

# Cheers!



*A study commissioned by Unique Homes and Wine Trend found that today's homeowners are thirsting for wine-related amenities.*

BY JENNIFER MARTIN

The Vue, a new high-rise in Orlando, offers all of the fine amenities a buyer would expect in an upscale condominium—a posh health club, a theater room, a pet park. But there's an extra feature that sets it apart: a GE stainless-steel wine vault that holds more than 1,000 bottles. With fine temperature and humidity controls, this complex appliance also comes with a touch-screen console that lets residents search for wines by producer, country, vintage, maturity and other factors. Says Hope McCampbell, The Vue's vice president of marketing: "In the high-end market, having a wine cellar will eventually become a must."

The Vue has tapped into a red-hot trend among luxury home buyers nationwide. Because of an increase in wine collecting and entertaining, wine cellars, caves and closets are in demand like never before. One in four Americans drinks wine, and the American Institute of Architects found a sharp increase in the use of wine refrigerators and wine storage in its Home Design Trends Survey conducted in the final quarter of 2006.

Unique Homes and Wine Trend, a wine consulting firm, recently conducted a detailed study about home design trends among luxury home buyers and Realtors, including wine amenities. The numbers were revealing:

- ▶ 64 percent enjoy wine at least once a week
- ▶ 55 percent believe wine amenities in a luxury home are more important than they were just five years ago
- ▶ A wine cellar, room or closet was considered the fourth most important amenity in a luxury home (behind professional quality kitchens, home theaters or media rooms, and an in-home spa or gym)

"We anticipate that wine amenities are going to surpass indoor spas in importance," says Paul Koder, president of Wine Trend. "The interest in them is growing phenomenally."

For example, while the study showed that 17 percent of respondents owned a wine cellar, 67 percent were interested in adding one to their residence. It also showed that 50 percent thought wine amenities were important to have in a primary residence.

"The study supported what we've witnessed from our clients," says Koder, whose firm offers wine tutorials, inventory management, wine cellar design and installation, and many other services. "Wine is becoming part of the culture, especially as the American palette becomes more globalized."

As homebuyers have grown more sophisticated, so have wine cellars. "It used to be an area you just carved out in your house," says Mike Silvas, president of Morgan Lane, a Napa Valley real estate firm. "Now wine cellars are becoming entertainment centers."

Homeowners can spend upwards of \$200,000 adding features such as tasting rooms, dining halls and adjoining media rooms. The appointments in wine cellars are improving, too. Fine decorative glass, frescoes, wrought iron doors and imported stone are just some details that have been appearing. At a French country estate that recently listed for \$19.7 million in Santa Ynez, Calif., the wine cellar was built atop 200-year-old tile from France and nestled inside sandstone walls. Silvas mentions another home in Napa Valley with wine racks that were hand-carved in Tuscany.

"It's really just limited by the buyer's imagination," says Sandy Horwitz, president of Innovative Wine Cellar Designs, of Scottsdale, Ariz. "Five years ago, the cellars we were doing would generally cost between \$5,000 and \$8,000. Now, the average is probably around \$30,000."



These are homeowners who already have a taste for the finer things in life. The Unique Homes/Wine Trend study found that people who rate wine amenities as important tend also to be collectors of art, sculpture and rare books. "Wine is part of an upscale lifestyle," Koder says. "People who own wine rooms are the same people who enjoy fine dining and fine resorts."

And as the study notes, people use wine storage areas for other fine items. Among the respondents, 41 percent said they store cigars and 7 percent said they store chocolates in their wine storage rooms. Koder says wooden islands that hold a wide selection of cheeses are popular among his clients.

"There's a great appeal in a wine tasting event. You can combine just the right wine with just the right food, and it creates a third dimension we like to call 'a magical moment,'" says Jack Graham, a spokesperson for Wine Trend. "It's thrilling."

Apparently, luxury homeowners agree. Asked about other uses of a wine storage area, 49 percent of the respondents named wine tastings, 23 percent said dining, and 16 percent said food pairings. The number-one use was to showcase home décor (57 percent), but even that was followed closely by entertaining (55 percent), suggesting food plays a major role in wine cellar enjoyment.

The study also showed that people prefer to consult a wine room specialist when installing a wine amenity. As Koder notes, a wine cellar or room must be built correctly to maintain proper insulation, temperature and humidity. Another critical part of optimizing the investment is maintaining a sizable and varied collection. As a general rule, 90 percent of a wine collection should still be in the process of aging.

"If you want to drink 100 bottles of wine per year, you should have 1,000 bottles in storage," Koder says. "People seriously underestimate their wine capacity needs."

While Silvas has seen wine cellars store as many as 4,800 bottles, 1,200 to 1,800 is more common. Some buyers offset the costs by choosing wine caves, which are built into the side of a hill. With natural insulation, they demand less energy for heating or cooling. "Plus you don't have the humidity loss that you have in an artificially cooled environment," Silvas says.

Wine cellars and caves are no longer considered just the realm of the super-wealthy, and experts predict their popularity will continue to grow.

"They create a quiet, intimate setting, just for you and your guests," Silvas says. "And there's definitely some entertainment value. You're just wandering around, checking out somebody's collection. It's a more laid-back atmosphere than a formal dining room." **UH**

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