

HONG KONG (STORE WISELY)

Acknowledged as one of the city's biggest quality wine cellar facilities, Wine Vault is dedicated to offering meticulous handling, storage, maturation and flexibility for wine lovers' treasures collected over time

Perfection down to finest detail

by *Judith Ki* photos by *Keith Sin*

Managing Director of Hong Kong Wine Vault Hubert Li is one that fulfils the saying "do what you love and you will accomplish more". Only as a fine wine collector who is fastidious about proper storage environment and the sharing of wine knowledge, he perfectly fine tune each and every detail in the cellar exclusively for his clients, and create a platform for the exchange of thoughts and ideas.



There is an old Chinese saying goes: success comes from 70 per cent hard work and 30 per cent luck. Hubert Li, Managing Director of Hong Kong Wine Vault, the city's very first and largest wine storage facility, serves as a perfect example.

His love for wine-drinking first blossomed in 2007 while he was still working as an actuary. With fast growing passion, he and his friends began collecting fine wines as the government trimmed down the alcohol tax to 40 per cent. Around the time when the tax was completely abolished in 2008 they realized they were already running out of storage space. That was when they had decided to buy five storeys of an industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang (which property price has multiplied over the years due to revitalization), where two were converted into wine cellars for personal use.

Hubert and his friends invited people over for private tasting and



Sophisticated services and security are sources of confidence



realized a lot of wine collectors were facing a similar dilemma – passionate and financially capable of collecting, but lacking a proper environment to store and age great vintages.

This was how they turned a hobby into a business. It did not take long to expand into seven storeys of 350 individual compartments that span across 45,000 sq. ft. to store at full capacity of 400,000 bottles, and then in three years' time set foot in Tokwawan as another self-owned property to offer 70 rooms for 100,000 bottles.

The cellars offer an optimum aging condition for wines. Only low-intensity lights are used, while the cellars are fitted with 80mm thick high-density polyurethane insulation on all the walls, floor and ceiling to ensure the right temperature and humidity.

Though these are the basics that most wine storage facilities already cover, Hubert and his wine-loving partners are aware of the smallest details for refinement. Heavy-duty air conditioners are installed at the end of each corridor to keep wines as far away from the source of vibration as possible while bronze grille gates of each cell allow proper ventilation and easy supervision by experienced staff.

What is more, Wine Vault boasts its multiple security measures that successfully halted an alleged burglary attempt back in 2009, which implies under continuous enhancement clients can leave their beloved treasures completely to its hands. Its state-of-the-art face recognition, access card systems and hidden surveillance equipment prohibit unauthorized access – so strong that even Hubert can never reach his clients' wines without consensus. Private collectors, though, enjoy a flexible 24-hour access, meaning impromptu meals, parties or getaways with great wines are always possible.

With the habit of purchasing wines from overseas via the internet, Hubert and his partners have incorporated an active trading platform into Wine Vault's business. Taking UK's secondary trading

Top, displayed is the collection of finished bottles after tasting events with widely celebrated winemakers or CEOs. Middle, Wine Vault resides in an old industrial building to provide vast storage space at low cost. Above, Each cell is protected by collectors' own padlocks. Right, unauthorized access is prohibited via effective security measures.



market as reference, it sources wines and off-loads clients' surplus collection, while the low-overhead operation enables it to offer valuable wines at attractive wholesale prices.

Up to now, about 70 per cent of clients who are enjoying the self-serviced storage facilities are locals, and the rest are mostly Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese and European. Yet mainlanders always take up the largest proportion in its internet sales business.

To further encourage the promotion of quality wines, Wine Vault invites representatives from prestigious vineyards and wineries from the world to its wine tasting sessions every now and then. It is a platform where clients get up close with owners and winemakers, discover buffs who share similar preferences, while winemakers collect feedback and know how their precious are appreciated instead of turning into commodities for investment.



“As in the wine hub of Asia we have the potential to progress”



Its latest tasting event was the 2013 Grand Tasting of Chateau d'Yquem that involved about 80 excited guests who were privileged to taste a selection of the “King of Sweet Wines” dating back to the 1970s and exchange ideas with CEO Pierre Lurton.

The business' diversity helps Hubert to understand people's drinking habits and how wine culture has been gradually incorporated into daily lives. As Hong Kong drinkers are becoming more mature, mainlanders are starting to open up to less pricey fine wines while still remaining as some of the biggest wine consumers in the world. By the word of mouth, Wine Vault has been thriving on at an incredible pace that after its latest expansion into Kowloon district by the end of 2011, it is ready to spread further on Hong Kong Island in Aberdeen this fall as its second largest storage facility, expected to offer 200 compartments and store a total of 300,000 bottles.

Hubert is confident, not slightly threatened by the many wine storage facilities that take inspiration and replicate the pioneer in the local wine scene. They are equipped with the basic hardware but might lack the ease of access, communication platform, as well as knowledgeable staffs who offer an extra sense of comfort.

At the end of the day, Wine Vault's operation is based on the simple idea of “home cellar”. “Extravagance is not our selling point,” Hubert says. “We target to offer a place where enthusiasts can sit back and enjoy their collection, start conversations, engage in interactions... it's a special experience when they happen to find soul mates who share the same, great taste towards rare vintages.”

HONG KONG WINE VAULT

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Top, on display wall shows signed bottles of rare, prominent vintages that mark all past private tasting events. Middle, a corner of the storage space at Wong Chuk Hang cellar. Above, Hubert creates a place for top quality wine storage and sharing, which also let his clients feel home like he does. Right, most popular wines among private collectors.



LA LANDONNE
CÔTE-ROÛTE
E. GUIGAL

1964
GAJA
Barbaresco

Château
Mouton Rothschild

Penfold's
Grange
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
SHIRAZ

CLOS DE LA ROCHE
Vielles Vignes
1996
DOMAINE PONSOT

1994 BOTTLED
EISELE VINEYARD
NAPA VALLEY
Cabernet Sauvignon
ARAUJO
CALIFORNIA