

## HUSBANDS & WINES » HOBBY OR OBSESSION?



Marc Russell, president of the Fine Wine Reserve, uses a fingerprint reader to access his wine storage. PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# It's in the vault: your man's secret wine stash

BY LEAH McLAREN

James, a Toronto tax lawyer, has a very happy marriage. He shares everything with his wife – everything, that is, except how much wine he's buying.

"I have stashes in lots of different places," he admits guiltily over the phone from his Bay Street office (he agreed to be interviewed on condition that his real name not be used). "I have periodically spent thousands of dollars on wine unbeknownst to my wife."

The need for subterfuge came about, he says, after his wife looked at a credit-card statement several years ago and told him, "No more wine for six months."

James agreed with her in principle. Then his agent came a-calling with the latest limited-edition vintages.

James couldn't resist: He got a friend to buy the wine for him,

then purchased it back at a later date.

As the popularity of wine continues to grow among the nation's chattering classes, more enthusiasts are finding their obsession driving them to spend far more on their cellars than their spouse might approve of. The solution? Don't tell the wife. All it takes is a private vault, a discreet agent and a group of like-minded tipplers with whom you can appreciate your illicit bouquet.

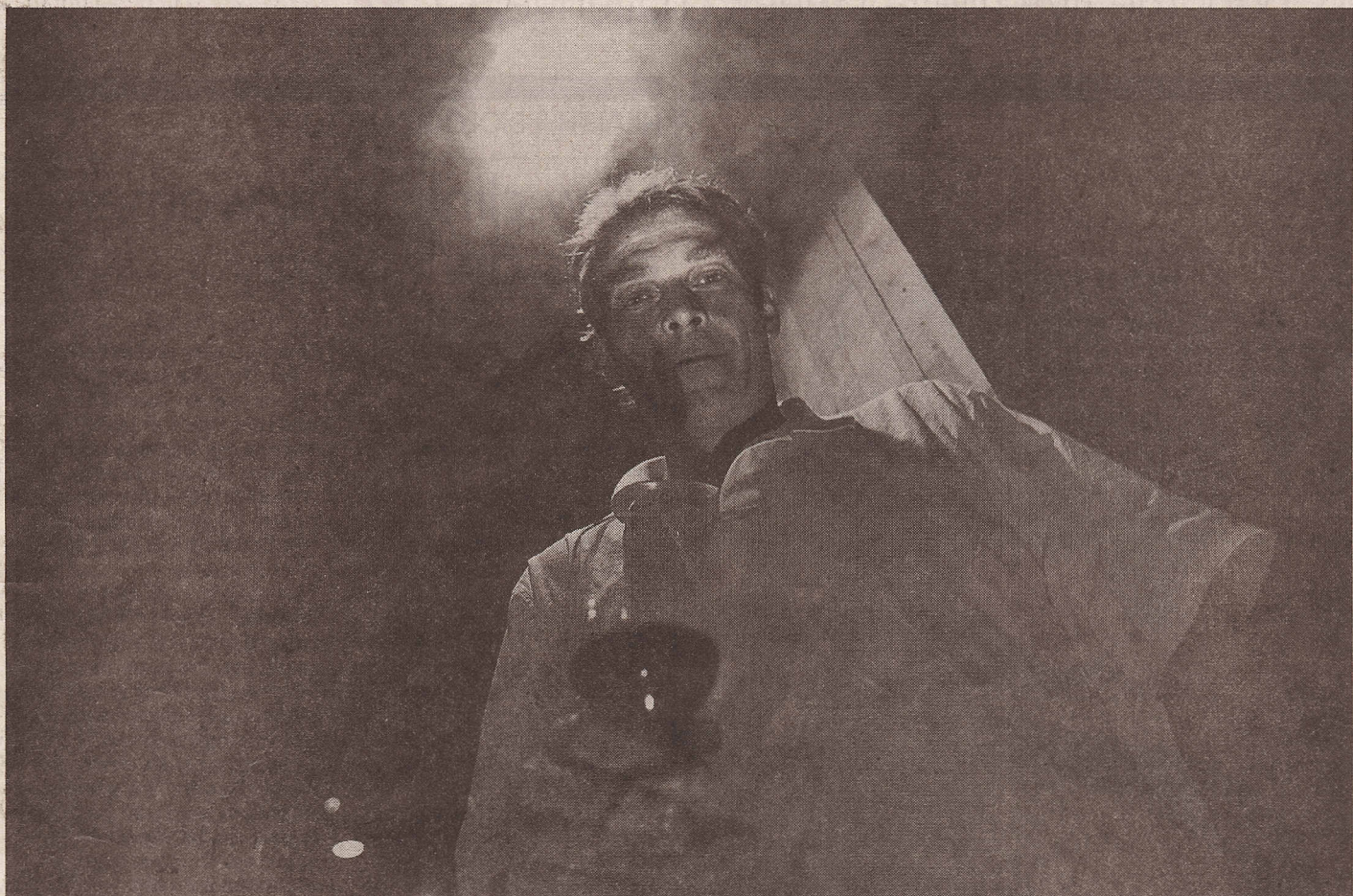
Stephen Grant, 59, a senior partner with McCarthy Tétraut LLP, understands the drive to acquire an obscene amount of fermented grape juice.

He has two personal wine cellars and a collection of several thousand bottles, mostly French Burgundies and Bordeaux.

"It's a profound and steady relationship," he explains.

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Marc Russell's Fine Wine Reserve stores \$30-million in fine wines for serious private collectors. PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

# All they can drink - and then some

» "It's a serious fascination and an obsessive pursuit of an aesthetic enlightenment as to the perfect place, the perfect time, the perfect wine," Mr. Grant says.

It's this sort of passion - some would call it addiction - that drives some collectors to cultivate that most rarefied of possessions: a secret stash.

Todd Halpern, one of Canada's most successful wine agents, thinks the perfect collection should consist of 3,000 to 4,000 good bottles, a base of classics and a consistent turnover of new stuff.

But like all loyal agents, Mr. Halpern has been known to suggest a Plan B when a serious private collector exceeds the bounds of his home cellar - or his partner's patience. That's where Marc Russell

and his wine vault come in. Located in the King and Spadina area of downtown Toronto, the Fine Wine Reserve is a climate-controlled space where collectors can find a home for their extra stash of 1975 Petrus or La Mission Haut Brion. Thirty million dollars in fine wine is hidden behind a plain steel door labelled "Mechanical Room."

In addition to state-of-the-art security (each locker in the cellar has its own private alarm, and entry to the nondescript front door requires fingerprint access), Mr. Russell guarantees total privacy and discretion for those looking to store a little something extra on the side.

"If you want to do well in this business, you have to keep your mouth shut," he said. "I definitely have clients who are sheepish and embarrassed

about it and say, 'Don't tell anyone.' It's a collecting bug and they've caught it."

Mr. Grant, who counts many collectors in his direct social circle, says he's seen firsthand the domestic tension caused by a burgeoning cellar. "I know guys who've spent lots and lots of money on their obsession instead of paying off the mortgage," he concedes. "It's a hobby that can get in the way of balancing household budgets."

Of course, collectors would argue that it's merely a savvy investment: Over the past 20 years the value of fine European wines (particularly Bordeaux and Burgundy) has risen exponentially, Mr. Halpern says. But, he adds, there is a tipping point with wine where passion transforms into something more insatiable.

"Over the years I have recommended that several of my clients stop buying wine," he says, without naming names. "I look at their collection and see that in their lifetimes they'll never be able to consume what they have."

When it comes to the issue of secret wine stashes, he is a paragon of discretion. "It's like women buying clothing - sometimes they don't tell their husbands. When husbands buy wine, sometimes they don't want their wives to know. It happens all the time," he admits, then quickly adds, "but like I said - no comment."

Mr. Russell has some clients storing million-dollar collections under his well-insulated roof. Wandering around the rows of pine-panelled cellars brings new meaning to the term "back-door operation."



All of the stock in this veritable Swiss bank for wine is slipped in through a secret trap door attached to the parking lot and moved along a conveyor system to the basement. Not only does this eliminate the chance of expensive accidents in the stairwell, Mr. Russell says: it ensures complete privacy for all involved.

He will not disclose his client list or get into the details of specific collections.

"I see myself as an investment counsellor for wine enthusiasts," he says. "You don't see those guys in finance talking about what's in their clients' portfolios, do you?"

Andrew Freedman, 54, a business valuator, belongs to the Toronto branch of the *Confrérie des chevaliers du tastevin*, an international club devoted exclusively to tasting the world's best Burgundies. Mr. Freedman, who has an extensive private collection and his own home cellar, says that while his partner has a healthy appreciation for wine it can be a touchy subject in his house.

"I share all of [my purchases] with her," he says. But whether she approves is another thing. "It's a matter of appreciation," he says. "If I spend hundreds on a bottle she might not get it, but only in the same way that if she spent hundreds on a pair of shoes and I might not get it."

Mr. Grant defends his habit in positive terms. Most first-growth Bordeaux, he points out, can't be opened for at least 20 years. "You buy it with the hope that you'll be alive to drink it. But really it's just my little hobby."

He pauses on the phone.

"That's my wife laughing in the background," he says. "She doesn't think it's so little."