THE KING WEST CENTRAL
Community Chronicle
king west central
Volume 18 Winter 2004

The Sipping Point

King Street West's Fine Wine Reserve a place to store and taste your best bottles.

By Yvan Marston

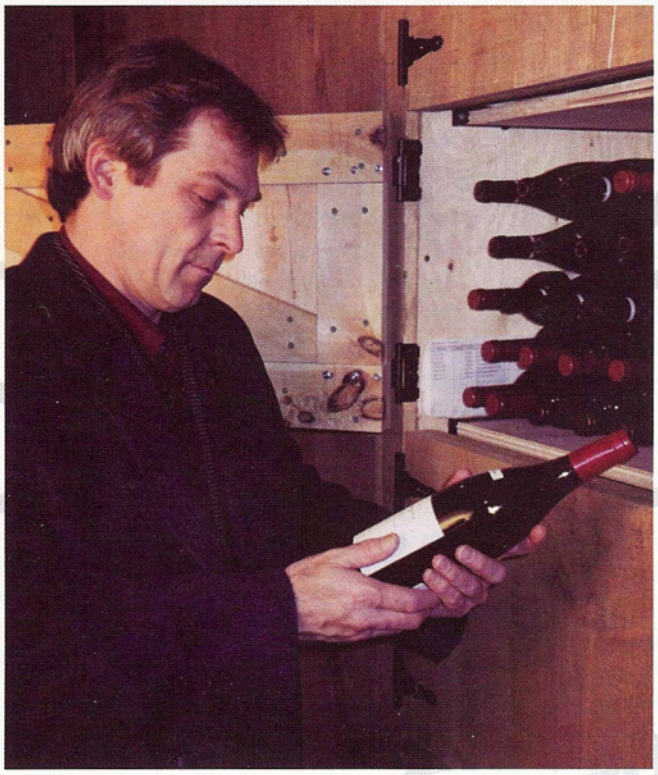

Photo by Tony Whibley

OWNER MARC RUSSELL PROVIDES PROFESSIONAL CELLARING AT THE FINE WINE RESERVE.

Marc Russell is concerned with about five percent of the wine out there. He estimates that 95 percent of what is available to consumers can be drunk right away, leaving five percent in need of decent conditions in which to age. Enter the Fine Wine Reserve, a professional storage facility for wine collectors, investors and serious enthusiasts.

The 5,500-square-foot space at King Street West, just next to Interior Elements is specifically designed to meet a niche public's need for wine storage. The first facility of its kind operating in Ontario, The Reserve uses specialized cooling, heating and humidifying equipment to create an environment that meets professional wine cellaring specifications. Within this space are a series of wine lockers and walk-in wine cellars that clients use to preserve and age their fine wines. These units can be leased for periods ranging from three months to over ten years.

All units are private, locked and alarmed. Each unit is furnished according to the specific needs of the client, from simple shelving arrangements to more elaborate racking systems. Units can hold from eight to 576+ cases of wine, and access is 24/7 using a special card access system and biometric fingerprint technology. In total, the space has seen about $400,000 in leasehold improvements, and Russell says, very little has to do with aesthetics.

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Wine Storage Tips

Most of the wine bought off the shelf is ready for drinking the day the money leaves your wallet. In fact, keeping an everyday bottle of plonk won't improve it. If anything, says Marc Russell of The Fine Wine Reserve, it may be detrimental to hold onto a bottle for more than a few months if it's not properly stored. Given the wrong conditions, a bottle can go bad in a month. Here are five things you should know about wine storage:

1. Most wines are safe at 4° to 18°C (40° to 65°F) for the short term, but ideally these should be stored at 13° to 14°C (55° to 57°F).
2. The temperature cannot fluctuate more than 2° to 3°C (5°F), once annually because these fluctuations cause the wine and the air in the bottle to expand and contract. Repeated "cycling" brings in new oxygen through the cork's pores – and that new air will spoil your drink.
3. 50-80 percent humidity is best otherwise the cork may dry out and let in more oxygen.
4. Don't store it with items that have strong odors as these can lend themselves to the wine. Some odours to look out for include solvents (i.e. fresh paint, cleaning solutions), or various aromatic food products like onions and garlic.
5. Keep it away from sunlight – ultraviolet light can break down some of the molecules, changing the taste.

A note on vibrations: The jury is still out regarding the effect of vibrations on wine, says Russell. Some purists insist that vibrations affect flavour and bouquet, but there's no clear evidence to suggest that this is important for wines that do not throw off a sediment. "If they do throw sediment," he advises, "just let the wine sit somewhere quiet for a few weeks before serving it."

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Feat of Insulation

About $100,000 was spent on the customized engineering system that ensures temperatures in the space won't fluctuate by more than 2°F. In addition, another $150,000 was spent simply on insulating the space (windows are blocked with concrete, walls and ceilings vapour-barriered and backed with mineral wool insulation).

"Trying to get absolute stability 365 days a year in a place that goes from 98 F to –25 F, is a real engineering feat," he sighs.

An exploration geologist for 20 years (the last ten spent in Central America and U.S.), Russell suddenly felt the need to settle down and came home to Toronto intent on being an entrepreneur. While looking for a business idea, he thought of the case of wine sitting under the sink in his condo's kitchen. A little research yielded that there were hundreds of successful wine storage companies throughout the U.S. and very few, if any such operations, here. "And there's 1 billion dollars a year being spent on wine in Ontario," he adds.

Tasting Room

The Fine Wine Reserve has an 11,000 case capacity with the smallest unit designed to hold eight. "It's less expensive as you get more space," says Russell, explaining that prices start at about $35 a month for an eight-case locker, but depending on how much you store, it could end up costing as little as $2 a case. Access to individual collections is 24/7 given that everything is protected with biometric security measures. "It's designed so that clients can come anytime to get the bottle they want," says Russell.

And if they choose to stick around, for a small membership fee, wine aficionados can have access to The Reserve's tasting room, a cozy nook downtown where members can hold private wine tastings or just relax with a glass of wine after taking in a show.

For more information, visit www.FineWineReserve.com. ■