

National Treasure

“Little Hong Kong” was one of most tightly-kept secrets during World War II; now it holds one of Hong Kong’s most priceless treasures

BY CLARISSA CATALINA REPOLLO / HONG KONG

“This is a Second World War bunker,” says Hong Kong Trade Development Council assistant executive director Raymond Yip. We were supposed to be touring the Crown Wine Cellar on Deep Water Bay Drive, not a garrison used in the Battle of Hong Kong.

“We are now 60 feet underground,” Yip adds as he leads a group of journalists in town for the Hong Kong Wines and Spirits Fair.

Crown Wine Cellars co-founder and general manager Gregory De ‘Eb says the site was originally the Central Ordinance Munitions Depot (Code Name: Little Hong Kong). It was constructed in the late 1930s by the British Royal Engineers. Back then, the site was partially made up of 12 pairs of underground bunkers (of which only 4 pairs remain), a depot HQ, and a sentry box.

Little Hong Kong was manned by soldiers of different nationalities in December 1941. The Japanese, not wanting to lose men in an assault on the virtually impregnable bunker, negotiated an honorable surrender with the British officer in command. Had negotiations failed, Little Hong Kong’s defenders were ready to blow up the site—with them in it.

It was the last to fall to the Japanese on 27 December 1941, two days after the official surrender of Hong Kong on 25 December 1941. Yip says this was the safest place to be because Little Hong Kong was not on any official map.

“The Japanese had no clue where ‘Little Hong Kong’ was. It was, of course, where we are standing right now,” says De ‘Eb.

By 1977, the military ceased to use the site and transferred control of the bunker to the Hong Kong Police Driving School, which occupied it until the early 1980s. After that, the development of two residential apartments resulted in some of the bunkers being torn down.

In 2000, the Hong Kong government approached the private sector to guarantee the survival of the historical place. Under the guidance of then Chief Secretary

Donald Tsang, a contract was offered for the private restoration of Little Hong Kong.

One of the first to submit a proposal was the Crown Worldwide Group, a privately owned company specializing in global mobility, relocation services, information management, and high-value logistics. They successfully lobbied for the site to be converted into an advanced wine cellar and took over in June 2003.

Crown spent approximately HK\$30 million (US\$3.9 million) on restoration and construction. Their investment was rewarded with an Award of Merit from the UNESCO in 2007, and an exclusive enclave for oenophiles in Asia.

The Crown Wine Cellar’s clubhouse now features three reception areas. Each is connected by a state-of-the-art communication system that includes 42-inch plasma screens, video cameras, a professional speaker layout, and public address systems.

Other additions are the Conservatory, the Main Underground Bunker, and the Library. The Conservatory is a colonial-styled glasshouse used as a member’s dining area.

The Main Underground Bunker has been equipped with a serving counter and a wide complement of wine glasses, and now serves as the main tasting area. The Library, decorated to look like the drawing room from more elegant times, leads to the Crown’s holy of holies, the Platinum members’ cellar. The Library is exclusively for Platinum members, and there’s already a long waiting list of applicants.

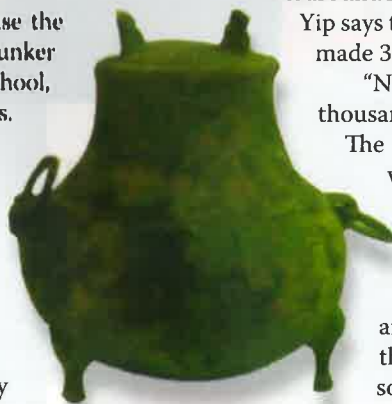
Does building a wine cellar in an old war bunker seem like some drunken idea? Not if you consider what Little Hong Kong has in its possession.

De ‘Eb shows us a metal wine vessel burnished from being handed down over the centuries. He passes it around for all of us to hold and give a little shake. Yip says the wine inside is supposed to have been made 3,000 years ago.

“No one knows for sure. More than a thousand years is the best estimate,” says De ‘Eb.

The ancient wine is kept in the clubhouse, where it is used to lay a foundation for the wine education of members.

Now that the Japanese are welcomed as visitors, Little Hong Kong’s role has changed. As guardian of an ancient legacy and a growing industry, the Central Ordinance Munitions Depot soldiers on. ■



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World war wine
The former war bunker now protects this 3,000-year-old wine