



GOING UNDERGROUND

Constructed in a pre-war military bunker, Crown Wine Cellars is one of Asia's most advanced wine-storage facilities and a UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage site.

Text by **Cherrie Yu**

In 1937, long before it became a luxury residential area, Shouson Hill was home to a secret military facility, with weapons cached in 24 underground bunkers that ran deep into the hillside. It was codenamed "Little Hong Kong" by the British, hoping to trick Japanese spies into thinking it was located in Aberdeen (called "little Hong Kong" in Cantonese).

By 2001, the weapons were long gone, and so were all but four pairs of the original bunkers. With the bunkers under threat, the site caught the attention of Jim Thompson, chairman of the Crown Worldwide Group, and former diplomat Gregory de Eb, who came up with a plan to save the historic location. It wouldn't be easy, however, as the bunkers were located in what had become a green belt, and planning

restrictions applied. But they didn't let that put them off.

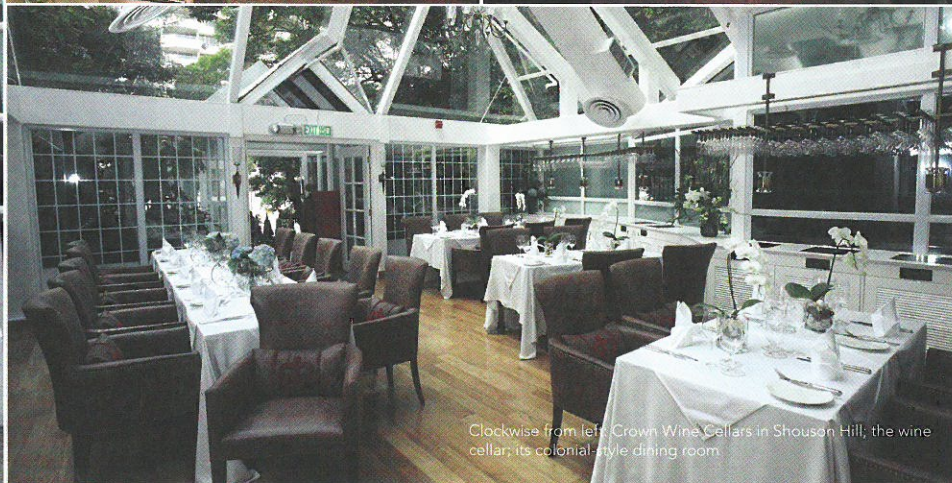
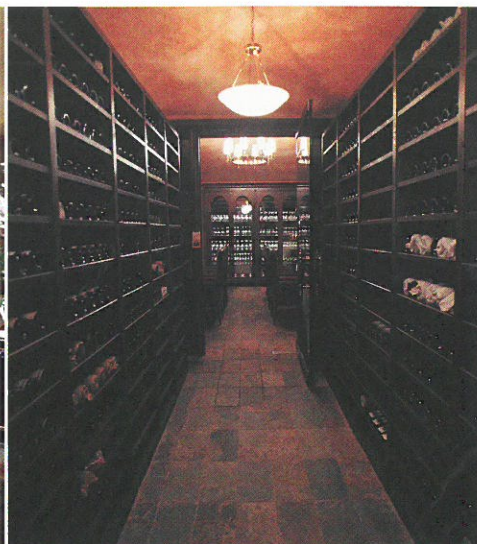
"If we couldn't build anything here, how were we going to save the site?" de Eb asks. "So we looked through old laws and one said: within the green-belt zone, you can have a club, meaning anything from a mahjong club to a swimming club. So we turned it into a wine club and opened it up to Hong Kong."

They rented the bunkers and set about creating Crown Wine Cellars (CWC) owned by Thompson's Crown Worldwide Group, of which de Eb is now principal. When it opened in 2004, it was one of Hong Kong's first publicly owned, privately controlled heritage spaces. And in 2007, the pair achieved their aim of preserving the bunkers when

they were listed as a UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage site.

The site is divided into two areas at the foot of Shouson Hill. On Deep Water Bay Drive is the club entrance to a colonial-style glasshouse, which leads to a pair of bunkers now used as underground lounges and wine cellars. The remaining bunkers are located on the other side of Shouson Hill, facing Ocean Park.

The glasshouse, known as The Conservatory, is a bright and alluring entrance to the underground areas, flooded with light, with a hardwood floor and vintage leather armchairs and tables set with starched white tablecloths. A narrow tunnel leads into the hillside and the Main Dining Room, an underground space lit by glowing medieval-style



Clockwise from left: Crown Wine Cellars in Shouson Hill; the wine cellar; its colonial-style dining room.

lights. At its heart, a sleek black bar adds contemporary flair.

Beyond the dining room, a short red passage leads to The Library, with floor-to-ceiling oak cabinets displaying decanters, wine glasses, books and antiques.

"This is one of my favourite rooms," says de Eb. He indicates a display of signed wine bottles. "If any dinner lasts 'til 3am, we'll all vote for one bottle from that night that was most memorable and sign it. Feng shui-wise, The Library is said to be the most harmonious room with no lurking bad spirits [no one died at the military base], so we 'trap the good spirits' in the selected bottle and sign it to keep it that way."

Off The Library, a floor-to-ceiling glass door leads into the wine cellars, with rows of wooden cabinets and sliding trays containing a few of CWC's million-plus bottles. There is a second facility in Tuen Mun built according to the same infrastructure of the bunkers here.

Today, the facility is one of Asia's most-advanced wine cellars. Ideal wine conditions are maintained by computer-

controlled climate and humidity systems, installed by internationally renowned wine-cellar construction company, along with electronic security.

"Security control is so, so important for wines, not just because you can steal a bottle, that's the easy one. But a more serious situation, far more prevalent around the world, is 'wine-bottle switching', which happens a lot."

To prevent anyone switching case codes or the bottles inside the wine cases, CWC is the first wine cellar to employ advanced security programs and computer-controlled systems based on the diamond industry. These include requiring staff to wear a wetsuit (for warmth and to prevent them hiding anything under their clothes), work-control systems that detail what and where any staff member should be doing at any specific time, and destructible case codes.

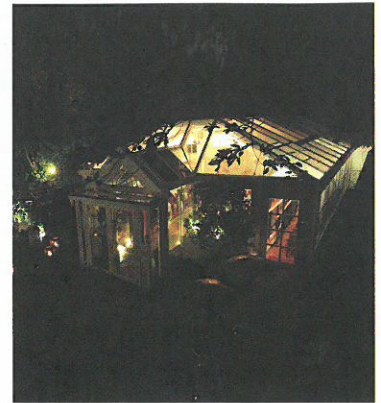
"Try to peel [off the case codes] and they will shatter, like tissue paper that's got wet," de Eb says. "In the first six months, there were some 'experiments', but after a while our staff realised they really can't mess with it."

Besides keeping wine lovers safe from theft, the club has a comprehensive insurance policy that, in the event of any accident, enables it to pay owners the full market value of their wines, even if all of the wines are lost at the same time.

"As a customer, you feel safe storing your wines here. You can also drink your own wines and there's no corkage fees, making it accessible to literally anyone, even students," he says. "Here people tend to be invited based on their personalities and not on their wine collections."

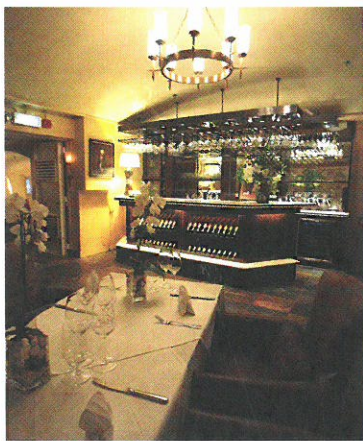
He recalls many wine-sharing dinners where one person will bring an expensive bottle, such as a 1999 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti worth over \$100,000, and another a \$300 bottle, but not once will they be judged. This is a place where wine drinkers respect each other.

"Almost every Tuesday night we hold a wine-sharing event, where members simply bring a bottle of wine that means something to them," de Eb says. "We're not just bonded by wine here, but also by what this place represents culturally and historically, especially to Hong Kong people." ■



THE CONSERVATORY AND DECK

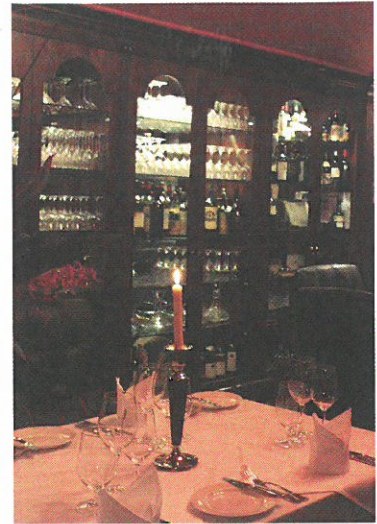
In light-filled contrast to the underground spaces, the club entrance is a colonial-style glasshouse designed by Alice Lin and Peggy Paig. Silver and white tones provide a sophisticated but airy backdrop to leather dining chairs with the club's crown logo stitched onto the cushions. Outside is a movable deck, where members can light up a cigar or enjoy their favourite wine under the trees.



MAIN DINING ROOM

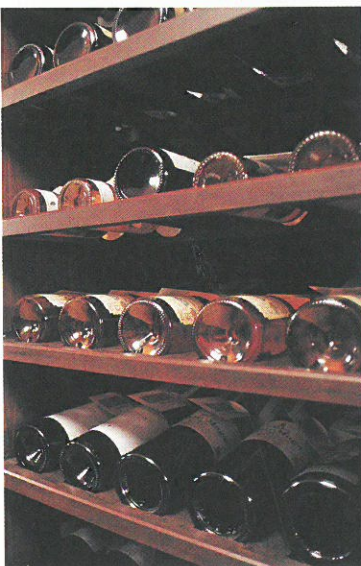
Wrought-iron chandeliers imbue the dining room with a soft and atmospheric light, while a black grand piano and original artworks add contemporary flair. The centrepiece is a refurbished wood and marble bar with a metal display made to appear as the radiator grille of a Bentley Arnage by placing wine bottles side by side.





THE LIBRARY

Set so far underground that it has no mobile phone reception, the Library has the cosy ambience of a gentleman's club. As a palpable connection to the site's history, near the entrance is a blown-up photograph taken on the site on December 27, 1941, two days after the military base surrendered to the invading Japanese army, and four days after the general surrender of Hong Kong.



WINE CELLAR

The grand wine cellar is sealed off from The Library by a floor-to-ceiling glass door. Accessible only to Platinum club members, the crafted wooden cabinets are fitted with sliding trays, each holding 12 bottles.

