

**N**estled in an exclusive park-like area in Shouson Hill on Hong Kong Island, Crown Wine Cellars was the brain-child of Jim Thompson, founder and CEO of the Crown Relocation Group and Gregory De'eb, former Acting Consul-General of South Africa in Hong Kong.

Recalling how their vision came true, Greg – as he prefers to be called – says he and Mr Thompson had met many times socially and over time their discussions always returned to their love of wine and the need for a first-class wine storage facility in Hong Kong.

Coming up with a business plan financed by Mr Thompson, Greg then had to do the rounds of various government departments to get the necessary support to convert 8 Pacific War bunkers on the slope of Shouson Hill into the site for a clubhouse, conservatory and wine cellars that have now become Crown Wine Cellars.

As it fitted in with the government's intention to restore the site to historical accuracy while allowing a broader section of the community to have access to it, Greg found a powerful ally in Chief Secretary Donald Tsang, who had expressed during an official business trip to South Africa that he would like to see Hong Kong become a wine trading hub for Asia.

As General Manager of the club, Greg is rightly proud of its achievements, which include:

- Having the largest single collection of wines available in any club, hotel or restaurant in Hong Kong.
- Having the first open bonded storage for wine in Hong Kong.
- Being the only food facility in Hong Kong, where patrons pay for food charges only as club wines are sold at no mark-up or members drink their own wines.

Greg is also pleased that the club is now "in the black", merely some 7 month after opening. How this has come about is that the club has signed up more than 120 members in two of the following categories:

**Platinum:** Each member pays a flat monthly fee of \$860, which entitles them to store 24 bottles inside the clubhouse

cellars and 36 bottles in the adjacent main cellars.

**Gold:** Each member pays \$688 a month and is allowed to store 96 bottles in the main cellars.

Over and above their allotted entitlement, members – who are in the main of the platinum variety – pay \$3 a bottle per month. There are also long-term storage options available for as low as \$1 per bottle per month. Members can also consume club wines at cost price. The club currently has 48,000 bottles in storage but can store up to 240,000 bottles.

What is the profile of typical members? According to Greg, they are wine importers, government officials, business tycoons, diplomats, mainstream managers and even personal assistants. What they all have in common is their passion for drinking good quality wines because one presumes that nobody would bother to store a "chateau plonk".

The one great advantage of using the facilities of Crown Wine Cellars is that people who are not here permanently can move in or move out their personal favourite wines without incurring extra costs such as customs duty.

The way this works is that the club has been given government approval to have full private control of the wines it has in storage. While it is still the Customs and Excise Department that does the clearing of the duties payable on each bottle, members need not pay for that until they decide to use the wine.

Under a central computerised system, linking members, the club and customs, members have to give 48 hours' notice if they wish to use their wines. After the government tax has been calculated and paid, customs officially authorises the release of the wine at the clubhouse.

All of this is done electronically. No forms to fill out! No customs officer to deal with! Great, isn't it? When are you joining Crown Wine Cellars? •

## HAVE WINE... WILL TRAVEL

*Wine, glorious wine: that is the raison d'être of Crown Wine Cellars, Asia's premier wine storage facility, which is the culmination of the vision of a business tycoon who loves wine and a retired diplomat who comes from a wine-growing country – and also happens to have a passion for the fermented juice of the grape.*



Greg De'eb displaying one of the wines available at Crown Wine Cellars.