PRIVATE RESERVE
YOUR WINE OASIS, DEFINED

By Suzy Feine

Tucked deep within the recesses of many homes, a new trend in entertainment is bubbling up: custom wine cellars. We're not talking about the do-it-yourself racks placed along a wall in succession for mere bottle storage purposes. Today's custom wine cellars are adding some serious equity to homes, along with an upscale fun factor not normally found in your standard basement.
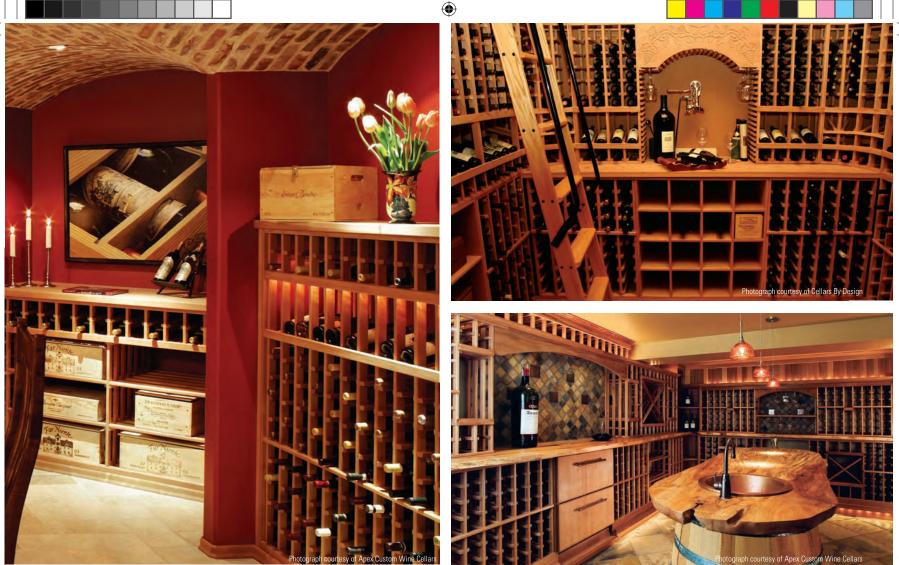
"The economy is dictating needs; people are not selling their homes right now," says Bob Kowalski, co-owner of Cellars By Design, a custom wine cellar design/build firm located in Mendota Heights. "Instead, they're remodeling and entertaining at home, and many are interested in taking entertaining to the next level with cellaring."

Recent wine consumption statistics are suggesting that the U.S. may soon become the largest consumer of wine in the world. "Americans are discovering that wine is food and not just an occasional celebratory item," says Kowalski. "If you go to another country, such as Spain or South America or Europe, wine is on the table every night, just like bread or butter. Americans are finally getting excited about wine, and they want to learn more about it in a comfortable and unintimidating environment."

Novice wine drinkers and serious oenophiles alike, listen up. Here's what you need to know to turn that drab and dreary corner of your basement into a wine lover's haven.

Photograph courtesy of Cellars By Design

Photograph courtesy of Apex Custom Wine Cellars

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CELLAR SCIENCE

"We term the components of a wine cellar, 'cellar science,'" says Mike Williams, co-owner of Cellars By Design. "The science behind designing and building a wine cellar consists of many factors including climate control, insulation, vapor barrier, its own HVAC system and temperature-controlled lighting. Then we add in the racking, finishing elements, flooring and aesthetics that tie the cellar into the rest of the house. All these things bring a holistic approach to the wine cellar experience."

Whether you can devote an entire room or just a linen closet to your cellar, size and storage requirements will dictate the complexities of the space, notes Doug Smith, owner of Apex Custom Wine Cellars, which is headquartered in Seattle with a satellite office and showroom in Eden Prairie. "Everybody's idea of a wine cellar is very different; some have 500 bottles to store, others have up to 5000 bottles," he says. "It's all based on the client's budget and the room we have to work with."

Once the cellar science and size are determined, the cellar's personality will only be limited by your imagination. Custom molding, arches, magnum display areas, custom entryway doors, sinks and even hand-painted murals can all be integrated into wine cellars. For serious collectors, a cellar monitoring system is recommended. "We provide cellar monitoring on the Internet," says Smith. "Customers can see the temperature, humidity, if the door was left open and if all components are working properly from anywhere in the world."

One classic misconception concerning wine cellars is this: Many people want to incorporate a tasting table into the room. Since it's recommended to keep all wines at 55 degrees for long-term storage, "most people don't realize they'd be sitting in a 55-degree room to do their tasting," says Smith. Apex usually solves the issue by placing the tasting area outside the cellar with a simple glass wall dividing the two rooms. In this way, people can enjoy tasting the wines while still enjoying the view of the cellar.

The future of wine cellars is actually moving out of the basement and into the backyard, where cellar design firms are infusing wine storage and tasting areas into outdoor cooking zones. While this may seem unfeasible in Minnesota, outdoor cellars are extending the backyard entertainment season way into the fall. "Our outdoor wine coolers don't have a glass front so they'll work for climate control outside," says Williams. "Homeowners would have the frequently drunk beverages outside in the cooler, and indoors they'd have a backup storage area."⌖