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Collecting

Home on the Range

Ray Thurston took his wine cellar in a new direction—straight up BY JENNIFER FIEDLER

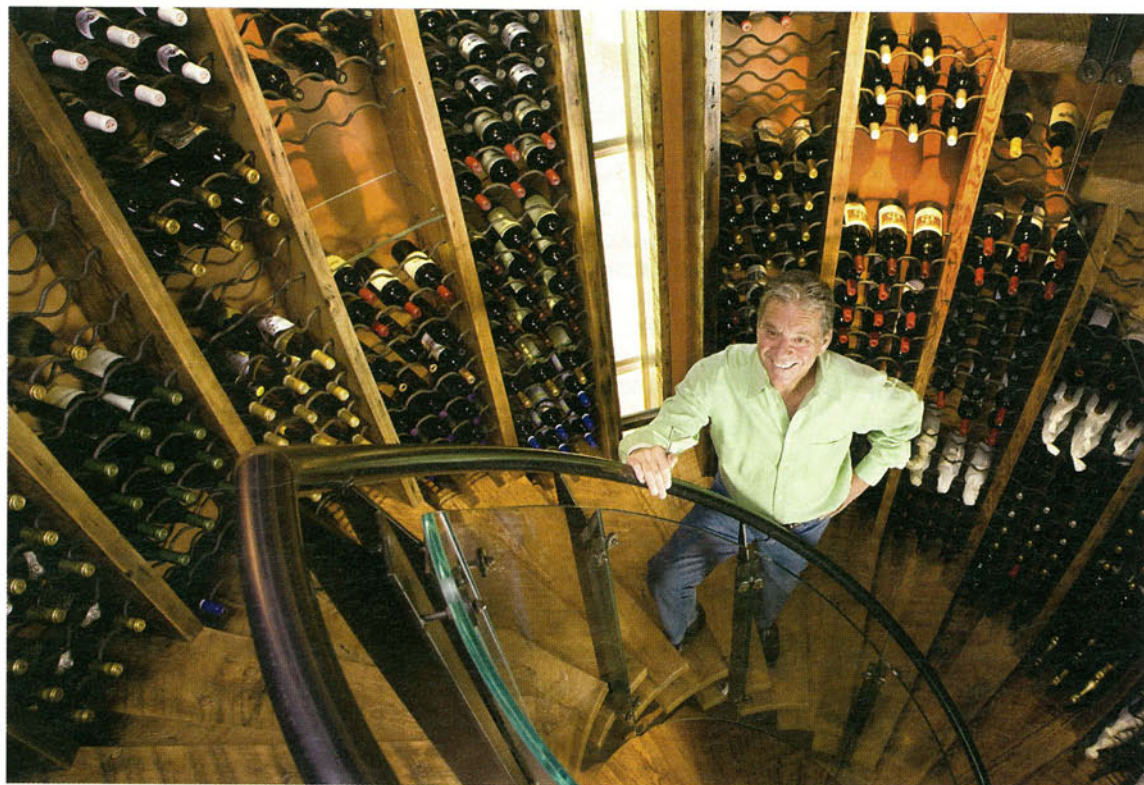
Cellar design is sometimes dictated by available space.

Cases are squeezed into closets, unfinished basements are retrofitted, racks are tucked underneath staircases. And though you wouldn't guess by its fanciful shape, Ray Thurston's award-winning wine cellar in a silo is the product of the specific site limitations of his Jackson Hole, Wyo., property.

Thurston, an investor, struggled to reconcile the idea of a wine cellar with the flood plain on which his 150-acre homestead lies. A traditional belowground structure would have run the risk of filling like a swimming pool.

When he glanced at a magazine photo of a grain silo in 2004, however, Thurston, 61, knew he had found the right model. "I said, 'That's it.' Instead of an underground cellar, it's going to be an aboveground cellar."

After a few days noodling around with a design, he handed over his sketches to Eric Logan of Carney Architects. Logan had helped with previous projects on Thurston's land, and was impressed with his vision. "We'd done a number of wine cellars," he says, "but none anywhere near the sort of structural- or architectural-folly quality that this one has."



Ray Thurston couldn't build his wine cellar belowground at his Jackson Hole property because of a flooding risk. Inspired by a photo of a grain silo, he built a three-story, cylinder-shaped building—complete with a tasting room—that can house 2,000 bottles and 500 cases.

Logan and his team smoothed out Thurston's ideas into a three-level steel cylinder that stands 30 feet high and 16 feet wide. Thurston had envisioned a stone exterior, but Logan convinced him to finish it in oxidized steel so that the orangey-brown patina would weather well alongside the other buildings on the site and the natural landscape. One-foot-thick walls made from con-

crete and foam help stabilize the silo's temperature through Wyoming's temperate summers and, more importantly, its fierce subzero winters.

An enclosed breezeway connects the silo to what Logan calls the "más macho" building, which houses Thurston's office, billiard room, woodshop and his fly-fishing equipment. Situating the silo cellar there was a natural step, says Logan, instead of near

the other buildings on the site, including the lodgelike main house and the barn. "The use of [the cellar] seemed to complement the más macho building—entertainment, fun. There were some good parallels."

A spiral staircase, made from planks of reclaimed wood, forms the spine of the interior. The racking, with space for 2,000 bottles and an additional 500 in cases, twists up the walls alongside the stairs for two stories until reaching a hatch that slides open to a viewing deck. This open-air top level looks north

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over a pond and functions as a de facto tasting room. "Most evenings we have a herd of elk that come out of the woods and go up into the grasslands to eat, so we can sit out there and have hors d'oeuvres and watch the elk pass through," says Thurston. "It's spectacular."

Thurston—who sold his supply chain logistics company to UPS in 1995 and now invests in 11 companies, ranging from diagnostic genetics to vision research—will admit that initially his silo cellar project came about because of his interest in designing a unique building, rather than from a passion for wine. When he built the main house on his property in 1995, he wasn't a big wine drinker.

And while he credits a friend in the wine business for getting him hooked on a roster of about 10 California Cabernets, including Heitz, Duckhorn, Caymus and Stag's Leap about two years later, his budding collection of those wines was almost more an excuse to dream up a new building. "I'm a frustrated architect," he says. "I like to fool around with different types of architecture."

But a funny thing happened around the time Thurston finished the silo cellar: He began to get into wine. Now he has a 1,900-bottle



What's in Ray Thurston's Cellar

Collection size: About 2,000 total, with 1,900 bottles in Jackson Hole

Collection strengths: 70 percent California; also, France, Italy and Argentina

Most bottles: William Fèvre Chablis

Self-determined smartest purchase: Château Margaux 2000, Château La

Mission-Haut-Brion 2000 and Château Beauséjour 1995, at auction, for less than \$50 per bottle for several cases of each

Cellar Temperature: 55°F

Humidity: 50 percent

How he tracks inventory: Memory

collection. The core comprises that set of California Cabernets from every vintage over the past five years. "Almost all the wines that I like, I buy the same ones over and over again. Each year maybe 10 percent of my purchases are things that are new."

He's judicious about which wines he adds to his catalog. During a weeklong retreat on a ranch in Montana, Thurston shunned the horseback rides ("I don't like [horses]; I keep falling off them and it

hurts"), but he discovered Chappellet Cabernet while relaxing with fellow guests. Now that's on his list. A tip from a friend led him to a liquidation auction in Arizona where he picked up a stash of multiple cases of Bordeaux that includes Château Margaux 2000, Château La Mission-Haut-Brion 2000 and Château Beauséjour 1995.

Thurston also drinks a fair amount of white wines, his favorite being William Fèvre Chablis. His wife, Amy, who

sold her own courier service company to UPS around the same time he did, is a fan of California Chardonnays. "I can't get her to try anything else," he says. As a result, the cellar is stocked with multiple recent vintages of the likes of Martinelli, Rombauer and Nickel & Nickel.

Thurston keeps track of his wines by storing them by region. "It's all memory and guesswork after that," he says. He does, though, try to keep his younger, high-end bottles in boxes to keep guests from opening wines before their time, putting them on the racks only when they've aged enough. "I hate to drink them if they're only five years old and you need 10 or 12 years," he says.

The silo cellar is nearly filled now, and Carney Architects have won multiple awards for their design. But Thurston isn't done with collecting—or with architecture. He has set his sights on a new cellar for his home in Phoenix, where he lives five months out of the year. He's working with an architect to build something that will complement the house's adobe architecture and hold 3,000 bottles. "We're going to do a really cool structure that will be half aboveground and half belowground," he says. "It'll be exciting." □

Auction Calendar

COMMERCIAL AUCTIONS

LONDON Oct. 15, Sotheby's

LONDON Oct. 16, Christie's

NEW YORK Oct. 18, Acker Merrall & Condit

CHICAGO Oct. 22, Chicago Wine Co.

HONG KONG Oct. 25, Zachys

NEW YORK Oct. 25, NYWinesChristie's

CHICAGO Oct. 26, Edward Roberts International

LOS ANGELES Oct. 30, NYWinesChristie's

CHICAGO Oct. 31 & Nov. 1, Hart Davis Hart

BENEFIT AUCTIONS

BOSTON Oct. 17, "Wine & Dine for MS Dinner and Auction," for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Central New England Chapter, (800) 493-9255

HOUSTON Oct. 17, "Vine2Wine,"

for inner-city youth programs, (713) 523-7326

NEW YORK Oct. 21, "Bid Against Hunger," for City Harvest, (917) 351-8700

FORT WORTH, TEXAS Oct. 24, "Second Annual Fête du Vin," for the Botanical Research Institute of Texas, (817) 332-4441, ext. 215

LAKE FOREST, ILL. Oct. 25, "Third Annual Lake Forest Wine Tasting and Auction," for the

Gorton Community Center, (847) 234-6060

For commercial auction information, call Acker Merrall & Condit, (877) 225-3747; Aulden Cellars-Sotheby's (New York), (212) 606-7050; Bonhams & Butterfields, (415) 861-7500, ext. 307; Chicago Wine Co., (630) 594-2972; Christie's (London), (44-207) 839-9060; Edward Roberts International, (847) 295-8696; Hart Davis Hart, (312) 482-9996; Morrell & Co., (212) 307-4200; NYWinesChristie's (New York), (212) 463-8600; Sotheby's (London), (44-207) 293-6423; Zachys (New York), (914) 448-3026.

Send calendar listings at least three months before auction date to Auction Editor, *Wine Spectator*, 387 Park Ave. S., New York, NY 10016.