



your label's showing

Wine buffs are making an exhibition of their prized assets. John Stimpfig ogles stellar cellars. Photographs by Clive Frost.

Years ago, it used to be the case that fine wines were neither seen nor heard in the home – except, of course, at the dinner table. Invariably, great bottles would spend their days buried in their idyllic subterranean environment of a dank, dark cellar before emerging blinking from the gloom to be decanted and served by the butler. Even then, the claret would only be mentioned as “fine” or “jolly good” before the conversation moved on to something else more meaningful, such as shooting or politics.

How times change. Now, of course, wine is so much more than a staple and a social lubricant. In fact, wine has become a topic of conversation in its own right, thanks to its rebranding as a grade-one symbol of wealth and sophistication. No wonder, then, that the smart set buys and enjoys the best wine in much the

same way as it does property, paintings, furniture and fashion.

This is no idle comparison. Not least because the new breed of wine collector isn't just buying to drink and invest. Increasingly, they have begun to showcase their best bottles in the same way as they do rare books, antiques or pictures. As James Thorp of Thorp Design points out: “If you have some seriously fine wine you are passionate about, you'll get entertainment and enjoyment out of seeing it beautifully displayed, rather than banishing it to a damp, humid cellar.” Particularly if you have a collection worth £100,000 and a house worth £2m.

According to Cyril Margnat, a founding partner of Aramis Oak, a French company that specialises in bespoke cellar design and construction: “Wine prices have really taken off in the past few years. So too has people's interest in wine. I think it's only natural that people are proud to bring these



great wines into their home and show them off in a beautiful, comfortable setting.”

Certainly, London's leading architects, interior designers and furniture makers have noticed a small but significant upswing in

the number of well-heeled clients asking for bespoke wine rooms, cellars, installations and cabinets in which to display their finest and rarest.

Karen Howes of Taylor Howes Designs believes the trend began a couple of years ago. “I think it came from boutique hotels and restaurants who led the way by showing how wine can be brought into the dining space and integrated as a focal design feature. People came back from places like the Mandarin Oriental saying, ‘I want a bit of that at home.’”

The other factor is that many of today's modern houses or apartments simply aren't built with a traditional cellar where people can safely store their wine at home. Of course, you can keep your wine with your merchant. But not only is there the problem of access and convenience, it's much less fun too.

Moreover, there are practical benefits to be gained from having a dedicated wine room in addition to the aesthetic and storage advantages.

Top and above: Morton's wine cellar can be viewed by guests in the club's private dining room.

Some can be used for informal dining or a pre- or post-prandial drink. They are also the perfect place for choosing and decanting the wines to go with dinner, or hosting a wine tasting. However, some wine rooms can be pretty chilly places. According to Tim Gosling, director at the furniture-maker Linley, 13°C is not the most conducive temperature to hang around in for too long, however good the wines are.

Yet spending time in wine rooms doesn't have to be like stepping into Siberia, providing you have sufficient space and ingenuity. In a villa in the South of France, Aramis Oak recently transformed a ground-floor garage into a spectacular modern cellar storing an outstanding collection of 2,200 bottles displayed in oak racking under low-tension lighting. To make it climatically comfortable, the wine has been partitioned off behind lightly smoked glass panels on three sides of the room, while in the middle there is an intimate and atmospheric tasting area complete with table and chairs for informal dining or tasting.

The same see-through dining concept has also been employed at Morton's private members' club in London's Berkeley Square. There, owner Marlon Abela has created a simple but inspiring private dining room for 14 guests around an elegantly modern, Linley-designed, English walnut table.

Equally, though, diners cannot fail to be drawn to the awesome 5,000-bottle wine cellar which can be viewed through an entire glass wall at one end of the room. In addition, leather-covered walls on either side conceal yet more wine, while another smaller glass display cabinet reveals the club's oldest and most expensive large format bottles, illuminated by fiberoptic lighting. "The bottles and labels are so old and beautiful to look at, it's a real wine lover's paradise," says Abela. One can't help but feel that the close proximity to

The brief was to create a sexy bar-cum-wine room, which led onto a spectacular roof terrace with hot tub.

so many great wines and vintages will prove irresistible to many of Abela's customers. Which, presumably, is the whole point of the exercise.

Not far away, in Bayswater's Orme Square, Thorp Design has also recently created a unique wine room which leads off the dining room. The owner wanted it to hold up to 1,200 bottles of wine, some of which were to remain in boxes, while most would be stored in bins. For the cases, Thorp's practical solution was to store them at floor level on runners and place a bench on top. For the bottles, he came up with an intricate "spider's web" design of open bins using afrormosia, an African hardwood. In addition, Lutron Controlled Lighting was installed above, below and behind the racks to show the collection at its optimum. The overall effect is warm, clean and contemporary, with a unique geometric pattern.

Many houses, of course, still have traditional cellars. But even these are not immune from the design makeover. Smith & Taylor Limited, a specialist wine storage company in London, began branching out into cellar design as long ago as 1989. Since then, the business has



provided bespoke cellars and racking systems for private clients as well as restaurants and clubs such as Morton's, The Square restaurant in Mayfair, and Spencer House in St James's.

The size and scale of projects range from a substantial cellar in a grand baronial house in Scotland to an old coal hole in Belgravia. Perhaps ironically, the latter was the greater design challenge, as it required a curved racking system to fit three large interconnected, vaulted archways. Visually, the end result is undoubtedly

striking. However, according to Smith & Taylor boss Sebastian Riley-Smith, "The framing of the wine is only one aspect of the work. From the client's point of view, the design also has to be practical, well ordered and versatile, as well as aesthetically pleasing."

Yet there are people who have a traditional cellar who are also choosing to display some of their wine as an architectural design piece within the home. The question is: where? According to Thorp, there's no rule as to where you might put it. "Most tend to be situated in the basement or near the dining room or kitchen. But equally, it could be an axis of inter-connecting corridors. The key point is that the room or installation is a highly visible focal point," says Thorp.

Karen Howes has even converted a bedroom for the purpose. She has also transformed a simple utility room for the developers St George in a penthouse apartment in Paddington. The brief was to create a sexy bar-cum-wine room, which led onto a spectacular roof terrace with hot tub. Howes designed and installed a bar with seating and tables for either pre- or post-dinner drinks. She also included a

small kitchen space that in turn adjoined an 8ft x 8ft wine room. This was fitted out with a glass-fronted Sub-Zero fridge so that the wine was very much on view and accessible.

Another variation on the wine theme is to commission an individual piece of furniture for your wine or drawing room. According to Gosling at Linley, demand for this kind of installation is fairly constant. However, the commissions vary enormously. Gosling recently crafted an extraordinary octagonal table for a City client. Remarkably, the piece incorporated a weather vane acquired from the London Stock Exchange with some equally impressive jero-boams from his personal wine collection.

More recently, Gosling has been working on a wine cabinet with a 1930s design twist for a modern apartment. It is a complex design that intersperses wood and Perspex. Inside, the bottles are back-lit



Above: a Smith & Taylor cellar in an old coal hole in Belgravia.
Below: EuroCave wine cabinet.

which "creates the effect of looking through slices of walnut".

Perhaps a more prosaic reason why the wine room has come of age is because it is now technically so much easier to incorporate fully climate- and humidity-controlled (as well as noise-attenuated) storage in the habitable areas of your home. A good cellar, of course, did all this for free, unlike the expensive commercial systems which are required for cooling down large areas to such low temperatures. These add even more zeros to what is a significant design and installation cost.

According to James Thorp, a bespoke wine room could easily cost up to £75,000. And that's obviously not including your liquid assets. As a result, this type of large space will undoubtedly remain the preserve of those at the apex of the property market. But will it add or subtract value when the owner comes to sell? William Kirkland of the estate agent Cluttons believes that a wine room or cellar can add value to the purchase price. "It's unlikely to put anyone off. And with the right buyer, it's the sort of thing that could clinch the deal." Who knows what people want? In the past, Smith & Taylor has installed a cellar for a teetotal client.

What is also interesting is the way in which the wine display and storage issue

is now being addressed further down the property ladder. The designer Michael Costley-White believes that "people are thinking about what to do with their wine because they don't want it ruined by poor storage conditions". For spatially challenged clients, his preferred solution is often to place a glass-fronted fridge just for wine in the kitchen.

Certainly, there are plenty of very acceptable cabinet options from suppliers such as EuroCave, Liebherr, Transtherm and Sub-Zero. EuroCave, for instance (available through Autour du Vin in the UK), offers a high-quality range with a variety of sizes, internal racking systems and finishes. Its small unit, from the Compact range, will fit into a standard kitchen under-counter space and house up to 47 bottles, while the medium size, from the Classic range, will hold 161 and the large, from the Classic range, up to 223. Moreover, these are sophisticated pieces of kit, which can chill sections of the cabinet to two or even three different temperatures.

In other words, it's now perfectly possible to have your wine properly stored and put on display. The only downside with such a public display of vinous affection is that your guests will know exactly where and what the decent stuff is. And that could create problems when you're deciding what to pour. Unless, of course, you've opted for the '59 Haut Brion. +

WINE AND DANDY

Aramis Oak, 003306-1167 1531; www.aramisok.com. **Autour du Vin**, 38-40 New Cavendish Street, London W1 (020-7935 4679; www.eurocave.com). **Linley**, 60 Pimlico Road, London SW1 (020-7730 7300). **Morton's**, 28 Berkeley Square, London W1 (020-7499 0363). **Smith & Taylor**, Chelsea Bridge Cellars, 1c Broughton Street, London SW8 (020-7627 5070). **Taylor Howes Designs**, 020-7349 9017. **Thorp Design**, 020-7731 6887.