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Home wine cellars: Let it breathe

Connoisseurs see wine as 'a living thing' with needs of its own

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When Wendy Northrup approached her husband about enlarging a small den in their Ashland home, he didn't exactly pounce on the idea.

Drawing on years of spousal wisdom, Wendy knew how to change his outlook. She dropped the word "wine."

"I was not enthused about the room until she said, 'You know what we could do with that space?'" Steve Northrup recalled, nodding toward what appears to be a closet adjacent to the room's home theater.

The alcove, Wendy had explained slyly, would make a perfect little wine cellar. "It was the ultimate bribe by a wife," Steve said, shrugging.

"Actually, we're both interested in wine, but my interest is more obsessive than hers."

A friend gave Steve, an attorney with Troutman Sanders in Richmond, and Wendy, president of Prevention Opportunities in Ashland, a brochure about a company called Wine Trend. The cellaring business had recently relocated from southern France to Virginia.

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Company founder Paul Koder met the Northrups and asked what he considers to be the key question before building wine storage: "Are you a wine drinker or are you a wine collector?"

"Wine drinkers," was Steve Northrup's firm answer. "We have no interest in collecting."

The Northrups and Koder designed an 8-by-5-foot room with slots for about 800 bottles and a cooling system that carefully controls temperature, humidity and airflow.

"Wine is a living thing," Koder said. "These wines, they breathe."

The elegant little space, which cost \$20,000 to build, has subdued lighting, a ceramic-tile floor and a decorative tumbled-marble arch with an embedded grape cluster. The arch has a small shelf for displaying bottles or glasses.

The room's heart-redwood racks hold about 500 bottles, far below its capacity. "That way, whatever he's going to buy in the future, he will have a place for it," said Koder, whose extensive wine knowledge is made all the more authoritative by his heavy French accent.

Ironically, the Northrups' gray contemporary, their home for 21 years, sits on an expansive meadow that once housed a vineyard. The grapes are gone, but the Northrups and five other families still call themselves the Ashland Vineyard Community.

The Northrups became serious about wine 10 years ago after taking a course at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. "We learned a lot from the class and took a lot of trips to Napa, New Zealand, France and so forth, and it just built from

there," Steve said.

In the early days, they stored wine in cardboard boxes under their steps. They progressed to a 150-bottle EuroCave, a wine refrigerator that's now relegated to holding some everyday wines and bottled water.

Now a true wine connoisseur, Steve subscribes to wine magazines, has shelves of wine books, buys wines from little-known vintners online and has a circle of "wine friends."

He uses Microsoft Access software to catalog his cabernet sauvignons, pinot noirs and other vintages.

The Northrups, empty-nest parents of three and grandparents of one, enjoy wine each evening. They aren't alone. Wine has become a lifestyle in many homes.

Interest ranges from a few bottles on a countertop rack to a full-blown basement cellar.

Wine rooms are catching up to spas as a must-have luxury home amenity, says Koder, who installed 18 wine rooms last year, and already has built 18 this year.

The American Institute of Architects reported a significant increase in the use of wine refrigerators and wine storage in a design trend survey last year. "Wine is becoming part of the culture," said Koder.

Wine Trend installs cellars that range from small \$30,000 wine closets to \$250,000 rooms with cheese islands. A Harrisonburg client recently spent \$90,000 for a wine room, cigar humidor and cabinets for cheeses, chocolates and olive oils.

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