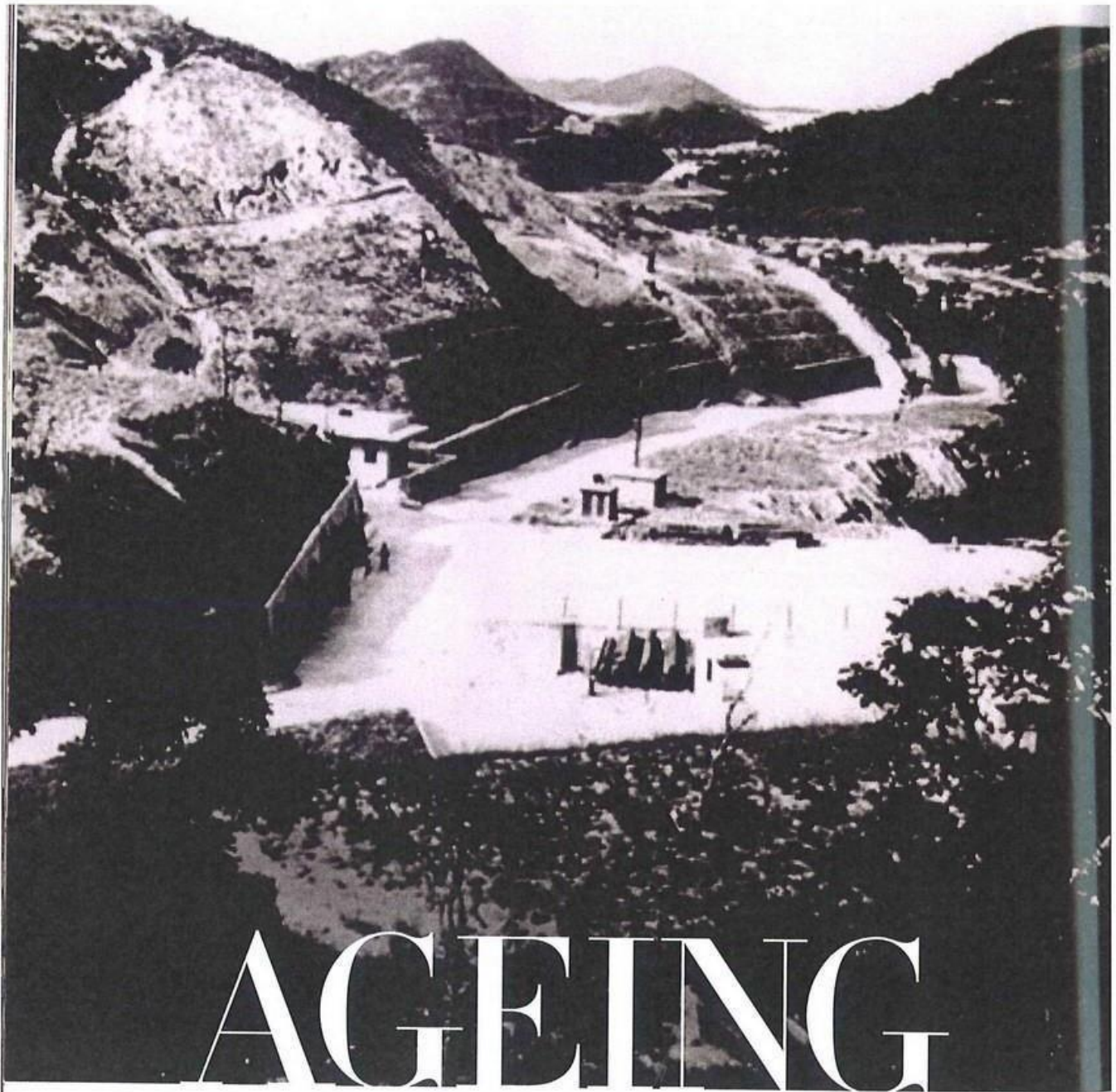


07/2005 (Hong Kong Tatler)

Ageing Tastefully



AGEING TASTEFULLY

Former military sites in Hong Kong are undergoing radical transformations, thanks to cooperation between the government and private enterprise. One World War II bunker in particular has got the wine world agog, reports Sean Fitzpatrick

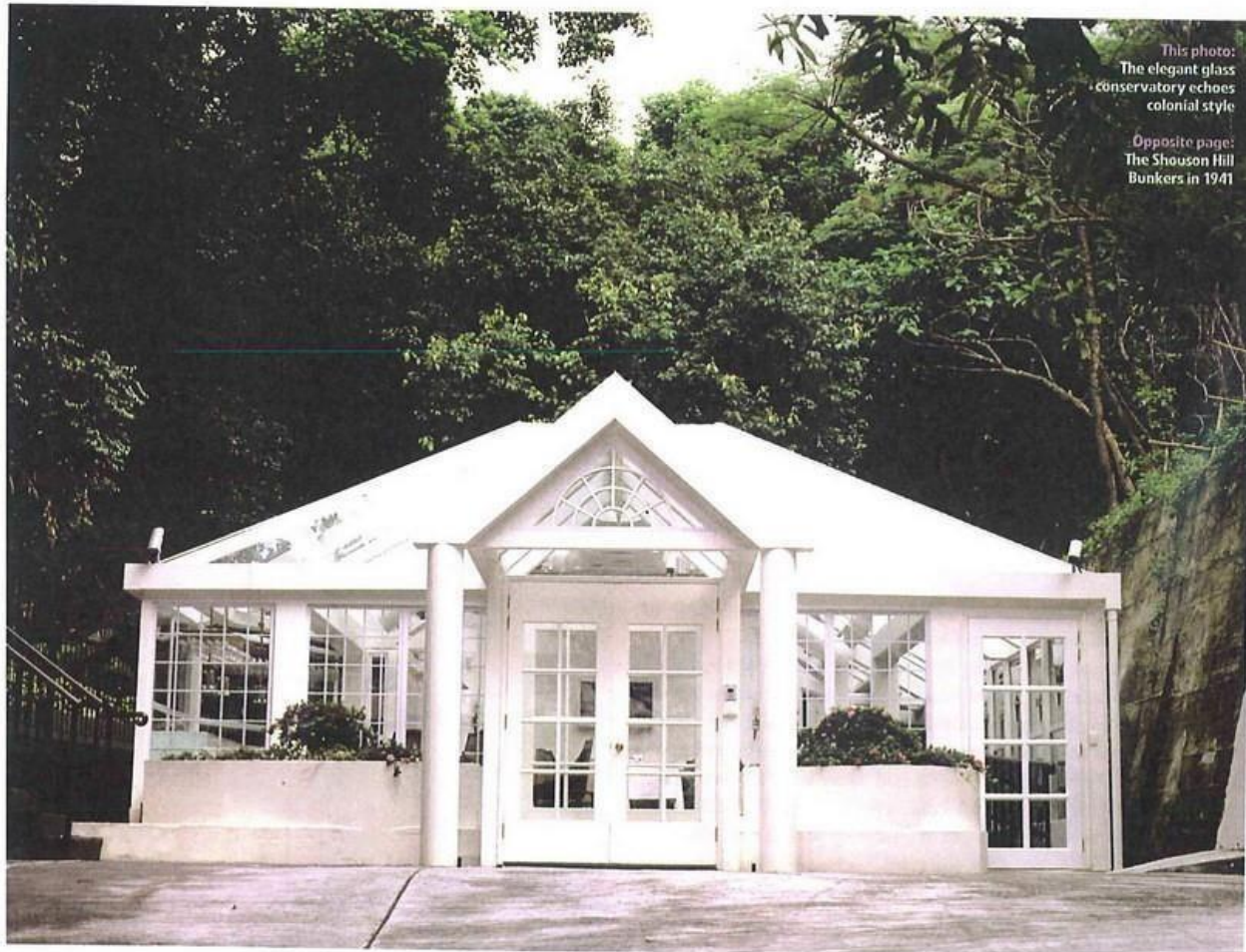
Along the curves of Deep Water Bay Drive, tucked away in a concealed nook on Shouson Hill, stands the proud, geometric form of a glass conservatory, its white beams lending it the air of a fairy tale as it stands among the thick foliage and the surrounding heavy concrete slope. It is hard to imagine that one year ago, this site was an almost impenetrable jungle in a half-forgotten corner of Hong Kong Island's south side, so concealed by trees that even local residents were unaware that military bunkers lay within. "I have lived in that house for 17 years," says James Thompson, founder and chairman of Crown Worldwide, pointing above the conservatory. "I never even saw these bunkers because it was so overgrown. I saw the concrete faces and thought it must just be a generator or something and I never gave a second thought to what it was."

Luckily for Hong Kong's wine lovers, Thompson did eventually learn of the secret caves that lay beneath his home and realised that the defunct bunkers represented an opportunity for the city's first professional wine cellars. The story of how these former British military munitions bunkers were transformed into Crown Wine Cellars – has its genesis in a trade visit by Chief Secretary Donald Tsang to South Africa; in 2000 accompanying Tsang on the trip was Thompson. During the

end of the delegation, Tsang and Thompson visited Capetown and toured the wine country, where Tsang mooted the idea of the SAR becoming a regional hub for wine, an idea with which Thompson was in whole-hearted agreement.

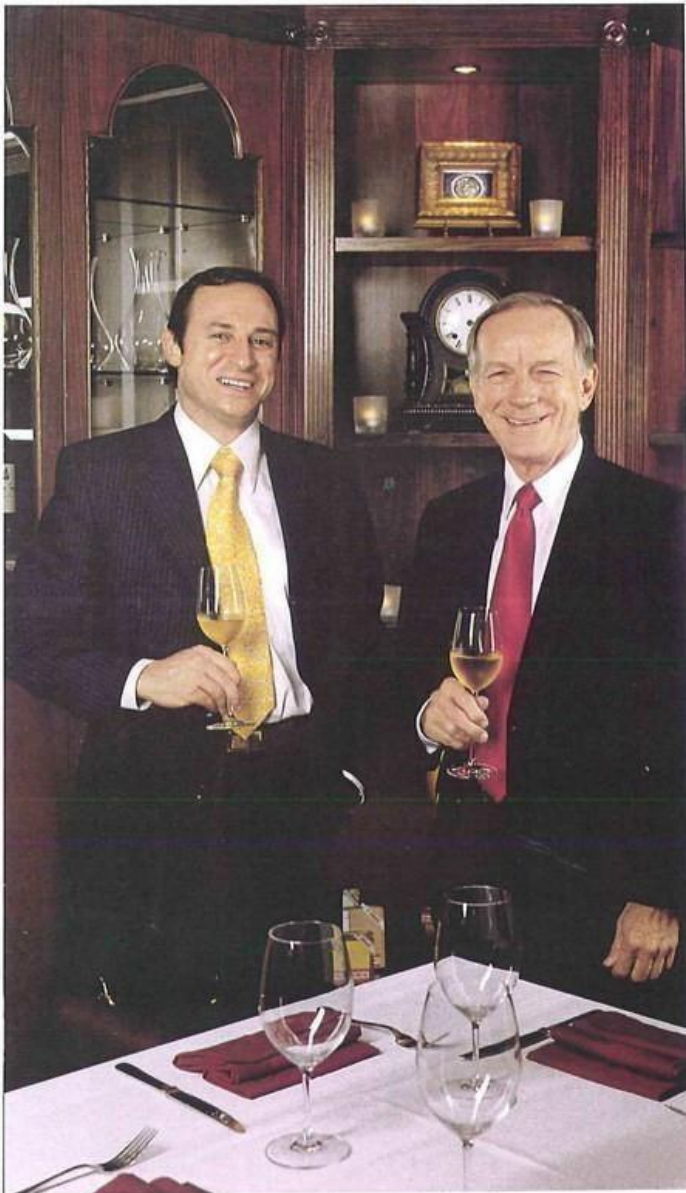
After the delegation's return in June 2000, Tsang's assistant, Yvonne Choi, gave a presentation on Hong Kong's potential as a wine centre. In the audience was South Africa Consul-General Gregory Deéb, a wine lover who would, in time, become the other half of the Crown Wine Cellar vanguard. "A chap from the Lands Department presented possible sites for wine storage but we just us shook our heads. Nobody had any foresight. I doodled with this for a year," says the personable Deéb. He and Thompson knew each other socially, and one night in August 2001, as a dinner party rolled into the wee hours, Deéb and Thompson sketched out the mission of creating a world-class cellar in Hong Kong – in a discussion suitably fuelled by fine wine.

On a cool January day the following year, they found themselves hacking their way through the thick brush on Shouson Hill with officers from the government's Geotechnical Engineering Office, who had been using the bunkers as storage for rock samples. It was deemed a viable location for the new venture and the location's unusual history was uncovered. The site was originally known as the Central Ordinance (Munitions) Depot, and the general area was known as Little Hong



This photo:
The elegant glass
conservatory echoes
colonial style

Opposite page:
The Shouson Hill
Bunkers in 1941



"I'm a great believer in heritage sites; they should be protected. Actually, this one would be pretty tough to destroy. But most have gone under the wrecker's ball. Now we think we'll be able to keep this one as a heritage site," says Thompson. Preserving the site's historical significance was tantamount to the venture, and the founders maintain close ties with historians and war veterans. On August 15 this year, the cellars hosted Memorial Day celebrations, inviting former soldiers and POWs to visit the bunkers and experience its transformation. Now the general manager of Crown Wine Cellar, Deeb asserts proudly, "To me it's the pinnacle of what this place should be. These restorations are all things that have happened since 1997 and they have happened 100 percent through the initiative of government. They really are trying, and they should be credited. It's great foresight. And ironic that a Chinese-oriented government, which is supposed to be anti-colonial, are the ones who say, 'Respect these sites' and 'Put up the colonial conservatory.'" And at a cost of \$40 million, that's what Crown did.

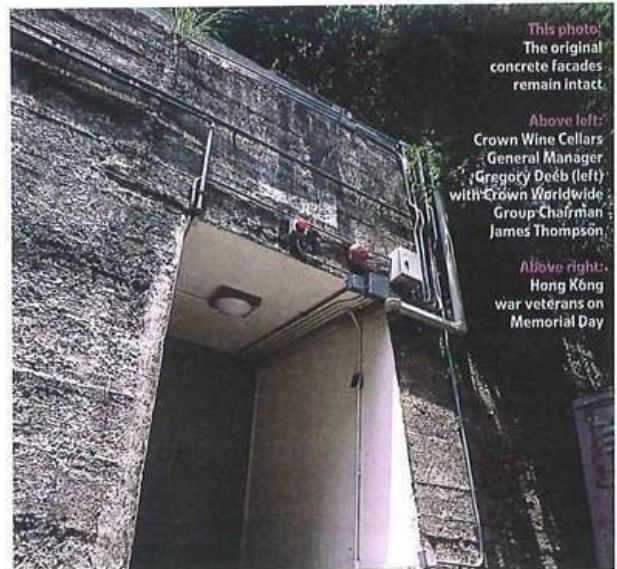
To transform the site into the luxurious, state-of-the-art facility it is today, Crown called upon the skills of expert cellar designers from



"We think we'll be able to keep this one as a heritage site"

Kong. Construction of the Bunkers was completed in 1937, at which time the entire site was comprised of 12 pairs of bunkers, a depot HQ, and a sentry box. Later, a guardhouse was added, which certain commentators have speculated may have been constructed by the Japanese military. Interestingly, due to its position between hills, Little Hong Kong was well protected from enemy shelling during the Japanese invasion, and the site fell to the Japanese two days after the rest of Hong Kong was captured on Christmas Day 1941.

Government maps published by the War Office dated 1938 and 1945 failed to indicate the site, possibly due to the sensitivity of the facility. The first aerial photographs available date back to 1949 and clearly show 12 fill slopes. Minimal vegetation covering them shows that recent construction and improvement works had likely been undertaken at that time. The British forces ceased use of the site by 1977, and transferred control to the Hong Kong Police Driving School until the early 1980s. Most of the bunkers were substantially altered in the mid-1980s with the development of two residential apartments. The original fill slopes and bunkers were all but lost – out of the original 24 bunkers, only eight remained.



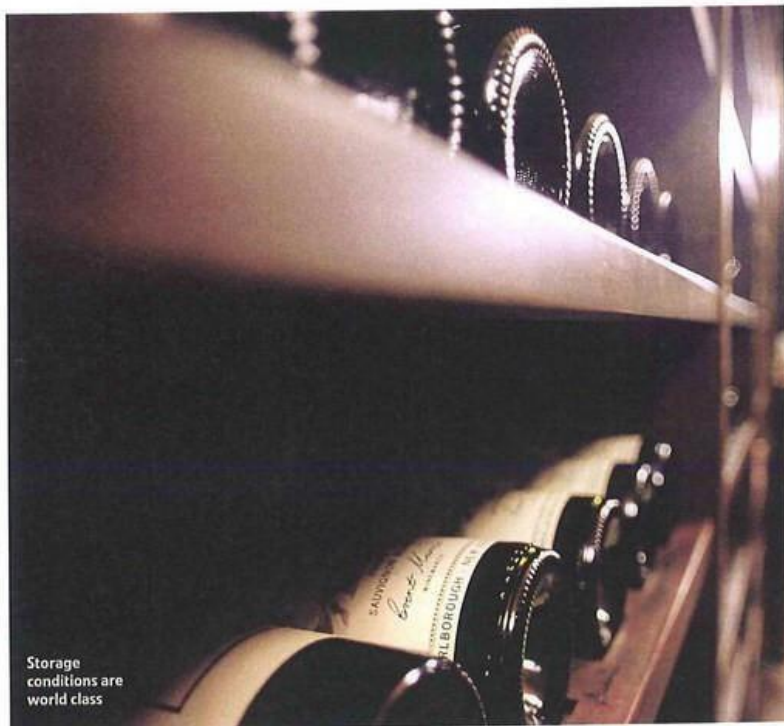
This photo: The original concrete facades remain intact.

Above left: Crown Wine Cellars General Manager Gregory Deeb (left) with Crown Worldwide Group Chairman James Thompson.

Above right: Hong Kong war veterans on Memorial Day

GOING UNDERGROUND

When it comes to storing wine, the experts agree that the millennia-old technique of subterranean storage is what works best. Here are two underground cellars on opposite sides of the Atlantic that rank amongst the world's best



Storage conditions are world class

HORSE RIDGE CELLARS (US)

Horse Ridge Cellars is the most advanced and secure underground wine storage facility in the United States. Originally built to withstand an indirect hit from a nuclear warhead, Horse Ridge Cellars has been transformed from a Cold War relic into an optimal location for the storage of fine wine. Located on a rural yet accessible property in one of the most scenic areas of north central Connecticut, Horse Ridge Cellars offers an environment that is controlled for temperature and humidity, is vibration free, devoid of light and the only wine storage facility in the country that offers an air filtration system.

The cellars are three to five metres below ground and measure 930 square metres enclosed by 40 cm-thick walls, and floor and ceiling comprising 15,000 cubic metres of concrete and 126 tons of reinforcing steel. In security terms, Horse Ridge cellars certainly deliver: a 12 ton, 50 cm thick steel vault door

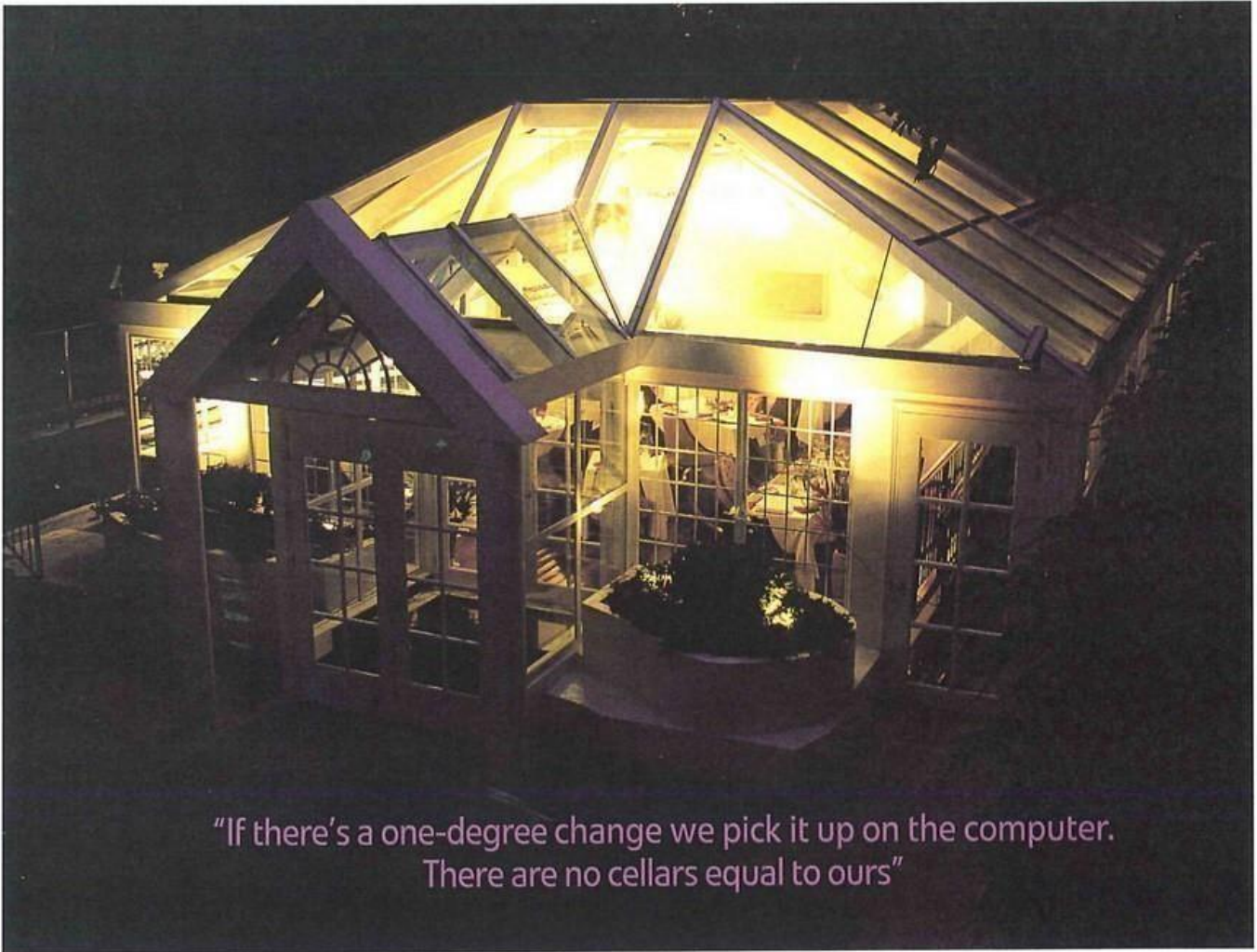
guards the precious cases within. Climate control is also exemplary, with a perfect 13 degrees Celsius and 70 percent relative humidity maintained, the "gold standard." The unique air filtration system is what sets Horse Ridge apart from other cellars in the US: The system, which is approved by the Atomic Energy Commission, was originally constructed to provide a fall-out free environment in the event of a nuclear disaster and has fantastic wine storage applications since it has the potential to filter out mould spores.

No matter the weather conditions outside Horse Ridge Cellars, inside, wine will be kept in a constant and stable environment due to the existence of a back up diesel generator custom designed for the vault, capable of operating all systems, including the state-of-the-art security system. Fire suppression equipment, motion sensors and other alarm features guarantee that bottles of the finest will be kept completely safe.

OCTAVIAN (UK)

Octavian is the UK's premier bonded wine, warehousing and distribution company, handling more than four million cases a year for both private and trade customers. Octavian has the capacity at its unique cellars in Corsham, Wiltshire, to store more than 800,000 cases in ideal conditions 30 metres underground. Constant computer controlled temperature, absence of ultraviolet light, and full humidity control guarantee top notch storage in not only the Corsham cellars, but also in the company's other cellar locations in Kemble in Gloucestershire and Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. Blending the best of traditional storage and delivery skills with the most advanced technology, the award-winning Octavian ranks as one of Europe's leading facilities.

Endorsed by leading oenologists, Octavian is the only underground storage facility in the UK to boast a dynamic computerised humidity and temperature control system, ensuring consistent quality conditions for wine. Frequent and rapid temperature changes can have highly adverse effects on wine, making it evolve more quickly and reducing its life span. Octavian's choice of a constant 13 degrees Celsius is firmly in line with expert opinion around the globe. In addition, vibration is kept to a minimum and humidity is balanced to ensure no damage is done to the large number of bottles Octavian stores. And you need not have a large collection to take advantage of Octavian's technology. Such a large facility suggest that the UK's top cellar deals only in large quantities, but that is not the case. One needs only a few cases to be able to enjoy the company's services, which include accurate conditioning reports, in which customers are provided with a full conditioning report on their wines, including neck levels, label status and condition of the capsule. In addition, private customers can have access to such experts as Sotheby's, and master winemaker Ronnie Hicks, who may provide valuations and suggested drinking dates.



"If there's a one-degree change we pick it up on the computer.
There are no cellars equal to ours"



Above:
The conservatory
shines at night

This photo:
The exclusive
Library room

South Africa who, unlike their European counterparts, were experienced in designing wine storage for warm climates. Technically, the cellars are a world-first on a number of levels. The slopes that surround the glass clubhouse were completely remodelled, using an innovative technique that avoided the removal of even a single tree. This technique was key to securing the project in the eyes of the local council who were concerned that the area's green belt integrity would be compromised by the construction.

The system stores the wine under perfect conditions: "Everything is registered and recorded by computers so the provenance of the wines is absolutely impeccable. If there's a one-degree change we pick it up on the computer. As a result, we have actually leap-frogged beyond what Europe offers at the moment. We studied the best of everything in the world and then applied every aspect of it. With respect to certain technical elements, there are cellars – especially in the US – equal to ours. But in all facets, there are none equal to ours. That's why we can justifiably say we are the most advanced in the world." The key to the cellar's world-class storage is a cooling system that keeps the bottles at a perfect 13 degrees Celsius. Unlike air-conditioning systems, which blow icy air onto the bottle, the system employed by Crown Wine Cellars (CWC) involves a delicate filtration technology that avoids creating a system of wind currents. "When ice-cold air is blowing straight onto the bottle, it's effectively freezing the bottle and all the little molecules inside are crimping up. And when the air-conditioning switches off they release again: crimping up and releasing. And if this happens constantly, when people open up that bottle of wine they say, 'The flavour's gone out of this wine.'

For many people, the world of wine appreciation can be a daunting one, populated with oenophiles waxing lyrical about *après gout*, tannins and other qualities that are esoteric to the novice palate. While the CWC presents itself as a natural home for Hong Kong's wine-lovers, it refrains from the type of snobbery that is all too often found in the upper echelons of oenology. It is indeed so rife that the entry for "snob" in the Oxford Dictionary offers "wine snob" as an example of usage. The emphasis at Shouson Hill is firmly on wine appreciation in a friendly, inclusive environment with members of varying knowledge levels learning from one another rather than sitting through lectures *ad nauseum*.

The owners are adamant that CWC is where those who share a *joie de vivre* appreciate wine not only in terms of its tangible physical properties of aroma, taste and colour but also metaphysically, as the elixir that has fuelled good times for millennia. "What this club does offer is a very soft environment to expand your knowledge of wines; there are no hard sells here. We have social gatherings where we bring people together from the same social background enjoying fine food and wine. It's a casual way to become confident about wines. I'm learning like everybody else, and 90 percent of my knowledge has come from drinking the stuff. We want to gather a group where love of life and love of fine things in life are important, not pretension," he says.

The CWC has three areas in which members and their guests can enjoy their evenings: the glass conservatory, the main reception room and the exclusive Library, a private area for the club's Platinum members, who can access their collections in an adjoining cellar. The Library, with its solid wood furnishings, slate flooring and robust chandelier, is known affectionately among regulars as the Camelot room. The list of those who have graced this inner sanctum of CWC reads like who's who of Hong Kong: Henry Tang, James Tien, Martin Lee are among

those who appreciate the club's exclusive environment.

Furthermore, the Library Room, with its privacy, lends itself perfectly to the off-the-record brainstorming sessions between the city's "deep thinkers" that have been taking place there.

One of the club's first 20 members, Daniel Yu, CEO of Sun Microsystems, is a wine-lover who says the CWC has come at just the right time in Hong Kong history. He says, "If you think about the general trend towards wine consumption, first of all it's the preference of many people these days and supposedly health benefits are associated with wine drinking. So whether you see it as a hobby or a healthful practice, the demand for wine storage and wine services keeps on increasing around the world and especially in Hong Kong. They are creating an experience and that includes the historical background of the site.

The CWC also offers bonded cellars, which means that members can store their wines for as long as desired before re-exporting them without paying duty. Members who choose to store their collections in the duty-paid cellar pay tax only on the initial price of the wine, and are thus encouraged to bring their collections into the SAR as early as possible. The *raison d'être* for the facility, is firmly in the development of a home for wine lovers, and to nurture a culture of wine appreciation. "We'll stay focussed and the real pleasure will come when we see new wines tasted and people getting interested," he adds.

Whether CWC will spark a growth in Hong Kong's wine culture is something that will become apparent in the coming years as the club, like its precious bottles, matures. For now, wine lovers can raise a glass to their transformation of a vestige of the darkest days in Hong Kong history – a bunker associated with death and destruction – into a venue that celebrates life. □

TIMELINE OF SHOUSON HILL BUNKERS

- 1937 Construction
- 1941 December 27: Surrender to the Japanese
- 1941 December 29: First photo on record of site
- 1945 August 15: Return to the Allied forces
- 1949 April 24: First aerial photo on record
- 1956 Declassified from being a "secret facility"
- 1977 Handed over from the military to the police, becomes the site of the HK Police Driving School
- 1980s Essentially abandoned and many of the buildings were destroyed and damaged due to residential construction projects
- 1990s Taken over by the Geotechnical Engineering Office to store rock core samples
- 2003 August: Planning is approved and the land leased to proceed with the club
- 2003 September: Full site restoration and club construction begins
- 2004 February 25: Club construction is completed and the first event takes place