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House Wine

Display—and consume—your collection
in style by building an in-home wine cellar

Alexander Miller is a serious wine collector. He buys bottles of the fermented drink from around the world, and specializes in Madeira, a Portuguese wine that tickled the tastebuds of Napoleon Bonaparte and Winston Churchill. The oldest bottle in Miller's collection is from 1795. "Not the kind of thing you can walk into a store and buy," Miller notes.

Now Miller has a storage area worthy of his 3,000-bottle collection. After fire destroyed Miller's first wine cellar (what he calls "a couple of racks in an extra tool room"), he and his wife, Mary Jane, built a new one.

The spacious room has redwood racks that can store 4,000 bottles and boasts a cooling system that keeps the collection at its optimal temperature. A glass-door freezer stores vodka for after-dinner drinks, while next door, a walk-in humididor holds cigars.

"I wanted a showplace, and I didn't spare any expense," says Miller, an assistant principal oboist with the Grand Rapids

orchestra. "I've encountered many rooms I've had to tear apart and re-do" because contractors used the wrong materials or design, Needham says. "[Experts] can complement builders and advise them on how to create the proper space."

Homeowners should also know what they're getting into, money-wise, before they begin. The base cost for a 10-foot by 6-foot cellar is about \$10,000, with an additional cost of \$5 per bottle for racks, cooling and rack installation. "For a 1,000-bottle room, homeowners could spend about \$15,000," Needham says. Still, the amount is not set in stone. "Much of the cost depends on the amount of custom work they want done," he adds.

With thousands of dollars in investment on the line, construction is no time to pinch pennies. When it comes to insulation, fiberglass—the



Symphony who lives in East Grand Rapids. "It grew out of need. As you buy wine, you don't want it to spoil. You run the risk of ruining your investment."

That's a key reason homeowners build wine cellars. Cool, moist, dark conditions help wine retain its flavor—and value—until opportunities to enjoy it come along.

Still, investment isn't everything. Centuries ago, Europeans stored wine in caves. Now the cellar is a celebration itself, with luxuries worthy of a drink many consider tops among imbibed intoxicants. Sir Robert Scott Caywood may have captured the attitude best when he said—perhaps in a state of alcohol-induced ecstasy—"Compromises are [meant] for relationships...not for wine."

Todd Needham, owner of Matrix Wine Cellars in Grand Rapids, says that collectors who want to pay fitting tribute to their passions should make home wine cellars at least 10 feet by 6 feet in size—the minimum that makes construction worthwhile, fit for a collec-

tion of about 1,000 bottles—and should work with an expert. This is especially true when homeowners want to build wine cellars in new homes.

Todd Needham of Matrix Wine Cellars helped Alexander Miller create this 4,000-bottle home wine cellar. Needham also designed a cellar for collector Barry Ratenink, with additional work by Kim Schwamberger of Finishing Touches by Kim.

yellow or pink panels one sees in new homes—may be cheaper, but it relies on pockets of air that don't keep cellars at proper temperature and moisture levels.

Instead, Needham says homeowners should use closed-cell urethane insulation, which forms a hard plastic shell that controls temperature and humidity. Closed-cell urethane insulation also has a higher R-Value (which measures resistance to heat flow) and an impenetrable vapor barrier that keeps moisture from moving around the cellar—an important factor in wine preservation.

As for the drinks themselves, Needham recommends that bottles go on mahogany or redwood racks, which resist the mildew that can form at ideal storage conditions (55-degree temperature and



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75-percent humidity). Cooling units and humidifiers achieve proper conditions, while gauges in bottles of water ensure temperature stays at its correct level.

Where is the best place to put a wine cellar? Many homeowners opt for the basement, but that's a trend Needham wishes would end. "It's a pain to run downstairs for a bottle of wine, so why not put a cellar adjacent to the kitchen?" Needham asks. "You have the wine handy and it looks fabulous."

Indeed, the number of options available—exotic woods, stained glass accents, lavish displays for cigars and liqueurs—ensure cellars are places of pride, not eyesores, in the home.

Still, even underground storage areas can become showcases. Middleville resident Barry Raterink, who works for a telecommunications company, has a collection of 2,000 bottles, and his basement game room contains a window that lets guests see the display a few feet away. All-heart redwood racks line the cellar's perimeter, while a granite island offers space to study bottles in style.

About 60 percent of Raterink's collection comes from California; another 30 percent is from Australia. Raterink gets many of his bottles while traveling. "Half the fun is acquiring it," he says.

The other half is drinking it. "There are people who are wine collectors, and then there are people like me, who are wine drinkers," Miller says. "It's a necessary part of enjoying the wine. It might seem like sacrilege to some, but I consider it the best way to pay tribute to the person who made it." Miller's cellar helps him do just that.

Know Your Vine

Home wine cellars are smart investments. Collectors can buy bottles for \$50, then let the wine gain flavor and value at home. "I have bottles I paid \$70 or \$80 for, and now they sell for \$600," wine collector Alexander Miller says.

Miller recommends the following wines for new collectors:

- Wines from the south of France, like Cotes du Languedoc, Cotes du Roussillon, Bandol and Madiran. "Great values abound, and many of these wines would be priced two to three times higher if they had a more famous region on their labels."
- Reds from Italy. "They are terrific these days, with a string of fantastic vintages."
- Reds from "rediscovered" regions of Spain, like Toro, Bierzo, Costa Brava and Priorat. "The Riojas and Ribera del Dueros are also going up in quality."