

The Overnight Wine Collector

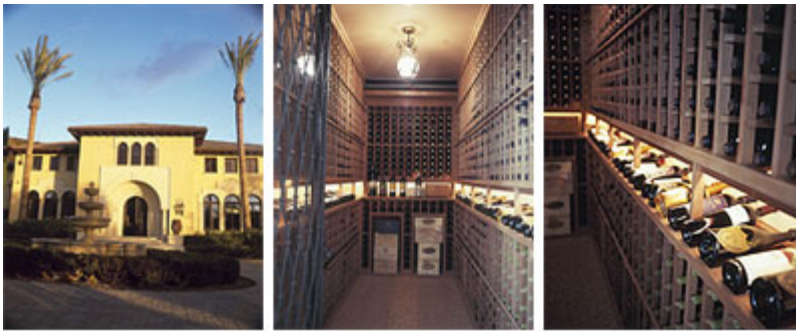
Facing Empty Cellars,
Homeowners Try Buying

Bottles 'By the Foot'

By CHRISTINA S.N. LEWIS

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Planning a custom home in Los Angeles County, Alan Bursteen plotted a spread with a nine-hole putting green, a screening room and a glassed-in cellar big enough for 800 bottles of wine. When he moved his family there this spring, just one thing was missing: the wine.



Selling the cellar: Real-estate brokers Hilton & Hyland stocked this home in Brentwood, Calif., with an instant collection (\$30,000, sold separately).

eight bottles) to Zinfandel (California, one 1998 Turley Wine Cellars' Hayne Vineyard).

The 49-year-old television producer has done the occasional winery tour and charity tasting, but he calls his wine knowledge limited. So he hired a consultant who charged \$50,000 to put together a 420-bottle collection ranging from Antinori (Italy, 1997 Ornellaia,

"A wine cellar looks better filled up," Mr. Bursteen says. "It's kind of like having a Ferrari parked in the middle of your dining room."

Some wine-smitten homeowners are skipping the collecting and going straight for the collection. With many expensive new houses and condominiums including dedicated space for wine, owners are often finding themselves a few cases short of a cellar. Many, of course, will fill them the old-fashioned way, accumulating a case here or there over the years. But in one emerging solution, others are seeking instant cellars -- paying consultants to add hundreds or even thousands of bottles within a month or two, or asking wine stores to fill overnight orders for a decade's worth of wine.

Fast-track cellars are rooted, in part, in the real-estate business. Developers are offering storage racks or rooms, hoping buyers will equate wine with the good life. At La Vita, a new 32-home development by **KB Home** in Henderson, Nev., four of six house plans include cellars (capacities range from 850 to 1,440 bottles). At John Laing Homes' new Roubion development in Los Altos Hills, Calif., where home prices start at about \$2 million, glass-enclosed cellars are a standard option. A new luxury tower in Manhattan, 15 Central Park West, offers 30 private climate-controlled wine rooms facing a shared tasting area. Every apartment at The Manhattan, a 221-unit condo

tower in Kansas City, Mo., where studios start at \$85,000, comes with wooden wine racks.

'Just Send It'

For vendors, those empty shelves spell opportunity. In Los Angeles, retailer Wally's Wine & Spirits began providing prefab collections as props for Hollywood studio shoots more than a decade ago, and now it fills a couple instant-collection requests a month, from \$5,000 apiece to more than \$1 million. The Wine Club, a warehouse-style store in Orange County, Calif., says overnight-collection buyers accounted for about 2.5% of its \$40 million in revenue in 2006. At New York's Sherry-Lehmann four years ago, a client fresh from a remodeling job asked for help filling his new wine room. "I put together a proposal for 400 cases of wine, anticipating him to say, 'I'll take this or that,'" says company chairman Michael Aaron. "Instead, he says, 'I got the list. It looks good. Just send it.'" The \$700,000 tab remains the retailer's largest instant-collection sale, Mr. Aaron says, but now the company says it fills about three turnkey-cellar orders each month.

Michael Lorber, a 27-year-old principal of a real estate agency, likes to buy wines gradually for the 400-bottle cellar in his New York apartment. But he took the express track for his new one-bedroom pied-à-terre in Boston, where he plans to entertain friends and business associates in a wine-bar area off his open kitchen. "Considering I'm only there two days a week, I can't keep on top of it," says Mr. Lorber. He spent a couple hours with a personal shopper at Gordon's Fine Wines & Liquors, a chain in the Boston suburbs, spending \$3,000 for 40 bottles, including Caymus from California, Bollinger champagne, Montrachet from Burgundy and some sweet French Chateau d'Yquem. "I completely stocked up," he says.

Instant stashes have their detractors. Wine experts say the collections tend to be less diverse than those gathered over time because buyers are limited by what's in stores or at auctions. Thanks to a recent collecting boom, the most desirable bottles have become pricier at retailers and auctions, while many bottles in stores now either won't improve markedly with age or won't be ready to drink for years. Simon Lambert, a senior sales manager at The Chicago Wine Company, a retailer that holds a monthly auction, says overnight buyers are practically guaranteed a sub-par mix. "At a one-stop shop," he says, "it's virtually impossible to get a good, well-balanced collection."

Long-time oenophiles also don't relish extra competition for already-pricey bottles, particularly from collectors who might not know their Domaine de la Romanée-Conti from a Beaujolais Nouveau. It's also, some say, an example of people buying the trappings of wealth. "It's not that these people want to be considered rich, they want to be considered connoisseurs," says Sharon Zukin, a sociologist at City University of New York who studies consumer culture. "It's similar to buying books by the foot."

Not all the new owners are depleting global stocks of Chateau Latour. Two months ago, Kurt Manley, 44 and his wife, Sara, 30, issued a challenge to wine store co-owner

Kristen Kowalski: Their new house has a cellar with a vaulted ceiling and 18th-century French monastery floor tiles, and they had a week to fill it with 700 bottles, in time to host a fund-raiser for Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty. "He was really complimentary," says Mr. Manley, a real estate developer in Eagan, Minn.

VOILA! WINE

A look at some of the consultants and vendors who promise to build wine cellars from scratch in short order:

| COMPANY | SERVICE | COMMENT |
|---|---|---|
| Carte du Vin Beverly Hills, Calif. | "Wine cellar concierge" picks, buys and organizes collections. | Owner Jeff Smith began organizing and appraising messy cellars in the Los Angeles area in 2002. Now, he says, one-third of his business is buying and selling wine. |
| Italian Wine Merchants New York City | Cellar-management unit assembles collections of specialty wines. | Merchant specializes in older Italian wines but began buying more broadly last year for investment-minded clients. Owner Sergio Esposito says top clients get access to rare wines like a '41 Giacomo Conterno Barolo Monfortino Riserva (\$995). |
| Manhattan Wine Company West Orange, N.J. | In "instant cellar package," company picks and stores wine, then sends it to you. | New online-only storage company offers packages of three-, six- or 10-case collections from \$1,000 annually. To drink a bottle, local clients must request delivery no later than 10 a.m. from the storage facility in New Jersey. |
| Wally's Wine & Spirits Los Angeles | Sells wine from its inventory, color-codes bottles by taste or price. | Some of Wally's "instant cellars" go to real-estate agents who use the wine to "stage" vacant houses, including a \$29 million home in Brentwood, Calif. (pictured above), with a 500-bottle collection that sells separately for \$30,000. |

The Manleys' new collection, averaging \$14 a bottle, includes about half white and sparkling wine. Now, instead of going to the grocery store for bottles to drink with dinner, the Manleys pick a Cakebread Sauvignon Blanc or Torbreck Woodcutter's Shiraz from the right side of the cellar, where Ms. Kowalski put the everyday wines. Mr. Manley says he hasn't touched the "collectibles" at the far left. "We have some," he says. "I don't really know what kind they are."

To serve customers with modest wine knowledge, Wally's began offering cellar guides on spreadsheets and organizing shelves with color-coded labels, says Chairman Steve Wallace. The company even promises to help customers match wines to their guests' stature. "We'll organize it so that the east wall is for cheap wines for the B-guest list," Mr. Wallace says. "The A-guest-list wines will be elsewhere."

Jeff Smith, author of "The Best Cellar" and owner of Carte du Vin, a wine-organizing company in Beverly Hills, Calif., says that rather than analyze his potential clients' tasting preferences, he tries to figure out their collecting style. He outlines 13 collector types, including "Bargain Hunters," "Bankers" (who hope to sell the wine for a profit later), and "Point Men," whose focus on ratings leads them to churn their collections to get rid of low-scoring bottles. Mr. Smith says he'll assemble cellars for all types. The inventory spreadsheets he includes with each one has price data, ratings from Robert Parker and the Wine Spectator, and when to drink each bottle.

'Go to Column 12'

Not all clients heed Mr. Smith's advice. Mr. Bursteen and his wife have drunk only a few of the 420 bottles Mr. Smith chose for them, despite the consultant's email reminders. "For a good time, go to column 12, row M," Mr. Smith wrote recently, nudging them toward a 1994 Joseph Phelps Insignia. Instead, Mr. Bursteen says he lets dinner-party guests pick their own bottles. "I don't pay much attention until afterwards," he says. "Then I go look it up in the chart."

Other turnkey collectors may find their pricey new wine hard to swallow. Ralph Eads, who has been collecting wine since 1984 and has a 6,500-bottle cellar, recently visited a friend who he figures spent well over \$100,000 for 1,000 bottles -- mostly 1985 and 1989 Bordeaux -- for his new tasting room. The Houston oil & gas executive was impressed. But as the two friends and their wives shared an '88 Mouton-Rothschild, Mr. Eads noticed that his friend seemed uncomfortable drinking wine that had cost him hundreds of dollars. Mr. Eads says he thinks little of opening a 1985 or 1982 Chateau Latour that could fetch \$300 and \$700, respectively, in part because he bought the bottles decades ago. "It only cost me about \$75 a bottle."

Charmaine Weeks has her own shelf-stocking strategy. The 47-year-old real estate agent and her husband have about 50 bottles. But they recently bought a home at Roubion, which has a 1,000-bottle cellar. To bridge the gap, she's already started saving empty bottles that she'll use to fill the upper rows of the floor-to-ceiling cellar. She'll also ask her friends to pitch in. "Our plan is to immediately host a 'cork-it' party and have everyone bring a bottle," she says. Still, Ms. Weeks sees no incongruity in buying a cellar she'll struggle to fill. "It's mainly the look of it. What word can I use?" she says. "It's just so fabulous."