

A Cellar for the Next Generation

Erica Abramson, 42, learned the value of collectible wine early on. She can remember her father accepting a delivery at their Great Neck, N.Y., home of 1970 Bordeaux he had bought as futures. The merchant begged him to sell some back, but her father refused. "He bought them for drinking," she explains. By the time she was in high school, he had accumulated enough wine that he would regularly pull out trophy bottles for weeknight dinners. "I had a nice introduction to wine," she laughs.

Now Abramson, an executive recruiter, has a cellar of her own that she wants to share with her two children, ages 9 and 4. But in a slightly different way: She started an investment collection to pay for their college tuition. "Some I can sell, some I can drink—after I pay for college," she says.

Abramson had been a casual drinker with a EuroCave unit in her kitchen for special bottles, but a trip to Bordeaux for her 40th birthday in 2007 piqued her interest in collectibles. When she returned, she told her husband, an equities trader, that she wanted to invest in wine as a college fund. Previous talks to set up a more conventional fund had stalled. "We never did because my husband kept saying, 'Oh, the market's going to collapse.'" Collectible wine, however, had an appealing long-term track record. Even with the recent market correction, a classic first-growth Bordeaux such as 1982

Margaux has appreciated by 1,374 percent.

Abramson began her collection by buying 2005 Bordeaux futures. "I knew it was a great vintage," she says. "And I could get it." For investment-grade storage, one of her merchants put her in contact with Jim Cash, a Michigan real-estate developer who had designed a cellar prototype with sliding racks and lazy Susans. Abramson was so impressed that she commissioned one for her Long Island home, and then set up her own company, First Growth Wine Cellars, to distribute the system.

Her personal cellar, which was completed this past March, is currently 60 percent full. Though most of the wine is first-growth Bordeaux, Abramson has branched out a little, picking up collectibles such as Château Lascombes and Sassicaia. This is how she explains her buying strategy: "It's based on books I've read and on my gut feeling. I like the wines to be from a region that has a track record. A lot of the California [wines], some of them are investment-grade now, but there's not as much history with them so I don't know how much they'll appreciate."

Abramson is aware of the risks of investing in wine. At auction so far, the 2005 first-growths have slid a collective 29 percent in value from their release prices. But she also knows that wine has at least one potential benefit over stocks: "If the investment doesn't hold up, at least I can drink it."

—Jennifer Fiedler

WHAT'S IN ERICA ABRAMSON'S CELLAR:



CELLAR CAPACITY: 1,500
CURRENT NUMBER OF BOTTLES: 898

COLLECTION STRENGTHS:

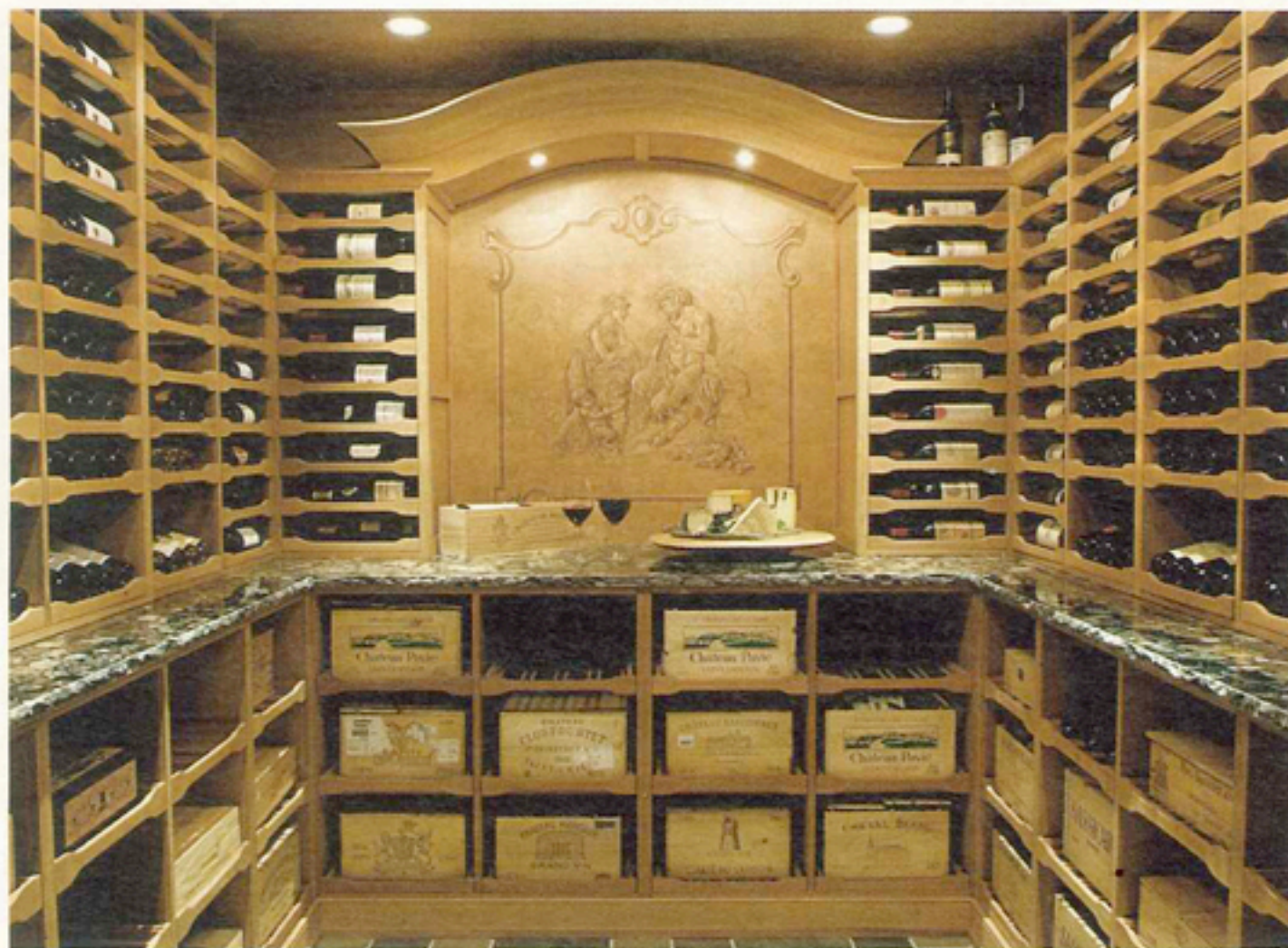
2005 Bordeaux

MOST BOTTLES: 2005 Château Pavie, 2005 Château Margaux, 2002 Harlan Estate, 2005 Williams Selyem Pinot Noir

OLDEST WINES: 1970 Pétrus, 1970 Ausone

WHAT SHE DRINKS ON A REGULAR BASIS: Duckhorn, A. Rafanelli, St. Clement Merlot

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY: 55° F; 70 percent



The features Abramson most appreciates in the cellar—above all, the functionality of its racking system—are also what led her to found her own company to distribute the system. The drawers and racks slide out, minimizing the amount she has to handle the bottles when hunting for a wine. "I don't have to worry about dropping them," she says. The racks also accommodate

multiple bottle sizes, which is handy as she's started investing in magnums. In Jim Cash's original model, the lazy Susans were a way to maximize storage under the counter. Abramson wanted them to be floor-to-ceiling in her cellar, and had two towers installed in the front corners, each with nine discs. "It looks like [the discs] are suspended in air—there's nothing in the middle."