

# Has cellaring gone underground?

By Gerri Nelligan

Twenty years ago cellaring wine was the done thing. You'd buy a case or two of your favourites each vintage and lay them down to drink over the next 10 years – or longer if you had an older house and dry cellar. But times have changed and, in today's world of global warming, economic crisis and a society geared towards instant gratification, have practices also changed when it comes to ageing wine?

To find out, the *Wine Industry Journal* spoke with experts in the fields of marketing, wine retailing and wine storage supply. They gave us the lowdown on current wine purchasing and consumption trends and assured us that, while it seems we're doing it differently now, wine cellaring is still alive and well – and perhaps even seeing a resurgence.

Senior lecturer in marketing at the University of Adelaide Business School, Steve Goodman, says he doesn't believe cellaring is a diminishing trend – and was never really that commonplace anyway.

"People were cellaring wine but it certainly wasn't anything near a huge market," he said. "There were very highly involved consumers who were doing it but there wasn't ever that many of them. Statistics show that the majority of wine is drunk within 48-72 hours of purchase, so it's not a huge segment of the market where wine is sold to lay down."

Goodman doesn't believe that the current financial situation, nor climate change, has had much impact on those who do cellar wine.

"Certainly, there will be people who've pulled back expenditure a little, or delayed purchasing, but I doubt the economy has stopped people buying wine to cellar. People who are collectors are obsessive about their hobby," he said. "And while we may have a changing climate, we all use air conditioners so the climate of our houses hasn't changed much.

"So, I'd say it's about line ball with what it was but now we're seeing different ways to do it. Recently, we've seen consumers moving towards wine that has already been cellared, accessing ready-made cellaring from the retailer. Dan Murphy's, for instance, has just announced a 2004 vintage release, with eight or 10 different wines from 2004 which you can walk in and buy straight off the shelf. That's a growing trend; the large national retail chains selling wine that has been cellared, and it's probably because people have less space now.

"We're also seeing a rise in the purchase of controlled environment wine cellars – the wine equivalent of cigar humidors – and off-site wine storage. So, there's obviously a move in people seeing the need to cellar wine and a better understanding of the things you can do to keep your wine in good condition."

Then there are the changes in popularity of wine styles and generational perceptions about aged wines, which are also affecting cellaring practices.

"There is certainly been a move away from big, fat clumsy wines – over-oaked and overly fruity – and a shift to understanding and appreciating savoury wine," Goodman said. "It's having an effect on cellaring but I don't know that it means

people have moved away from putting those wines down, as they're starting to see what amazing rewards you can get from cellaring Grenache or a good Petit Verdot. Having two or three vintages of the same wine is becoming more socially acceptable, less elitist. It's still a long way off the norm but certainly not in the crusty old cardigan, wine snob vein that people would have put it down to in the past.

"As for Gen X and Gen Y, they do want it here, they do want it now and these wine conditioning refrigerators represent that. They're buying instant cellaring, not building them, which has fuelled the demand for those. And they're cellaring in their own way. It may be they're keeping good whites in there, or two-year-old reds and drinking them at three – and for Gen X five years is old. So, cellaring time has been compressed: while one generation thinks of ageing wines as 10-12 years, what we're seeing with Gen X is that three to five years is a well cellared wine – and even more so with Gen Y. Having an interesting wine and a wine cellar is also their chance to do something better than their parents did – which we know drives Gen X behaviour."

Craig MacPhee, director of MacPhee's for the wine enthusiast, a provider of off-site wine storage and wine cellaring solutions, agrees with Goodman about both the continuing popularity of cellaring and changing market demographic.



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Manager of boutique Barossa Valley wine retailer Tanunda Cellars, Chris Atkins, who says that while serious wine collectors are continuing to buy and cellar wines, the cellaring practices of the average wine drinker and the price range of wines which they're buying to lay down have changed.

"People are certainly buying wine and cellaring it, whether it be in their home cellar, wine cabinets or off-site wine storage," he said.

"I think it's probably fair to say that in the current economic environment people are being more cautious in what they're buying and cellaring – and without anecdotal evidence, it probably would have slowed down a bit. But then if it's a great vintage people will jump on it and buy anyway, and there are also new people coming into the market. More people are discovering fine wine and drinking better quality wines, and more are understanding that some wines benefit from some time cellared. They're becoming more educated about wine, going to tastings, events and talking to retailers about what they're buying, so I think overall the market is growing.

"And there are plenty of people in their 20s interested in good wines. Granted not all want to buy wines and cellar them, but parts of that generation are willing to try new things, and they're going to restaurants with vibrant and interesting wine lists and taking the advice of sommeliers. We have clients in that age group who store wine on site as well, so while they're probably not building cellars, they're certainly interested in things like wine cabinets and moving along the



Craig MacPhee, director of MacPhee's, says people are still buying and cellaring wine but acknowledges that in the current economic climate consumers are being more cautious about what they're buying and cellaring.

wine journey. As that interest develops, they'll put wine away for three to five years, watch it develop and enjoy it then."

MacPhee also agrees on the minimal impacts of climate change on cellaring: "It depends on what you're buying, how long you want to cellar it for and how serious you are," he said. "There are places you can stash a few cases of wine for 6-12 months and get a pretty good outcome, and for many people it's just about getting some nice fun wines and seeing how they develop.

"It's only when you want to store for longer you have to look at other options, and with wine cabinets or off-site storage facilities like the one we run, it's not hard to do it properly."

When it comes to long-term cellaring, MacPhee says that the backbone of most cellars is still the classic Australian Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon styles, with the addition of imported wines for the real enthusiasts.

"That has probably changed a little now, and new people getting into wine are probably cellaring a wider variety of wines because there's so much good information available. Younger people in particular are buying twos and threes of things and putting a few of this and that away, and over two to three years are building interesting wine collections with options for special occasions and everyday drinking.

“But wines like the classic Penfold’s reds still make up the highest percentage of cellaring for most people.”

Chris Atkins manages boutique Barossa wine retailer Tanunda Cellars, which specialises in older vintage and cellaring wines. He says that while serious wine collectors are continuing to buy and cellar wines, there’s been a change in both the cellaring practices of the average wine drinker and the price range of wines which they’re buying to lay down.

“Those who’ve cellared in the past are still doing it the old way but new people into wine are buying little wine fridges and using those,” he said. “They’re affordable and readily available these days, and enable people to cellar wine with very little effort.

“But while the intentions to cellar are there, I think in reality they’re drinking it within 12 months – they’re just buying a bulk supply so they don’t have to buy for a few months. As for long-term or even mid-term cellaring, though, I don’t think that population is growing with the development in wine drinkers.”

Atkins said increased choice and availability of wine is one of the main factors in the move away from long-term cellaring.

“Over the last 12 months there’s been a change in discretionary spending, with more people deciding that there’s no need to outlay cash in storing up on wine when they can get a nice selection of wine whenever they need it. So, part of it is the increased availability of good wine for the average drinker,” he said. “There are so many well-made, reasonably priced wines these days, a lot of people just feel there’s no need to cellar – ‘Do I spend a couple of thousand dollars on wines I’ll drink later or are there always going to be so many good wines out there that I’ll just spend as I need?’

“Then there’s the top end person, who’s either the serious wine lover who wants to ensure he or she has got it for the future, or the investment guy. People are looking at how they spend money and some who may have bought a lot more before are now asking ‘I’ve already got 10 cases of Grange, and there’s always going to be good wine around, so do I really need more? I’ve got plenty of wine so maybe I’ll take a break and wait until this whole economic thing is over and get back into it.’ Of course, they can be enticed by

something they’re told they shouldn’t miss out on but there are definitely a lot who are taking a step back.

“That said, there are a lot of new people coming into it as well, and a lot more younger

people getting interested in good wine. So, I couldn’t really say whether it’s a diminishing trend or not, because there are the variables of increased population and wine drinkers which counter everything I’ve just said.”



The managed cellarage of MacPhee’s.