

eat drink

wine cellaring

Peter Bourne stacks up the best ways to start your own cellar.

Photography Todd Sutherland

A wine cellar may start by accident with a few leftover bottles from your wedding or it may be a fulfilment of a lifetime's interest. Serious collectors group their wines by variety, region and style; others enter the purchase price, current auction value and the optimum drinking year on a spreadsheet.

For the less seriously minded, stacking bottles under the bed will do to begin with but you'll soon need to think about creating a dedicated space for your cellar. Ideally, this will be an airconditioned room beneath the house, complete with racks. The cellar must be kept cool, as this ensures that a wine ages slowly and develops the complexity of flavour its maker intended. Cellaring is not just for those expensive icons such as Grange and Hill of Grace. Wander into any retailer and you'll find plenty of affordable wines that would be ideal.

And while Grange needs at least eight years to reach its "drinking plateau", a year or two will help soften a well-priced red such as d'Arenberg Foot Bolt Shiraz or Taylors Clare Cabernet Sauvignon. Classic reds such as Wynns Coonawarra Estate Cabernet Sauvignon or Penfolds Bin 389 sit between the two. Both are currently being sold at bargain prices.

Long-lived reds are not the only candidates. Many white wines, especially Australian rieslings and semillons, have excellent cellaring potential. Choose your rieslings from either the Eden Valley (Pewsey Vale, Orlando St Helga, Peter Lehmann) or Clare Valley (Pikes, Tim Adams, Skillogalee, Mitchell) in South Australia. For semillons, look no further than the Hunter Valley. Capercallie, Andrew Thomas, Margan and Meerea Park are all reliable producers and their wines show their best after five years.

Wine is sensitive. It likes a temperature of 14C to 16C with a maximum of 18C. Swings in temperature can be disastrous so double-brick walls on the south and/or east side of the house are preferable. Alternatively, line your cellar with commercial insulation material. And keep an eye on the temperature – inexpensive thermometers are available at most hardware stores. Wines sealed with a cork need high humidity (ideally above 70 per cent) to stop the cork drying out. Most airconditioners dehydrate the air so a humidifier is a good idea. Wines also like the dark and hate vibration.

Racks look good but are not essential. Keep some space for storing cartons as cardboard is a wonderful insulator – and wines in their original packaging bring higher prices at auction. Simple racking like a double-layer of weld mesh, used to reinforce concrete, is both cheap and effective.

If space is a problem, there are a number of wine cabinets that do a terrific job. Transtherm sells a wide range from small 30-bottle units to a walk-in cellar with a capacity of 3900 bottles. And if your problem is temptation, use an off-site storage service such as Wine Ark.

A last word of advice: cutting corners on storage doesn't make sense. Poor cellaring can ruin your valuable investment in a few days. A well-maintained cellar, however, will provide many years of pleasure.

