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Practical

Home Oenophile Upgrade

Building a Domestic Wine Cellar

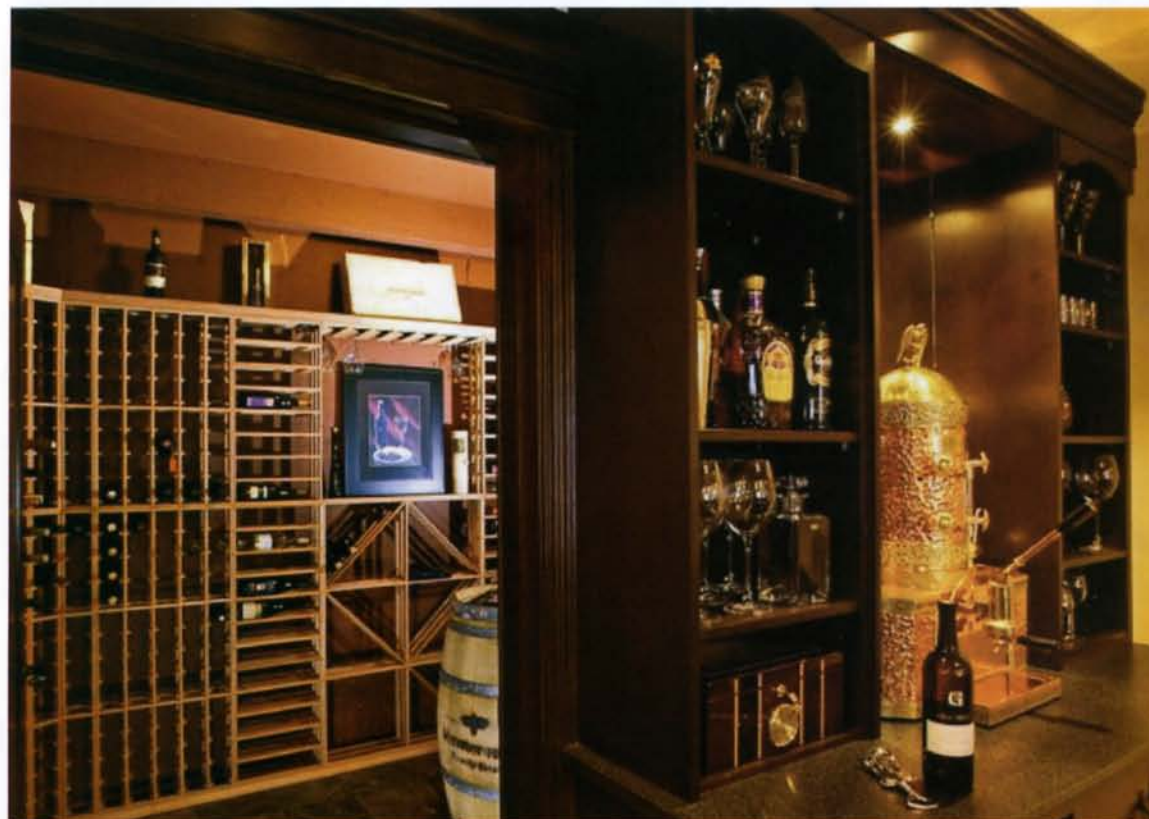
Buy an Infinity Villa at Greata Ranch Vineyard Estate and one of the stunning features is a temperature-controlled wine cellar with custom shelving.

At Lakeshore Three, a luxury 15-storey beach front condominium in Penticton, one of the unique features available to owners is a temperature and humidity controlled storage area with private racked lockers holding up to 100 bottles each, as well as a tasting room for decanting and pouring.

For many of today's home owners, a good wine cellar is an "essential accessory." Just as important as, say, a room for home entertainment, exercising or hot tubbing.

On one level, it solves the problem of where to stash fine wines – a valuable investment – that may otherwise be stored in cardboard boxes down in the basement or stuffed in every nook and cranny of available closet space.

If properly designed and constructed, a wine cellar keeps the wine safe and healthy until ready for the table or auction block.



Cellar with kit racking and custom display area. Photo: Strictly Cellars

For many, the pleasure is enhanced by visiting a well-laid out wine cellar and showing one's favourite vintages to friends.

However, needs, budgets and circumstances vary from home to home and owner to owner.

For example, an elaborate or extensive wine cellar is not necessary if your consumption is restricted to everyday wines stocked by a nearby liquor store. Keep one or two week's supply on an inexpensive wire or plastic rack or in boxes in the hall

closet or under the stairs, away from heat registers and bright lights, of course – and voilà – the problem is solved.

On the other hand, once you develop a palate for fine wine – the stuff that benefits from a year or more of aging in a cool, dark cellar, with bottles lying on their sides to keep the cork moist and airtight – the game changes. After all, the wines are usually more expensive – \$20 or \$25 and up (\$100 and up is not unheard of) – and you can't resist this or that bottle or case. Your

collection grows, storage in a controlled environment moves way up in importance.

Enter "wine care specialist" John Domerchie, president of Strictly Cellars & Accessories of Kelowna. As a dealer, his company provides the know-how and sources the products from cooling units to wine racks to help clients – who include home owners, real estate developers and restaurateurs – design and build the right wine cellar to suit their particular needs. Now, with the growing interest in



Left: Cellar with kit wine rack and cooling unit. Photo: Strictly Cellars

Below: This temperature controlled wine cellar with custom shelving is one of the stunning features of the design of the luxurious Infinity Villas at Greata Ranch Vineyard Estate. Photo: Michael Botner

you need a tasting table or display? Is the room already built or in the planning stages? What type of racking do you prefer? Do you require a cooling unit? What is your budget?

Also he requests a simple line drawing of the cellar with dimensions plus makeup of the walls (concrete, block or stud). "These questions are just the basics," explains Domerchie. The information can be provided in person, by email or by fax.

Not all cellars require active climate control. "Basement spaces that are ideal for passively storing wine are usually below grade and surrounded by earth on 2-3 sides," says Domerchie. "Ideally, a passive cellar will maintain constant temperature and humidity year round – like a cave in France. But if your room is not an ideal spot, you are going to have to actively control the conditions of the room with insulation, vapour barrier, cooling unit, etc."

Choose the best space for your wine cellar, preferably in the basement. But if it must be above ground, locate it in a part near the centre not exposed directly to sun. Domerchie will provide advice on what type of materials, including lighting and doors, are best for constructing an air-tight, water-tight space to



wine and the arrival of specialized cellar design software, the whole exercise has been much streamlined and simplified.

No need to hire an architect and engineer to work out the design and logistics of keeping your precious wine investment safe and healthy. Here is the scoop, according to Domerchie.

To determine which type of wine racking system is best for you, Domerchie begins by assessing your wine storage needs. Here are a few of the questions included in his company's one page questionnaire: How many bottles do you own and would you like to store in your wine cellar? Do you have larger format bottles (double magnums)? Do you have wood cases? Do

provide optimal conditions for the wines to mature.

Strictly Cellars offers three lines of racking – kit, modular and custom. The most popular, by far, is a kit racking system, which provides flexibility, strength and eye appeal. Made from select California redwood, these lightweight units are manufactured in Mississauga and shipped with all the pre-machined components so you can assemble it yourself or hire a professional (recommended by Domerchie). “It costs so little (\$1.50-\$2 per bottle) that you can afford to put more bottles in them,” Domerchie says. “Also, they take up less space, important if the wine room is already small.” With this system, Domerchie provides a cellar design based on your questionnaire at no cost.

If space and price are not issues, you can opt for a modular (\$3.50-\$5 per bottle) or custom (\$5.50-\$6.50) unit. California

redwood is higher grade, clear-cut for modular and heart-grade for custom. The wood is thicker and heavier, the shelf depth is 11 inches and 12 inches, and there is a design fee that goes directly to the manufacturer. In return, you receive design drafts and detailed 3D renderings of your project. It features “snap and tap” assembly that takes only minutes to assemble with a hammer.

These systems allow mixing and matching a wide assortment variety of different units and sizes including bottle racks for half bottles, Burgundy bottles, Champagne bottles, etc.

As your interest in wine develops, you are bound to need more and more space to safeguard your treasures. So allow extra space in your plans to expand your wine cellar along with your growing passion for wine. ■ MICHAEL BOTNER



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