



safe & sound

Whatever the size of your wine collection, storing your bottles in the right conditions is vital. SUSANNA FORBES speaks to avid wine collectors and takes a look at the whole host of wine-storing products on the market

You are only limited by your imagination,' said Irwen Martin as we stood in my dingy garage, discussing how best to store my motley collection of wine. The highly practical managing director of The Corner Fridge Company, Martin merely has to view the space available, hear the number of bottles you have in mind and, like Superman, he's able to see through the rubble and visualise some grand plan that will save the situation. We had moved to the country recently and, like many others, were contemplating converting part of our garage. But what was the next step? Although more preparation is needed before letting your creativity run riot, there's no shortage of knowledgeable folks out there to help.

Begin at the beginning

First, decide how much you want to store at home. If it's a few hundred bottles and space is tight, then wine cabinets are ideal. All you need is a 13-amp socket and you're away. Eurocave is the best-known example, but others (including Transtherm, Dometic and Liebherr) are also popular. Liebherr starts cheapest (from £900 for the basic full-size, 200-bottle model, but this version doesn't include a heating option). From there, there's any number of permutations, all reflected in the price, with a variety of finishes, different drawers (some on ball bearings, some able to accommodate different bottle shapes), doors (most are solid, but a few have tinted glass) and temperature zones.

Londoner Chris Psyllides went to Autour du Vin, in Marylebone High Street – 'they gave me very good advice' – and bought a Eurocave, a purchase that has revolutionised his wine buying. Falling into the buying-to-drink-rather-than-to-age category, Psyllides never used to purchase cases of wine. 'But now I can get to know a wine.' Whereas restaurants often need the multi-zoned temperature cabinets for serving purposes, home users normally opt for the models with just one zone, purely for ageing, or two or three zones, where whites can be kept at fridge temperature. 'In retrospect, that's the one I'd like to have bought,' says Psyllides. 'I never remember to take my wine out beforehand.'

The advantage of companies like Tanglewood and Wineware lies in the sheer variety of storage options they are able to offer. Run by wine enthusiasts who act as brokers, each positively relishes finding the solution to each and every situation. For example, if your needs are small, Samsung produces the baby of the chilling family, with a capacity of around 30 bottles (£375), while Vintec is the market leader for the latest wine-storing craze: chillers the size of standard kitchen units, ready to slot into the appropriate spot.

To store or to mature

'Cabinets work well in tandem with professional storage options,' says Noel Young, a keen collector himself ('mostly twos and threes'), as well as last year's Wine Merchant of the Year. Since provenance is everything, all agree that wine bought as an investment should be kept with a reputable storage company. Indeed, until they have a proper cellar system in place, many people keep their most valuable age-worthy wines with professional cellarers until the drinking window beckons.

While storing some of his still wines with Octavian, Port expert Tim Stanley-Clarke keeps his Port under the stairs. 'I live in an old mews house in London, so there's not much room,' he says. 'Any temperature changes are not sudden, and Port is quite a sturdy creature.' Geoff

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Simple solutions: wine storage companies, for example Smith & Taylor (above), pride themselves on finding the perfect storage method to meet any requirement

Taylor, managing director of the analytical laboratory Corkwise, keeps his wines in the garage. 'It's a north-facing wall,' he says, 'so even in the hot spells, the temperature keeps pretty consistent. I wouldn't keep light wine there, like an unoaked Sauvignon, but red wines are fairly robust.'

So if you're not lucky enough to have an underground cellar, how do you get yourself organised? Whether you dig down or convert an existing space, you need to know how much space you need, so it's time to count the bottles. 'Aside from smoking, collecting wine is probably the most addictive hobby there is,' says Martin. When estimating storage requirements, he always advises customers to double their existing stock. 'You tend to grow into it,' he says.

Going round and round

In terms of space efficiency, you can't beat the Spiral Cellar. Invented in 1978 by Georges Harnois, the only requirement is a 2.5m diameter excavatable space. Two metres in width, spiral cellars range in depth from 2m to 3m, and can hold up to 1,600 bottles in the honeycomb of wine hives around a spiral staircase spine. The whole cellar is enclosed within a waterproof lining, and topped off with a lockable reinforced trap door, with ventilation coming through the central shaft. '60% of installations are done by us,' says UK managing director Deryn Hemment. 'I liked the convenience, and the feel of it,' explains *Observer* columnist Tim Atkin MW of the spiral cellar at his old Wimbledon pad. The only design

Cellar nitty gritty

Temperature: Ideally 12°C to 15°C, although the essential requirement is that temperature never fluctuates more than 5°C within a short period.

Humidity: Around 65% to 80% is best to keep corks from drying out without labels starting to disintegrate.

Vibration: A stable environment is the ideal, so stay away from shuddering fridges or quaking walls.

Light: As little as possible, since light accelerates the ageing process.

Best bit of advice: Buy a min-max hygrometer, to measure both humidity and temperature (£22.50/£32.50 @ Wineware).

fault is that certain bottle shapes, like Riesling bottles, sit rather awkwardly, making carrying cases up and down a delicate manoeuvre.

For those not needing quite so much storage, there is a mini cellar that uses a straight wooden staircase and holds up to 770 bottles (2m cellar: complete kit including delivery from £5,100; fitting the 2m cellar, £1,500; full installation, an extra £1,400.)

The downside of the spiral cellar is that you can't take it with you, which is something you can do with the Vinosafe modular cellar. Fabricated from insulation material, and built to a standard width of 1.5m in a choice of heights and lengths, it fits together like Lego and can be put up in any weatherproof area. The only requirement is an electricity supply for the wine-conditioning unit, which fits into the door. 1,000 bottles will require a 2.14m-long cellar (£6,500 including VAT, delivery and assembly; 2,050 capacity: £9,500). 'Restaurants love them because in a small space, such as 1.46m², you can store up to 800 bottles,' says Roy Wilson, of suppliers Vin-Garde Ltd, who also acts as the UK distributor for Transtherm and Vintec cabinets.

The conversion factor

Be careful when converting an existing room. 'A room with an outside wall that is exposed to sunshine – or a wall with a radiator on the other side – is a potential disaster,' warns Douglas Green, UK agent for Bordex Wine Racking Systems. 'Twice a day, the temperature is up and down like a fiddler's elbow. Great if you like Madeira, but not so good for your wines. I normally recommend the purchase of a min-max thermometer (see box p41) and monitoring for a month or so before deciding to take a temperature-controlled or ambient route. Temperature-controlled cellars are not cheap, but then neither is good wine.'

To avoid temperature fluctuations, insulation is crucial. Not having insulation at the entrance to your cellaring unit, for example, 'is a bit like buying a fridge without a door,' says Martin. If your designated area is not consistent temperature-wise, invest in a cellar-conditioning unit. These relate to the area they need to cool, and range from 18m³ to over 100m³ (from £1,760). Like air-conditioners, they can be programmed for specific temperatures, but they also keep a check on humidity, and can warm the air during freezing spells. Don't be tempted with just repackaged air-conditioning equipment. 'If it has not been properly adapted to recirculate the humidity back into the cellar, a few years down the line your 1990 Château Lafite will taste like vinegar,' warns Wilson.

Names to look out for include Fondis – seen in the UK under the WineMaster moniker – and Norcool. When keen wine enthusiast David White decided to return the cloakroom of his early 20th-century house back to its original purpose, a walk-in larder, he went for a Norcool air-conditioner. Having removed the central heating pipes, he keeps his wines alongside his fruit and veg. Being within the house, White won't need any warming options, but for those thinking of converting part of the garage, this facility is essential.

I reckon Irwen and Christine Martin should rechristen their company Cellars Unlimited to better convey the seemingly limitless number of wine storing options they conjure up. As well as my simple garage conversion, Irwen also provided a 'money no object' quote to convert our dining room into a showpiece cellar that could also double as a tasting room, complete with wooden barrel and handy sink.

Happy to do as little or as much as the customer wants, Corner Fridge's priciest project costs over £50,000. Its most unusual request was for a glass pod-like cellar to go in a garden.

Modular approach

Roger Gillet swears by his Cavovin honeycomb units. Initially the wine storage business was just a sideline to Gillet's wine artefact shop



Perfect fit: whether you want to store 100 or 1,000 bottles, have one zone or three, convert a tiny cupboard or huge garage, the perfect storage solution is out there

and anniversary wine company. Now it's taken over. Made from a mix of cement, sand and polystyrene, the terracotta units stack tidily on top of one another. Basic units come in varying widths and are 350mm deep rather than the usual 250mm, thus cradling the whole bottle rather than leaving its neck sticking out. Each unit holds 13 bottles, or can be divided into two sixes with a separator. The 500mm-deep unit doubles as a handy bench as well as offering a chance to store both bottles and whole cases.

Gillet is fully fluent in wine unit computation. Give him any dimensions, and within seconds he's come up with the perfect mix of units. Once a plan is agreed, the units are delivered directly to you. A word of warning: they are heavy. Although putting them together is easy – it's a simple pin system – with each normal unit weighing 32kg, it's advisable to have the young or the strong on hand when you are putting this together. For a fee, Gillet can arrange construction for major orders and for those in the Sussex area. ➤