

The Pétrus Under the Stairs

A Florida couple created a showcase space for a wine cellar

BY ESTHER MOBLEY

Which came first, the cellar or the wines? You might not know it from looking at Sandi and Tom Moran's show-stopping store of bottles—14 vintages of Château d'Yquem, 50 bottles of Krug, 28 vintages of Château Haut-Brion back to 1928—but, Sandi admits, "We really didn't start collecting until we were building our home."

The Morans, of Naples, Fla., had long been wine lovers, active in their local chapter of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs wine society (Sandi was its president for a time) and founding committee members of the nation's highest-grossing charity wine auction, the Naples Winter Wine Festival (NWWF). By the time they began building their current home, five years ago, starting a serious wine collection was on their minds. "We realized that this magnificent, undedicated space under the grand staircase would be an ideal home for a growing collection of wine," says Sandi. They worked with the architect to create a dramatic cellar under the staircase, with glass panels stretching from floor to ceiling, conveniently situated within view of the dining room table and shielded from direct sunlight.

"We thought the cellar would last us a lifetime, with a 1,500-[bottle] capacity," says Tom, the founder of a money management firm. "We filled it up in the first 18 months."

Turns out, the couple was ready to make lots of room for wine in their life. They built another storage area in their garage, and keep more bottles offsite. They've become increasingly active in NWWF in the past five years, this year serving as the festival's co-chairs, with Sandi also heading the vintners committee. Many of their most impressive holdings, especially the verticals, they've acquired at charity wine auctions.

"Provenance is very important to us," says Sandi. "The wines that we've purchased to lay down, most have come directly from the winery." But Florida's climate presents challenges. "We don't want wines shipped in the summer months," explains Tom, noting that producers will hold his summer purchases until around November. Although no hurricanes have hit since they moved into the house, they have lost power, sometimes for days. They're prepared: Both home cellars have a backup generator, and the garage cellar has two cooling units. If the temperature moves outside a designated range, an alarm goes off, and the other unit kicks in.

Tom and Sandi also have a fondness for seeking out small-scale, artisan producers. "Many are still off the radar for a lot of wine consumers, but I think they have the potential to be the next cult wines," says Sandi, citing Helen Keplinger, Juan Mercado at Realm Cellars, Donelan, and Mike



The Morans' cellar takes advantage of a unique aboveground space.



Sandi and Tom Moran

WHAT'S IN THE MORANS' CELLAR

BOTTLE COUNT: Approximately 4,000, in three locations
LARGE FORMATS: Pétrus 2010 (1.5L), Château de St.-Cosme Gigondas Valbelle 2005 (1.5L), Cos-d'Estournel 1995 (1.5L), Bruno Giacosa Barolo Falletto 1997 (1.5L), Harlan 1994 (3L), Krug Vintage Brut 1995, '96 (3L), Shafer Hillside Select 2003 (3L), Dunn Howell Mountain 1990-1992 (5L), Paul Jaboulet La Chapelle 2006 (6L), Monteverzine Le Pergole Torte 1997 (12L)
VERTICALS: Château Haut-Brion 1928-2010, Château d'Yquem 1971-2001, Krug (various cuvées) 1973-2003, Vérité 1998-2011
BOTTLES FROM THE YEAR THEY MET, 1986: Haut-Brion, Lafite Rothschild, Margaux, Mouton-Rothschild, Pichon Longueville Lalande, Yquem
OTHER FAVORITES: Vega Sicilia Unico 1989 and 1994, E. Guigal La Mouline 1983, Joseph Phelps Insignia 1987, Penfolds Grange 1995, Ornellaia 1990, Dalla Valle Maya 1991

Farmer, the latter formerly of Opus One and now at Euclid. She loves the wines of Sonoma's Vérité so much that she bought multiple bottles of every vintage, many in formats up to 5 liters, for a total of 300 bottles.

When you're sitting on pristinely kept, old vintages of Domaine Ponsot, Krug Champagne and Harlan, it can be hard to justify an occasion to pop them open. For the Morans, those occasions arise when Laurent Ponsot, Olivier Krug and Bill and Debra Harlan come to dinner. "We love doing vintner dinners!" exclaims Sandi, whose many dinner guests have also included Paul Hobbs, Véronique Drouhin, Tim Mondavi, Grace and Ken Evenstad of Domaine Serene and Pierre Seillan of Vérité. The gatherings, some for NWWF and some just for fun, can bring anywhere from 40 to 100 guests into their home.

At these dinners, "Sometimes it's fun to bring out older vintages that perhaps the winemaker didn't bring," Sandi says. "Then, after everybody's gone, we raid the cellar. We stay up until 3 in the morning. They're like kids in a candy store." Adds Tom, "Especially if it's for a charitable cause, we'll open up our good wines."

Still, Tom and Sandi save some of their best bottles to enjoy alone. For their 25th anniversary recently, they opened a bottle of Mouton 1986—the year they met. "You want to save a wine like that for a special occasion," Tom says. "And that was special." □