

From. Vine to CELLAR

A Martinsville builder uncorks ideas for storing and displaying fine wines

By **PAUL FRANKLIN**
STAFF WRITER

Jay Rosen used to be a corporate consultant. Pinstriped suits, boardroom lunches and rush-hour traffic. The routine just wasn't him.

So he left the corporate world



Storing wine bottles on their sides keeps corks moist and airtight.

and tried real estate. And that's where he met his future — guys in work boots, muddy pants and hard hats.

"A friend of mine asked me to help him build a wine cellar. I thought it was neat, so I built my own," said Rosen, recalling how he started building wine cellars.

He has built nearly 100 custom-designed wine cellars in the past 10 years. He has traveled abroad and read up on wines to become quite the expert on the subject — so much so that he has given semi-

nars on the art of tasting and appreciating fine wine.

When wine auctions were legalized about five years ago, the demand for wine cellars essentially blew a cork. And despite the current down cycle in the economy, high-end jobs continue to flow for Rosen.

The 46-year-old Martinsville resident has done most of his work in Somerset County, primarily in upscale areas such as Bernardsville, Far Hills, Pluckemin and Warren.

With three or four men helping on a job, Rosen works as a general contractor for his own business — Washington Valley Construction.

"There's no pressure with wine cellars," he said about client demands. "Kitchens are another story. But with wine cellars, there is no traffic, no urgency."

Wine cellars generally take a week to 10 days to complete, and can cost anywhere from approximately \$7,000 to \$30,000.

And that doesn't include filling the racks. Rosen said he heard about one bottle of wine — supposedly taken from the cellar of Thomas Jefferson — being worth \$20,000.

"It's not rare for a bottle of wine to cost \$1,000," he said.

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JODY SOMERS/Staff photographer

Jay Rosen of Martinsville stands in a wine cellar that he built in a Warren Township home. The cellar can hold 1,200 bottles of wine.



The Warren Township wine cellar is used to store — and display — fine wines.

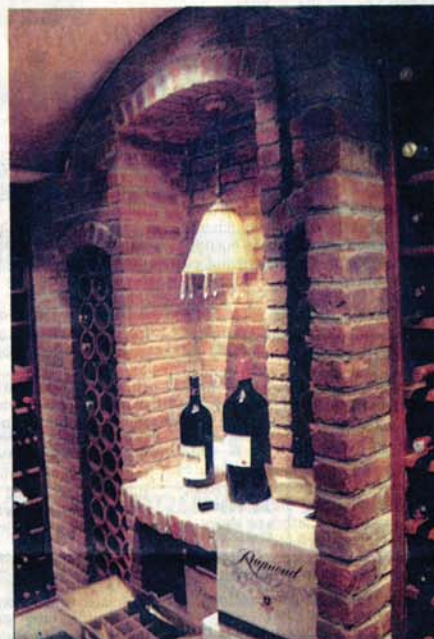


Photo courtesy of Jay Rosen

A softly illuminated brick niche in a wine cellar holds bottles of prized wines.

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His knowledge of wine began to bubble when he traveled to France and Italy about 10 years ago.

As to storing bottles, Rosen said the ideal location is a cool, completely dark and quiet place. Ideal temperatures are between 50 and 60 degrees and humidity between 60 and 70. Low humidity can dry out the corks.

Storing bottles on their sides is another way of keeping corks moist and airtight. Direct sunlight causes photochemical reactions, while vibrations keep sediment suspended and alter flavor and age wine prematurely.

Although racks of wine are best secluded for peak aging, many collectors display some of their wines. That's where creativity comes in. Brick walls — and especially brick fireplace chimneys — are popular for creating displays for bottles. Diamond-shaped shelves of wood are common for bulk storage. Gravel floors are also popular.

"It's not just the taste of wine but also its surroundings," Rosen said. "We have to consider visual amenities. People who collect wine tend to be compulsive. It becomes more of, 'I have to have that.' Collecting is not a hobby, it's a disease."

One day you buy a bottle of Dom Perignon, for example, the next day six bottles of Pully Montrachet, and maybe the next week a dozen of Dalla Valle Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Wines aren't like baseball cards or Beanie Babies," Rosen said. "Once you drink it, it's gone. You can duplicate a 1955 Yankees baseball card, but you can't duplicate a bottle of 1955 wine. You drink wine, it's gone forever."

That is why they sit in the dark so long. Wines take a certain amount of time to peak. As Rosen points out, a 1971 bottle of Dom Perignon might be wonderful, but a Dom Perignon from 1991 might be terrible.

Like most things, the more educated you are about wines the better the chances of avoiding a mistake.

"A particular taste is all relative, though," he said. "It's like riding a Mercedes. If you ask a millionaire to drive it and then ask some guy off the street, you're likely to get two different responses. From a pure pleasure experience, it's different."

"Wine tasting is interesting in that way. You taste the same grape from two different parts of the world, and you'll experience two different tastes. Or you can go to the same place and get two different-year wines from the same guy, and it's still a different vintage."

For people with wine cellars, there is no need to go around the world or even down to the local restaurant. Just a trip down the stairs, and the wine experience is potentially superior to anywhere you might travel.

"I'm very pleased, it's working out great," said Helen Vera, who last spring had Rosen create a wine cellar in her Short Hills home. "We have a passion for food and wine, and the civility of it. What else is there? We were very specific in our desires, and he did a wonderful job. If he can make us happy, he can make anybody happy."

Some people refer to wine collectors as snobs.

"My wife calls me a wine snob all the time," Rosen said with a smile. "I guess I am. I hate going to a restaurant that advertises good wines, then get there and discover they don't have any good wine at all. I guess that's being a snob."

But not to extremes.

When Rosen goes to a ball game, as he did for Game 5 against Oakland at Yankee Stadium, he doesn't pack a bottle of wine with cheese and caviar. He doesn't pack anything at all.

"Sausage and peppers and a beer," he said of his traditional outing. "And a bag of peanuts."

Vintage.

Paul Franklin: (732) 565-7258.
E-mail paulf@thnt.com