



THE FRUGAL OENOPHILE

Wine Appreciation through Education

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By Mr. Richard Best

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A Box to Put it In

Once the wine bug has bitten, some people find it all too easy to buy far more wine than they can consume. Should that habit develop into the hobby of collecting, then it's possible to buy more wine than one can comfortably store. When you've filled up every spare space, up-graded your wine locker two or three times, or packed the basement cellar to near bursting, what do you do? Time to call in the professionals.

The usual rag-tag bunch of Canuck wine writers gathered recently at the [Fine Wine Reserve](#) in downtown Toronto. As well as our monthly tasting, which was held in the Reserve's hospitality room, the session included an insightful tour of what must be Toronto's most advanced wine storage facility. The Reserve is a commercial wine cellar that provides short- or long-term storage for hire. The service can accommodate the small to large collector, and the storage area has been engineered to provide state-of-the-art security and cellaring conditions. It's an impressive operation and if you're in the market for some serious cellar space, you should drop by for a tour.

This is a type of business that is likely to become more and more common as more collectors outgrow their cellars, as more people jump into the game, and as senior collectors downsize their living accommodations. Apartment dwellers are likely to snap up storage units as an affordable alternative to bulky refrigeration units. Wine clubs might also find such a service more practical than constructing a cellar of their own.

I'll try not to make this sound like an infomercial for the Fine Wine Reserve, but that will be tough. These people have done all the right things, and I think their implementation could serve as a model for this industry.

Is it accessible?

The beauty of having your own wine cellar is that your collection is easy to access, so if you're going to move your wine downtown, you want the new cellar to be as accessible as possible. While a centralized facility can't offer quite this convenience, it should at least provide accessibility and ease of use.

I expected to pay for parking near the Reserve's cellar and was fearful of the price. It can cost as much a good bottle of German Riesling to park in downtown Toronto. I was pleased to see lots of street parking with very reasonable prices posted, so parking is not an issue.

What about loading and unloading? Is there an easy method provided for getting your wine into and out of the cellar? Fine Wine Reserve, for example, has a secure access door at street level where you can park and send your cases into the cellar using a conveyer system. To remove wine, reverse the process, loading up the wine on the conveyer and then meeting it in the alley.

Is it available?

The Fine Wine Reserve has no signs out front or inside, no reception area, no waiting room. The entrance is one flight down and all you see is a door with a code lock and a thumb print reader. Tenants have self-serve access to the cellar and their lockers. It's a true turn-key solution that translates into around-the-clock access since there is no gatekeeper and no "business hours".

Is it affordable?

The Reserve offers a wide variety of renting and leasing plans. Personal lockers can be configured to accommodate any size collection from eight cases on up. Fees are based on number of cases and there are no in/out charges. Of course, the value of the service hinges on the value of the wine being stored. Using the Reserve's price list, a quick calculation shows that storage actually costs literally just pennies per bottle.

Is there a variety of storage options and service levels?

The basic level of service is a private wine locker. All Reserve tenants receive a new lock plus a key card that gives them access to the building, the cellar and the loading bay, and they can visit their wine any time. Lockers can be configured for cases or individual bottles in capacities up to 600 cases.

The full package includes pickup, delivery, storage, use of the tasting room, and even cataloguing. The Reserve will catalogue each wine that goes into the cellar and provide the tenant with regular reports. You can even have a single bottle brought out of your collection and delivered to your door. Of course, this level of service costs quite a bit more, but if your collection is worth thousands of dollars -- not to mention the value of your time -- the relative cost could be quite modest.

The Reserve also provides transitional and temporary storage. This would work well for someone who is moving and waiting for their new cellar to be completed.

Is it secure?

Timed card locks, fingerprint reader, video camera, 30-inch thick walls ... that should be secure enough to satisfy any wine collector. It would have to be a very determined wine thief who would try to get by all the security measures at the Fine Wine Reserve. In fact, the Reserve is built to such a secure standard that one insurance company offers full-coverage insurance for customers' collections. (Interestingly, this particular insurance company will even cover defective bottles!)

Is cellaring a speciality or a sideline?

There are wine storage operations that work out of converted cold storage facilities -- not the sort of treatment you want for a valuable wine collection. Fine Wine Reserve is "purpose built". Marc Russell, president and founder of the Reserve, did an impressive job designing the cellar. He intentionally limited the number of similar operations he visited so he would not be overly influenced by existing designs. The result is an innovative cellar that provides rock solid security and performance. This specialized approach led naturally to additional features that could only be provided by a dedicated facility: walls designed to achieve one purpose, three-stage entry way, and security and tracking systems.

How extensive are the environmental controls?

It's not very likely that heating will be needed, but cooling is a big deal. The first line of defense is adequate insulation. The walls of the Reserve have roughly 20 inches of insulation. Even with a total power failure, the Reserve can maintain a constant cellar temperature for several days. A veritable roomful of computer-controlled air conditioners ensure that the temperature never rises about 56F (12C). Even the air conditioners have air conditioners.

Humidity is also an issue, though less so than temperature. The Reserve has a computer-controlled misting system that keeps humidity at the optimum level for stored wines.

Air quality is often overlooked in wine cellars. Wines don't like to breathe the same air over and over any more than humans do, but it costs more to provide fresh air. The environmental control system at the Reserve replenishes the air in the cellar to help combat stale odours and mustiness.

If you're considering moving all or part of your valuable wine collection to a commercial cellar, use the fore-going as a checklist to make sure you get the best protection for your wines and the best value for your money. And if you are in the Toronto area, drop by the Reserve to see how it should be done.

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