



KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Climate-controlled lockers house everything from \$20 Australian shiraz to a \$20,000 Montrachet.

ation, which opened two years ago, is a boon to Toronto wine lovers. "In the past, when we ran out of room, we just scrambled, borrowing space from friends or wherever we could find it."

While there are other wine-storage facilities in the city, according to Mr. Aspler, "none of them are up to these standards."

"We have fabulous tasting events here," Mr. Russell says. Tastings, presided over by some of the world's top vintners, are held in a fully equipped kitchen that can seat up to 20. Members are free to use the facilities whenever they like, whether it's to entertain clients or invite a few friends in to share a bottle.

D'Arcy Kelly, a 35-year-old e-business consultant, heard about the Wine Reserve by word of mouth. He describes the cellar as "state of the art," and says, "I like the fact that there's 24-hour access and that it's so close to the entertainment district. I can drop by on my way out to dinner or a party and pick up a bottle."

Mr. Kelly lives in a downtown condo and has wine storage at home, but he stores his most valuable bottles here. He regularly attends the tastings.

Mr. Russell is a geologist by profession but a wine lover at heart. The fortysomething native Torontonian saw the need for a high-end wine cellar after visiting similar facilities in the United States, where this is very big business, especially in the warm southern states. He says his business is now operating at about half its total capacity and already expansion plans are under way.

But in Ontario, it's a difficult business, and he admits, "I'm never going to get rich. Once it's up and running, I'll move on to something else." That's because Mr. Russell is restricted to post-retail business. He cannot store wine for wine agents or wineries, which is a big part of the American business: In this province, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, with its airtight monopoly, does that.

While about 25 per cent of Mr. Russell's clients are what he calls "all-star" collectors — affluent senior executives and celebrities, who store millions of dollars worth of wine — the rest are wine lovers of more modest means, who need a secure, stable place to keep their beloved bottles.

"You see," Mr. Russell says, "it doesn't matter if it's a \$20 Australian shiraz, or a \$2,000 Burgundy, they all require the same conditions."

For more information, call the Fine Wine Reserve, 416-593-9463, or visit www.finewinereserve.com.

When your cellar runneth over

In an unmarked basement with security worthy of Fort Knox, rock stars, bankers — and ordinary oenophiles — stash beloved collections and sample new vintages

BY CECILY ROSS

The directions in the e-mail lead to a brick building near the intersection of King and Spadina. There is no sign, just an unmarked doorbell on the wall. Inside there's a flight of stairs to the basement, at the bottom of which is a steel door with a sign that reads, somewhat incongruously, "Mechanical."

The room behind the door is anything but. It's a dimly lit foyer, the walls painted blood red, the floors polished slate. An affluent hush hangs in the cool, moist air. We have entered another world, an exclusive society of wealth, discretion and extremely expensive tastes.

Marc Russell is president of the Fine Wine Reserve, a 12,000-case wine storage facility with security rivalling that of Fort Knox — the only operation of its kind in the city.

"This is a disguised facility," Mr. Russell says. "We don't, as a rule, give out the address. And even if we tell someone it's at King and Spadina, they'll still never find it."

Security is a big issue at the reserve, whose 100 clients include rock stars, senior bank executives and entrepreneurs, as well as members of the secretive Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, an international fraternity dedicated to preserving high-end Burgundies.

"There are six layers of security to go through, before you even get to your wine," Mr. Russell says as he demonstrates the biometric fingerprint reader at the entrance. He uses an electronic pass card to open a second door leading from the foyer into the climate-controlled storage facility itself.

Inside, the air is even cooler, the light dimmer. The walls, clad in wide pine boards, camouflage

banks of lockers, each holding eight to 48 cases of wine. These are leased by private collectors who have 24-hour, seven-day-a-week access. Space in larger walk-in lockers is leased on a per-case, per-month basis for collectors who have run out of room in their home cellars. (Storage can run anywhere from \$25 a year for one case, to \$15,000 a year to store 1,000 cases.)

Mr. Russell shows me a gigantic 16-litre bottle of Montrachet lying on a locker shelf. "This is for a really special occasion," he says, estimating its value at around \$20,000. "You want more than one or two people around when you open this."

Then, he indicates several cases of the latest release from Montrachet, a DRC (Domaine de la Romanée-Conti are high-end Burgundies that are among the rarest wines in the world) that sells for \$1,800 a bottle.

"These kinds of wine improve with age over decades," he says. "They don't reach their peak for 40 or 50 years, and when they do, they can be worth \$20,000 to \$30,000 a bottle, so they have to have extremely good, stable conditions."

To that end, temperature in the facility is maintained at a cool and steady 13.3 C. Humidity is kept at 62 per cent. An impressive computerized control room monitors every corner of the cellar and rigidly controls the atmosphere.

Toronto wine writer Tony Aspler is a typical client. He has a relatively modest cellar at home, with room for about 1,000 bottles. "For long-term storage," he says, "I want a place where there is very little movement and the atmosphere is carefully controlled. Then, I don't have to worry. I can just forget about it."

Mr. Aspler says Mr. Russell's oper-