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## When a Wine Collection Outgrows the Rack

By KATE MURPHY

AFTER collecting wine for five years, Robert Chess was having trouble negotiating all the wine crates and overloaded wine racks in the basement of his home in Cranberry Township, Pa., near Pittsburgh. "It was hard to find anything," said Mr. Chess, a certified financial planner. And the conditions down there were not the constant 55 degrees and 75 percent humidity recommended for aging the expensive Bordeaux and Burgundy vintages that he and his wife, Laura, enjoy.

So last year they transformed most of their basement into a climate-controlled wine cellar, with a capacity of 2,200 bottles. With its foam-insulated, moisture-resistant walls, mahogany racks, cork flooring and adjoining tasting area, the space is both functional and enjoyable, Mr. Chess said. "It protects my investment, and we have a great time entertaining down there."

Whether would-be oenophiles or true connoisseurs, more people are drinking wine these days - and they want attractive cellars or appliances in which to store it. The costs can range from a couple of hundred dollars to the tens of thousands.

"Most people don't really need them, but elaborate wine storage units are increasingly becoming design elements in people's homes," said Steven Kolpan, professor of wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. He keeps his 500-bottle collection in a dark, cedar-lined closet in which he has installed a small fan.

For collectors who want something a little more sophisticated and showy for their wine, there are myriad wine keepers, coolers, lockers and cabinets from which to choose. They are essentially refrigerators, though they are not as cold as the usual kitchen variety and have horizontal slots for wine bottles. (The bottles should be stored on their side so that the corks stay moist; a dry cork will contract and allow air to enter, which will degrade the flavor and eventually ruin the wine.)

Typically, wine lockers also have smoked-glass doors so owners can see their stashes without letting in ultraviolet light, which also damages wine. Prices range from \$150 for an eight-bottle countertop cooler to \$6,000 for a 1,000-bottle armoire-style cabinet with roll-out shelves. Leading brands include EuroCave, Avanti and Sub-Zero.

Like regular refrigerators, wine keepers with front vents are more expensive, but they are necessary if you want to put them in nooks or build them into cabinetry. If you want to store both white and red wines, you may want to consider a dual-temperature unit, to keep the white wines cooler. Some units control humidity as well as temperature, which is also important in preventing a drying cork. That, of course, is not an issue if you drink any of the increasing number of high-quality wines with screw-top bottles.

You should look for coolers with no discernible vibration, said Josh Farrell, a product specialist in the retail division of the Wine Enthusiast Companies. Vibration can not only heat wine but may also stir up and reintroduce the harsh-tasting tannins that fall as sediment to the bottom of a bottle as wine ages.

For collections too large for an appliance, building a climate-controlled room is a possibility.

Michael Branson, a mortgage banker in Villa Park, Calif., once had wine lockers in his garage, kitchen and office. But last year, when his wine collection grew to 2,700 bottles, he decided to consolidate his holdings by transforming a sunroom into a walk-in vault with a capacity of 3,300 bottles. He now has weekly tastings there. "It's the most popular spot in the house," Mr. Branson said of the vault, which cost \$65,000. Mr. Chess in Pennsylvania spent \$40,000 for his smaller cellar, and he saved a bit by installing the racks with help from a friend.

As a rule, racking costs \$4 to \$10 a bottle, depending on the complexity of the design and the kind of wood, according to Vigilant Inc. of Dover, N.H., which designs and builds custom racks, paneling and doors for wine cellars. Mahogany and redwood are best because they won't rot in the humidity. Cellar builders and wine experts say the walls and the ceiling of the cellar or vault should be lined with R-30 foam insulation, which is much thicker than the standard R-13 fiberglass variety. And a vapor barrier of plastic sheeting is needed between the Sheetrock and the insulation so the outside walls, or perhaps the floor above won't sweat like a cold soda can on a hot day.

A slow-cooling system that does not dehumidify is also needed; brands include Breezaire, WhisperKool, VinoMate and CoolSpace. The options are boxy, through-the-wall units that look like window air-conditioners, or "split" systems that are like central air-conditioning, with ductwork connecting an outside condenser to an inside evaporator. Split systems cost \$7,000 to \$10,000, compared with \$800 to \$3,500 for self-contained units. The system should be the proper size for the area to be cooled.

If you prefer a ready-made solution, you may want to consider the new Monogram Walk-In Wine Vault, at \$30,000 from [General Electric](#). The company says that this fully insulated cooler, roughly 8 feet high, 9 feet wide and 8 feet deep, can be installed in a basement, garage or kitchen in less than a day. Customized features like an arched tasting alcove are available. A computerized, touch-screen tracking system attached to the vault's stainless-steel exterior helps you keep up with the inventory.

Whether you choose a high-tech vault or a low-tech closet, Mr. Kolpan at the Culinary Institute suggested that you spare any spiders that might take residence, because they feed on the mildew that rots corks and can ruin wine. "When it comes to wine storage," he said, "spiders are a very good thing."