

If you want to collect wine but don't have the facilities to do so at home, there are a whole host of professional storage companies out there to take perfect care of your treasured bottles. SUSANNA FORBES takes a closer look

HANDLE WITH CARE

T'he biggest deterrent is the 157 steps,' laughs Laurie Greer, operations director of Octavian, perhaps the UK's best-known wine-storage facility, when I ask about security for the millions of pounds of fine wine in his charge. And, as I trudge down the 100m-long shaft to the vast cellar 30m below ground, I can see exactly what he means. Anyone who wants to steal a case of wine from here would need to be possessed of both strength and stamina.

If you, like many other people, are taking advantage of the growing number of *en primeur* offers, you are going to need somewhere to store your wine. You have three options: at home, with the merchant who sold you the wine, or with a third-party wine warehouse. 'At least 76% of what we sell *en primeur* goes into our customers' private reserves,' says Tom Cave, cellar manager at Berry Bros & Rudd, speaking of Berry Bros' own dedicated warehouse in Basingstoke. For The Wine Society, proud owner of a purpose-built, temperature-controlled warehouse, some 50% of its annual *en primeur* sales of about £7.5m go into customer reserves. Lay & Wheeler looks after about £25m worth of its customers' wine at Vinothèque, the UK's other main fine-wine storage facility, just outside Derby. Storing wine is serious business.

But what are the most important factors in deciding who should be your wine custodian? Assuming that the physical conditions are taken care of, 'service, service, service' is

the instant answer of Corney & Barrow's managing director Adam Brett-Smith. I might modify that somewhat to 'integrity, reliability and service', but I can see what he means.

Decisions, decisions

Without a special cellar at home, when choosing where to store your wine, you must first ask yourself three questions: is your wine going to take a few years to hit its drinking window? Might you ever consider selling it?

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Jeremy Pearson, London City Bond

And is it worth over, say, £200 per case, *en primeur*? If the answer is 'yes' to all three, then the solution is simple: store your wine 'under bond' at a reputable external cellar (see box, p56). If duty and tax have already been paid, then it comes down to cost and convenience. Storing a case costing £200 for ten years will cost you roughly half its value in storage, which may or may not make sense.

Most wine-storage warehouses are outside central London, for the obvious reason: cost. One enquiry I made at a self-storage place

advertising itself for wine storage averaged out at £30 a case per annum, and that was assuming a full house.

Safe as houses

If your need is for short-term storage (for example, if you are moving house or if your own cellar is being created or renovated), bespoke cellaring companies, such as Smith & Taylor, or upmarket moving specialists, such as Abels (www.abels.co.uk), are ideal.

Whether short-term or long-term, however, the crucial parameters that your warehouse keeper must be able to assure you of are minimal light, a lack of vibration and relatively constant temperature and humidity. While many warehouses have timed switches for lights, all aim to keep their temperature between 11°C and 14°C, with the humidity around the 70% to 75% mark, using the fabric of the building, coupled with sophisticated monitoring systems, to help them.

A key question to ask is what action can be taken in the event of a deviation. For example, in its early days, Octavian had a problem with high humidity, but now a strong blast of air from its huge fan system can swiftly remedy the problem. Most reputable external cellars now include insurance on a replacement-value basis (that is, current market value) within the annual case fee.

Although Octavian may be unique in having 157 steps to deter would-be thieves, every



Taking care: Abels (far left) is an upmarket firm that prides itself on the art of moving; Laurie Greer (left), operations director of storage company Octavian, with private customers' reserves; Smith & Taylor (below) offers storage services as well as bespoke home-cellarling solutions

wine-storage specialist takes pride in its own security system. Infrared alarms and 24-hour surveillance are the norm; some undertake specialist vetting at the recruitment stage, while others keep the serious valuables – the Mouton 1961s and Lafite 1945s – in a special cage.

In the wake of earlier scandals, such as the Greene's debacle in the 1980s (where stock was not always directly attributable to its owner due to bad labelling), companies now have systems whereby each case is individually labelled with a unique identification number.

An organised office

The reception you get when you call your chosen warehouse can tell you a lot about the office set-up. Is it organised enough to cope with vast quantities of wine? This administrative capability is a crucial indicator, says Hugo Rose MW, communications and development consultant at Lay & Wheeler. 'Can they handle the richness of information available,' he asks. For example, simply logging a wine as Volnay could lead to confusion down the line.

Lay & Wheeler bought Vinothèque in Derby in 2001. It pumped more than £1m into improving and developing the former grain store (it had been a wine bond with a trade focus for 15 years) before selling it to its present owners, London City Bond, in spring 2004 (see box, p56). When speaking about the most vital lessons learned in that time, Rose says that after physical conditions, the 'most important thing was the documentation'.

'Clients get a lot of comfort from seeing where their cases are,' says Jeremy Pearson, LCB's sales director, referring to its online stock-checking service. 'They want the touchy-feely thing, even if it is remote.' Brett-Smith agrees: 'The ease with which customers can receive information on their wines is vital.'

Most serious storage facilities now allow clients to see their stock list online, others like Corney & Barrow, are moving towards instantly accessible condition reports. For your prized case of Pétrus, this might include notes on its provenance and images of its shoulder level and label.

Going for broke

If your main aim is investment, seek out merchants who are experts, such as Farr Vintners. For Farr, where top *en primeur* wines change hands on average three or four times before leaving its care, professional storage is vital. As well as storing its own wines at Octavian, Farr organises cellarling for thousands of its clients, which makes it Octavian's biggest customer.

Auction houses and merchants with a broking arm are happy to sell wines that have

been reliably stored since arriving in the UK. Chris Munro, associate director at Christie's wine department, says that almost 70% of wine coming up for auction at Christie's comes from 'recognised storage facilities'. The price a wine achieves directly reflects its storage history. A top growth stored in a private cellar may be given a lower estimate than one held at a reputable wine-storage facility.

An advantage of larger players like Octavian and Vinothèque is that inter-trading between customers is child's play. If you are selling your case of Latour 1996 to Joe Bloggs, who also stores his wine at, say, Octavian, while title to the stock is transferred, the wine itself lies undisturbed, no delivery charges are incurred, and, if the wine is still under bond, you haven't lost any of your profit to the VAT man (once paid, tax and duty are never refunded). ➔

