immediate consumption. Penfolds Rawson's Retreat Cabernet

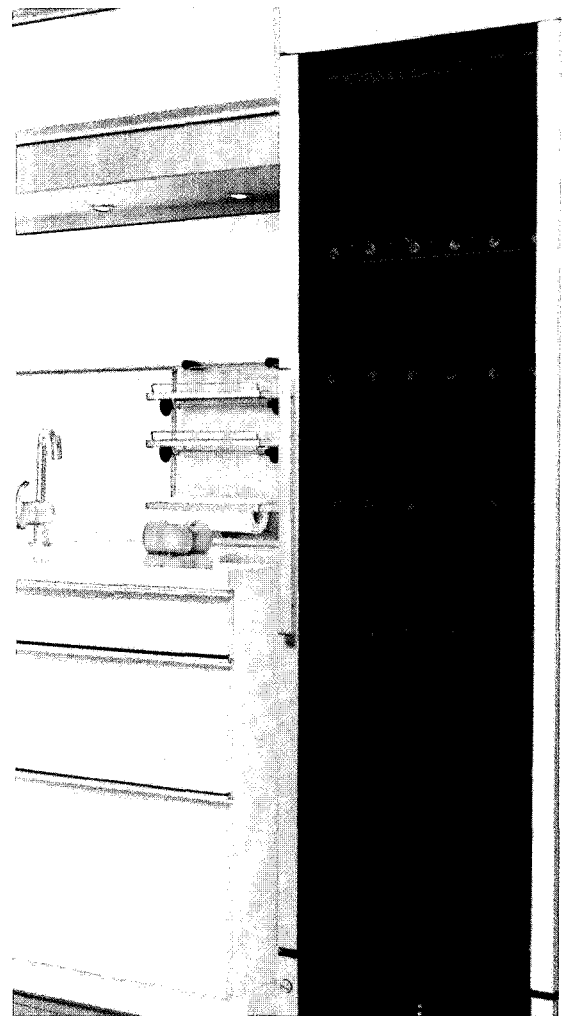
Sauvignon, for instance, is juicy in flavour and soft in its texture – a pleasing drink as a current vintage. Penfolds Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, on the other hand, has firmly textured tannins at the time of its release and is a little shy in flavour. After several years of maturation, the wine's structure becomes supple and its flavours evolve, making it pure nectar to drink. It is difficult to judge whether a wine will be cellar-worthy when basing the assumption purely on its variety or style.

The same can be said about price - just because a wine may command a premium price it may not necessarily age well and vice versa. In the aforementioned Penfolds example the assumption that higher prices equate to a better capacity to age holds true until considering other Penfolds wines. Koonunga Hill Shiraz Cabernet, for example, has a history of ageing well even though the wine is meagrely priced at around the \$10 mark. Similarly, Wynns Black Label Cabernet Sauvignon is the cornerstone of many a collectors' cellar, yet the wine hovers around the \$20 price category. Investing in wines

based on price is therefore not a terribly reliable guide.

How to determine which wines to invest in realistically requires some additional guidance. In Australia, the Langton's Classification serves as the benchmark. Developed by Langton's Wine Auctioneers in 1981 and updated every few years, the classification identifies and ranks key Australian wines based on a minimum ten years of being produced and its performance in the secondary market. Until a decade ago, a single wine held the top rank of Exceptional – Penfold's Grange. In the latest Classification (IV), released in late July, Grange shares the pedestal with ten other wines. The newest additions are: Bass Phillip Reserve Pinot Noir, Cullen Diana Madeline Cabernet Sauvignon, Giaconda Chardonnay and Rockford Basket Press Shiraz.

They join Henschke Hill of Grace, Leeuwin Estate Art Series Chardonnay, Moss Wood Cabernet Sauvignon, Mount Mary Quintet Cabernet Blend, Penfolds Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon and Wendouree Shiraz to make



up the super eleven.

Apart from Exceptional, the other three classifications in order of rank are: Outstanding, Excellent and Distinguished. New entrants spread throughout the 2005 Classification include Chris Ringland Shiraz, Clonakilla Shiraz-Viognier, Domaine A Cabernet Sauvignon, Grant Burge Meshach Shiraz, Katnook Odyssey Cabernet Sauvignon and Seppelt Great Western Vineyards Show Sparkling Shiraz.

The Langton's Classification serves as a valuable guide rather than a guarantee – because other issues such as the quality of the vintage in question will have an impact on a wine's inherent quality and calibre. A browse through any vertical tasting review - such as those found in James Halliday's *Classic Wines*, Huon Hooke's *Penguin Wine Guide* and the *Langton's Australian Fine Wine Guide* – reveals that even amongst the crème de la crème of vintage specific wines, variations exist in quality and esteem from one year to the next. Consider the value of Penfold's Grange from 1985 (in excess of \$15,000) compared to vintages either side of that date (at less than \$1000). Indeed, one of the "five wine investment maxims" noted in the *Langton's Australian Fine Wine Guide* is; "Buy only good vintages".

#### Where to buy a wine from

Not surprisingly, many premium wines are not widely available and some are downright scarce. It can be difficult to secure an allocation of a particularly prized wine upon its release unless you are a long-standing member of the winery's mailing list or are prepared to queue for hours or drive for miles to a specialist retailer that has secured an allocation.

Luckily, buying wines on the secondary market has never been easier. Langton's, for example, has held its wine auctions online for the past few years and is arguably the market leader in Australia with its technology. Investors are empowered with 24/7 access to check the progress of

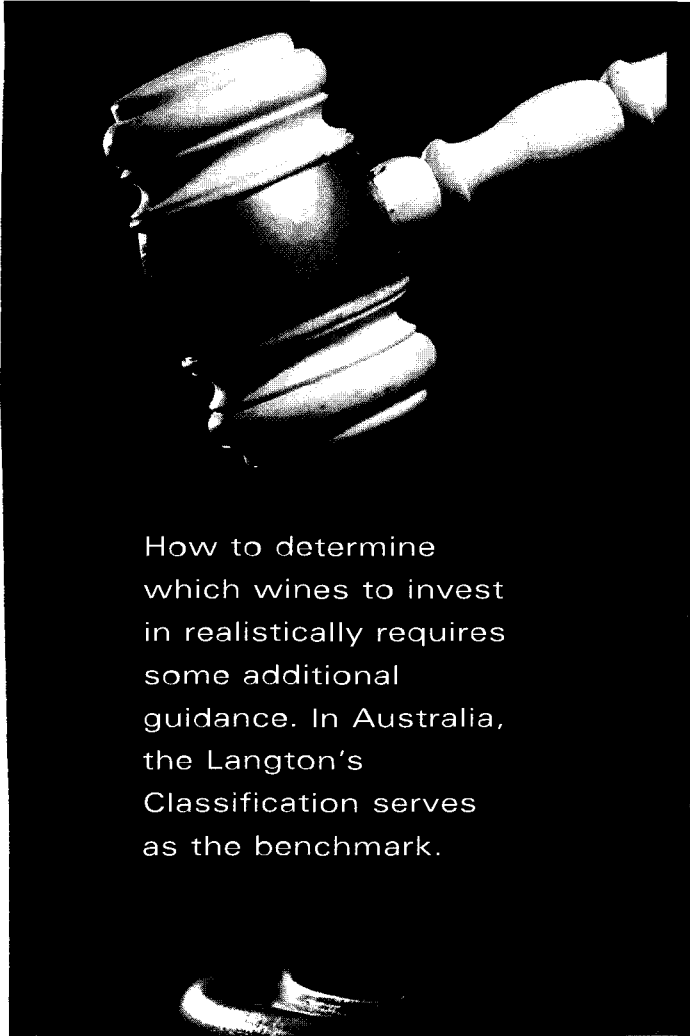
wines of interest and to place bids and signing up is as easy as visiting the company's website ([www.langtons.com.au](http://www.langtons.com.au)). Other auction houses with electronic access include Sterling Auctioneers ([www.sterlingauctions.com.au](http://www.sterlingauctions.com.au)) from West Australia, Cromwells Fine Wine Auctions ([www.cromwells.com.au](http://www.cromwells.com.au)) and Wine Ark ([www.wine-ark.com](http://www.wine-ark.com)). This does not signal an end to live wine auctions, however, as Langton's still conduct specialised events and Wine Ark have recently begun hosting live auctions from their storage facility at Alexandria in Sydney.

A new online auctions site just created in recent weeks is [drinkit.com.au](http://drinkit.com.au). It's aimed at assisting retailers, wineries and distributors to move stock, back vintages and speciality lines as well as excess stock. The group has worked with the wine industry to provide a commission-free and risk-free way to assist in addressing the current oversupply situation facing the Australian wine industry. The first live auction is planned for December 2005. These auctions will also be commission free to the seller.

Auctions are but one way to secure investment wines. Some cellar-worthy current release wines are widely available though retail stores – Petaluma, Wynns, Penfolds Bin Wines and others – have widespread distribution so sourcing them is not a profoundly difficult task. If the intention is to purchase certain wines that are not in ready supply, it is a good idea to contact the winery and secure a position on their waiting list to possibly gain an allocation of wine at some point in future. An aspect of cellaring wines involves patience, after all.

#### Caves

Selecting wines to invest in seems complex enough. Unfortunately that is only the beginning as the next vital step is how to cellar the wine. A wine's storage conditions can make or break the investment. An increasingly popular option is utilising the temperature controlled facilities of a cellar management specialist. Since its establishment in 2000, Wine Ark, for instance, exceeded all expectations as customers filled the entire 500sqm of



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climate controlled capacity in Camperdown Sydney in just 18 months.

This success prompted Wine Ark to relocate to a larger storage site in Chatswood in 2002. The site was developed specifically to provide clients with both managed cellarage and private wine vaults - a self accessed product. The 50,000 case capacity was filled in less than 18 months. To re-establish a presence in Sydney's eastern suburbs and to meet the growth in demand, Wine Ark recently opened a new site in Alexandria. Wine Ark is now the largest wine storage provider in Australia, managing over 1,000,000 bottles of wine for about 2500 private clients.

When asked what the greatest challenge that a wine storage business must face, Dean Taylor, managing director and brainchild behind Wine Ark says

"The recent theft of \$500,000 of wine from Millers Wine Storage (operated by Kennards Self Storage) demonstrates how important cellar management, stock-take and security systems are. From the start, Wine Ark has established itself as the market leader, setting what are regarded as the industry benchmarks. Any new operator would need to match or better

home). Alternatively, small, bar size wine fridges serve as a perfect option to hold a few cases of special wine and are available from department stores like K-Mart.

In his book 'Cellaring Wines', self professed wine enthusiast Tyson Stelzer proposes a range of do-it-yourself solutions. These range from the relatively complex notion of revamping a standard fridge to very simply storing wines in foam boxes as they serve to moderate temperatures slightly and thus increase the chances of a wine keeping well.

#### Let someone else do the cellaring

If the desire is to enjoy aged wines without incurring the hassle or time it takes to cellar wines, wine auctions provide a means of purchasing back vintage wines. Also, certain specialist retailers stock a collection of aged wines that are available for purchase. Ultimo Wine Centre in Sydney, for instance, holds back particular wines to release with age, storing them in a temperature controlled warehouse. Jason Hoy, who has worked at Ultimo Wine Centre for the past four years, says that they occasionally purchase aged wines from their network of long-standing customers - only when they are assured of the wine's provenance and storage history.

these if they want to build a solid brand and reputation in the market."

In addition to cellar management specialists such as Wine Ark, temperature and humidity controlled purpose built fridges are another wine storage option. A wide range of fridges in all shapes and sizes are produced by Vintech and available through Transtherm

([www.transtherm.com.au](http://www.transtherm.com.au)). These can range from walk-in units that hold hundreds of bottles (generally favoured by restaurants or avid collectors that have enough space in their

## Wine Auctions and Storage

Jason Hoy cites specialty suppliers such as Melbourne based MW Wines as another key source of fine, aged wines.

Jason stated that he has noticed an increase in interest in vintage ports, aged Burgundies, aged Bordeaux reds and a selection of prestigious Italian wines at Ultimo Wine Centre. The increased interest is not limited to consumers, however, as a band of restaurateurs also frequent the store in search of fine, aged offerings to include on their wine lists.

Jason Hoy said wineries are another valuable source of aged wines. He cited Tyrrell's, McWilliam's and Lindemans as pre-eminent suppliers of aged Hunter Semillons. Indeed, McWilliam's Elizabeth, which is typically released after at least four years bottle age, is arguably the best value aged Semillon on the market - especially because it continues to age gracefully for many years after its release.

#### How to gain more experience

The topic of cellaring wine is pretty daunting. In order to gain a better understanding of the aged wine market, a combination of research and experience goes a long way. To aid in the pursuit of experience, certain wineries showcase aged releases at winemaker events. At a recent Howard Park dinner their spectacular inaugural 1984 Cabernet Sauvignon served from magnums was shown alongside their new release offerings. Top wine stores in Sydney including Ultimo Wine Centre, Vintage Cellars Double Bay, Best Cellars, Five Way Cellars also host retrospective wine tasting events - often with the winemaker present. At Wine Ark, I host monthly wine tasting events in which wines destined for the cellar are highlighted.

Investing in wine is no different to any other investment - carried out wisely and with care, there are likely to be rewards. The beauty of wine as an investment is that the rewards are not limited to the hip-pocket. Consuming an aged wine that has been stored in optimum conditions provides a snapshot of a particular place, time and of the unique personality of its creator.