

U-Store, U-Drink

Professional wine-storage facilities make real sense when it's time to get serious

By Alan McGinty – *City Bites Magazine* – August / September 2005

Here's a nice problem to have: What to do with your age-worthy wines — the really, really good ones — once your cellar is full? Or if you only have room in your condo for one small wine fridge? Well, a few Toronto companies have sprung up over the past several years to help you deal. Kind of like the Brinks service of wine, with a little Fort Knox thrown in.

There are many reasons to consider a professional wine-storage facility, apart from lack of personal space. For the really good stuff — say, some of the built-to-last wines upwards of \$50 a bottle — to mature properly, a few crucial conditions must be maintained. A consistent climate is key: about 13 degrees at 70 per cent humidity. Darkness is also a good idea. And vibrations are really bad. So, your closet is out. Under the stairs is out. The average open-concept basement might be okay, if you keep the lights out and watch the climate and keep away from the furnace.

Here's how the pros do it. At the very impressive Fine Wine Reserve downtown, which opened in 2004, the custom-built facility's security would make George Bush blush. After waving your card and hearing the beep, you place your index finger on a reader for biometric validation. Then there's an "airlock" separating the warehouse from the front door and the tasting rooms.

President Marc Russell offers both managed service — where he pick-ups and stores your wine — and private lockers with 24/7 access. The super security means you needn't fear sticky-fingered fellow clients. There's also a terrific tasting room. The fee at the Fine Wine Reserve is \$2.75 a month per case for managed storage. Lockers start at \$33 a month (\$4/case). The premium covers the 24/7/365 access.

For Scarborough, talk to Paul Wolfe of The Wine Vault, located within a climate-controlled fur storage warehouse. "Ninety-five per cent of my clients have their own cellars, some quite substantial," said Wolfe, who charges \$2.50 per month per case. His clients want long-term storage in absolutely perfect conditions.

In the west end Iron Gate Cellarage, also within a fur warehouse. Iron Gate charges around \$3 a case per month. Another downtown facility, Urban Cellars last year launched a unique online "virtual cellar" service so you can track your wares.

Toronto has only a few wine storage facilities thanks to our restrictive laws. "I can't store wine for sale by wine agents," said Marc Russell. "They must store with the LCBO. That cuts out 95 per cent of the market." And raises individual storage costs because there are no volume savings generated by retailers' bigger stockpiles.

Will this ever change? Doubtful. But with the Vintages wine auctions, we now have a legal resale market (such auctions were outlawed until a couple years ago). In New York, shrewd collectors manage to "drink for free" according to David Wainwright of the Christie's auction house. They buy four cases and sell three for the same price a few years later. Proof of proper storage is essential at this level. But even if you just drink it yourself, you'll still win. The wine will be the best it can be.

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