

# Buyers and cellars

A year after the government lifted the wine duty in Hong Kong, the city is on the verge of becoming the fine wine hub that the experts hoped it would be. But where will all of these new prize bottles be kept? **Alexis Tay** visits the solutions for professional wine cellaring and storing in the area

**I**t's too hot. It's too humid. There's not enough space... These are the traditional complaints about storing wine in Hong Kong. And these are also the grievances that drive many wine enthusiasts to keep their valuables overseas, in the United Kingdom or France, for example. But here's a message to those cautious collectors: it's time to bring your bottles home.

No, global cooling hasn't suddenly happened overnight. And no amount of land reclamation could make Hong Kong a spacious place. It's just that some experts are arguing that these complaints never had any basis. For example, the co-founder of Crown Wine

Cellars, Gregory De'eb, believes that: "The one thing that kills wine is temperature variation, and the UK and France have larger climate extremes than we do in Hong Kong."

What a wine collector has to watch out for when selecting a cellar or storage place is not simply a matter of state-of-the-art climate control, but also experienced and dependable management. "Trust is a big reason why people will leave their wine in the UK," says Richard Green, managing director in Asia of Winelife, a company dedicated to the enjoyment of extraordinary wine experiences.

Winelife will soon launch a new, highly-selective private

members club and sommelier service, for which Green has spent the last year in Hong Kong working on the logistics, including scouting out adequate off-site storage space. He unequivocally recommends Crown Wine Cellars: "I've walked into facilities that are beautiful – top-of-the-line technology – but the difficulty lies in finding someone who's knowledgeable about handling wine, meaning shipping and bar-coding the bottles so they don't go missing." For example, if shipments come over in the hot summer months from Europe, a good wine cellar will control how much time they spend on the dock and in customs, and see

When choosing where to store your wine, there's more to take into consideration than just location

if the bottles are in refrigerated containers the entire time.

## Store this

Technically, there is a substantial difference between wine storage and wine cellaring: "storage" refers to an above-ground facility, such as a warehouse; and a "cellar" implies a subterranean locality.

De'eb estimates that 90 per cent of facilities in Hong Kong and the world provide wine storage, and low-level one and two storage at that. Within cellars and storage there are four levels: a "natural" wine cellar can be as simple as a hole in the ground; level two is a natural cellar with an induction ventilation fan to draw fresh air

in; category three incorporates air-conditioning systems that turn on when the temperature goes above ideal conditions (10-13°C, give or take); and category four is known as "climate control", with air-conditioners, dehumidifiers and humidifiers all on at the same time, working against each other to preserve the history and provenance of the wine.

The same rankings go for storage, save one additional hurdle to reach proper level four climate control: "It's impossible to reach category four in a 50,000-sq-ft warehouse," says De'eb, "unless you have one metre-thick insulation and build concrete cells no larger than 2,000 sq ft in order

to give each compartment its own climate control; otherwise, the temperature and humidity in the centre and sides of the warehouse will vary immensely."

## The wine club

Vinfolio, an American-based company which is planning to open in the Tuen Mun area of Hong Kong this year, is currently in the process of engineering the ideal storage facility. Managing director Anthony Mak says: "There is a lot to be done: we've ordered tailor-made insulation boards; special air-conditioners; dehumidifiers; and selected other machinery as well. We're doing it in phases: the first will house 20 >>>



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to 30,000 cases, or 240,000 bottles."

The company is basing its Asia business on their US model, including VinCellar, Vinfolio's free online cellar management software, which features real-time cellar valuation, drink dates, ratings and reviews, and convenient web access from anywhere in the world. "We have a history and a team of over 70 people in San Francisco to take care of the wine. We're bringing that experience to Asia," says Mak.

As for Philippe Bru, the owner of Vinoteca – a 10-year-old fine and rare wine merchant in Hong Kong which works on a very personal level with clients

(taking small groups of members to tour Champagne and Burgundy as part of its service) – he only stores a minimal amount of fine wine, about 500 cases. "I went to full capacity last June, shortly after the wine duty was lifted," says Bru. But to keep his client relationships intimate, Bru has no plans to expand.

The opposite is true of Crown Wine Cellars. De'eb has never turned away a single case of wine, and has no plans to. In addition to his category four cellar in Shouson Hill (which is also a heritage site preserving World War II bunkers that used to house British Military weaponry), De'eb is in the process

of building his third category four concrete cell storage satellite with fingerprint access. "The excuse that there is not enough storage space is nonsense – think about how much space is underutilised in Hong Kong," says De'eb. "As new wine comes in, we build new cellars. My turnaround time to build facilities is about six to 11 weeks."

De'eb's staff has also gone up at a rate of at least 100 per cent to accommodate demand; barcode each and every single bottle; and make sure bottles are delivered promptly (which can be anywhere from two hours, in the best case scenario, to 72 hours, "if every

single client is requesting them during a typhoon," he says).

De'eb admits that not compromising on quality has made his life a little difficult: "Client expectations on prices and the cellars make it so that profit margins aren't big. That's why facilities in the UK and Europe aren't that good – they cut corners." But as Hong Kong's reputation continues to climb, appreciation for the quality of storage facilities will rise just as fast as the appreciation for the fine wines inside them does. Somehow, we have a feeling that De'eb and his colleagues will soon have plenty to drink to... ☺

## Do it yourself cellaring

Even with a limited amount of space, home cellaring is possible for collectors who want to have easy access to their bottles thanks to companies like Cellarworks, an international design firm that specialises in creating chic, innovative private cellars for clients who want to store their wine in style. For the past 10 years, owners Lee and Amanda Zinser have been outfitting the homes of celebrities and Fortune 500 company heads – like new Citigroup chairman Richard Parsons and Samsung's Lee Kun-Hee – with custom vaults that house anywhere from 100 to 20,000 bottles. We catch up with Lee on his latest projects and breaking into the Hong Kong market.

### Millionaireasia: What are you currently working on?

Lee Zinser: I'm in Sydney at the moment, designing a 4,000+ bottle cellar for Tetsuya's, which is the world's fifth best restaurant right now. It's simple, with an Asian flair akin to the Mandarin Oriental cellar [in New York City's Time Warner Center, which Zinser also designed]. In this case, though, we're separating off part of the cellar for the chef's vintage sake collection.

### How do you begin designing for a private client?

First, we think 'what's the style of the house or place it's going into?' We'll integrate woods or lighting from throughout the home. For some music industry clients, we've used Koa wood, which is used to make violins. We try to make every component of the cellar tell some part of the client's story.

### Do you take into account the wines the client is storing?

Yes, we have to learn what a client is collecting. I have clients who are champagne only, so the dimensions, layout and sizing are driven by that. Some only collect old vintages of Bordeaux, so we'll do a case storage reminiscent of the châteaux.

### What's the most interesting project you've done lately?

We did one in New York, which was only 120 bottles but it was an extremely expensive wine cellar because it's actually a museum display: it's a glass jewel case with polished stainless steel racking and it's lit from within. The owners are art collectors; they have Andy Warhols and now this wine installation.

### What style would you recommend for a client's personal cellar in Hong Kong?

The problem with Hong Kong is that there isn't a lot of space. Clients often look at the logistics and decide it can't be done and go and buy property in mainland China or go to a wine club. But if a client does want to allocate even some space to it, I'd say to build a piece of art like the museum display, so that it's incorporated into their home without taking up a lot of room, and then have bulk storage off site.