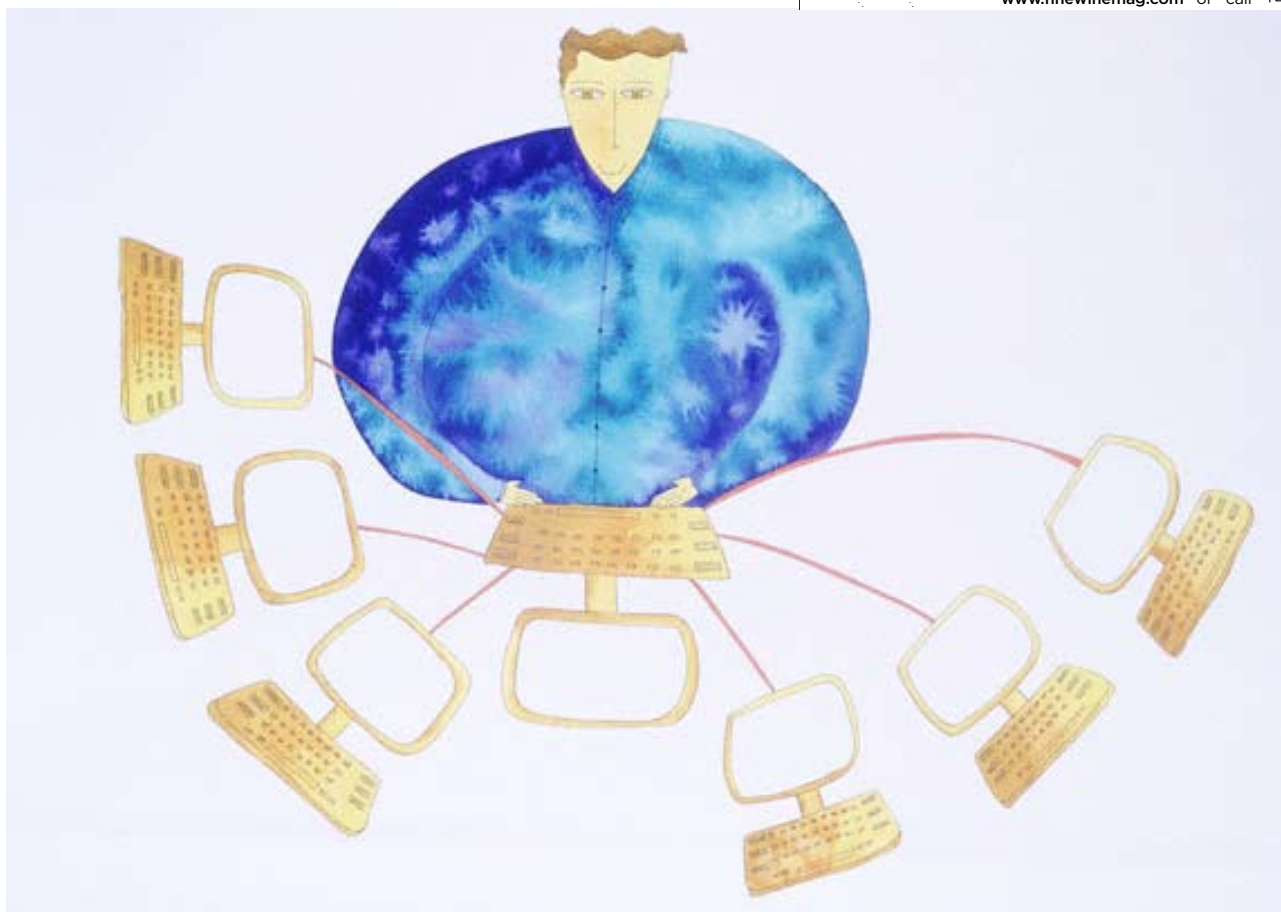


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## HOME AND AWAY CELLAR-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

The increasing community focus of the Internet has led to a rise in online cellar management, which offers users global accessibility to their notes. **Jamie Goode** examines both the phenomenon and the products on offer

There comes a stage in the development of a wine lover's hobby where the capacity of the human brain to remember which bottles are stashed away is outpaced by the rate of the acquisition of new ones. It's a particular problem where offsite storage is used in addition to cellar space at home. Initially, I suppose that the discovery of forgotten bottles in the cellar has an element of fun to it ("I never realized I had some of this left, let's open one tonight!"), but it quickly becomes annoying, especially when you miss optimal drinking windows or end up buying too much of a style of wine you aren't drinking very much of.

Mind you, some people quite enjoy the chaos of a cellar that develops organically. Several years ago, Jancis Robinson MW interviewed Barossa legend Peter Lehmann for her TV series *Jancis Robinson's Wine Course*. As they descended into what appeared to be a hideously chaotic collection of bottles and

boxes, she asked him how he kept track of his cellar's contents. "The biblical method," he replied. "What's that?" "Seek and ye shall find, my dear." But aside from the rare exceptions of the few deliberately, joyfully disorganized wine nuts, for most people some form of method for logging cellar contents is a must. And, increasingly, wine collectors are abandoning the traditional pen-and-paper cellar book for some form of computerized cellar management.

As might be expected, the adoption of information-technology solutions for cellar management has paralleled the rapid incursion of personal computers, the Internet, and, more recently, mobile computing into our everyday lives. With the more widespread adoption of the Internet, which began in earnest in the late 1990s, the stage was set for the emergence of dedicated cellar-management packages, relying on database

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and spreadsheet software that was now to be found on most business users' desktop computers. There are now dozens of such packages on offer. Now, the next generation of cellar-management software is taking advantage of the increased accessibility of the Internet and the social connectivity known in the tech world as Web 2.0. The principal behind these newer packages is that you don't store all the data on just a single machine, but instead make use of the World Wide Web to have your cellar database remotely hosted. To this hosting is added a range of other utilities, made possible by the Internet, such as community features. This is currently a dynamic, exciting field. The goal of this piece is to examine the various cellar-management options, assessing their strengths and weaknesses with an eye to the future and how all this might evolve.

### The advent of Web 2.0

Not that a specially configured software package is needed, of course. Anyone with a personal computer can catalog their cellar electronically without the need for dedicated software. The advantage of using an Excel spreadsheet, or even a database created in a program such as Microsoft Access, over a traditional cellar book is that it's relatively easy to organize what you have and to work out the value or cost of your collection. You can also query a database to bring up a list of wines that are in their peak drinking windows or need to be drunk up soon. But cataloging a cellar that's already quite sizable in such a way presents a challenge in terms of data input, and if wine is acquired at a reasonable rate, the ongoing maintenance of such a database or spreadsheet can be a little tedious: It's a process that needs to be as easy as possible. This do-it-yourself option is only really appealing for: (a) people who have considerable database/spreadsheet expertise, who quite fancy the challenge; and (b) people with enormous cellars, for whom the up-front investment in either time or cost is justified by the fact that they'll then have a bespoke tool that does exactly what they want it to do.

For most, though, dedicated cellar software will be the way to go. These days, there is a profusion of cellar-management packages available—a Google search on “cellar-management software” will throw up dozens of pages of relevant results. But there are two rather distinct categories of products with very different underlying principles. The first type involves a database that lives on your computer and can only be accessed from said computer. You download the program and then enter details of your wines into it, with all the relevant information. The second type is where your database is remotely hosted on someone else's computer and you then access it on the Internet through a Web interface. You log on, register with the website, and then enter your data online. There are some serious advantages with this approach, the chief one being that this allows you to access your cellar records wherever you are and using multiple computers.

This shift from having data on your own machine to accessing it remotely reflects the way that the world of personal computing is changing. In the very old days of computing, before personal computers were common, people used terminals (basically a keyboard and monitor) to access a large,

shared computer that had all the programs on it. Then, with the onset of personal computers, things shifted: We ended up with desktop machines that each ran their own programs and stored their own data. Where data had to be shared—for example, in the workplace—networks were set up, joining together a number of individual desktop machines to facilitate file sharing. In the past few years, the dominance of the Internet and the fact that people now typically have more than one computer (for example, a desktop machine at work, a desktop machine at home, a laptop, and a PDA) has meant that there has been a trend leading us back to a situation in which our documents and programs are stored remotely and we then use a computer with Internet access to work on these files, almost in the same way that the early computer users had their terminal and keyboard. (As a writer with three laptops and a desktop computer all used regularly, I find a major challenge is synchronizing my files. I'm currently in transit between a POP3 e-mail system, where my e-mails are downloaded on to a computer, and a Web-based system, Gmail, where the messages are all kept remotely and then accessed through the Internet, thereby reachable from any machine.)

There is also the aforementioned phenomenon known among the tech crowd as Web 2.0. It's hard to define Web 2.0 in a precise fashion; it's one of those things that you recognize when you see it. It encompasses phenomena such as social networking, blogging, video sharing, and viral marketing, in which the Internet is used to enhance community and connectivity. The new generation of cellar-management programs is beginning to make use of these Web 2.0 community features to enhance their utility to end users. It is likely that the growing utility of such Web 2.0 connectivity will become increasingly attractive for wine lovers and will finally see non-Web-based cellar-management software consigned to the trashcan of history. (A recent *WFW* article by Mike Steinberger touched on the way that the shared community tasting notes on Web-based cellar-management tools are in part replacing the role of the professional wine critic, but this is a separate topic that can't be revisited here; see *WFW* 19, pp.130–35.)

### Available options

In this review of cellar-management options, it is appropriate, therefore, to begin with the current leader of the field: CellarTracker. Many readers will already be familiar with this tool, but for the benefit of the rest, here's a potted history of its rise to prominence and a short description of what it does.

CellarTracker is website-based cellar-management tool that first emerged some five years ago but that has since seen explosive growth. It's the brainchild of Eric Levine, who was a software developer with Microsoft and was also seriously into wine. Initially, he just wanted to track the contents of his own cellar but was frustrated by the products on offer. “A lot of the pre-existing cellar-management software seems to have been created by people who *either* knew a lot of about wine *or* about databases but not much about both,” explains Levine. “That was my chief frustration and why I decided to build something myself. I wanted a program that had very proper wine etiquette, a strong database, attention to fine detail, and at the same time

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allowed users to be as casual or rigorous (to the point of extremely anal) as they chose to be about what information they wanted to track." Levine started CellarTracker as a hobby in March 2003, when he had a short sabbatical from Microsoft, a company enlightened enough to give its senior people some paid time off to pursue their own interests. "I started CellarTracker as a hobby back in March 2003," he recalls. "Initially it was just intended as something for me to use to track my own cellar, but then I happened to show two enophile friends, and they wanted to use it. One thing led to another, and the site moved from hobby to full-time pursuit." The public launch was in April 2004, after it had swelled to around 100 users, and by August of that year Levine decided to jump ship: He's been working full time on it ever since.

Levine says that he has been stunned by the takeup of the site. When I interviewed him (in April 2008), he revealed that there are currently 51,396 registered users, of whom about 22,000 are currently "active" on the site. "These users are collectively tracking 8.6 million bottles of wine," he reveals, "and there are more than 2,000 users who are tracking more than 1,000 bottles each." These are amazing statistics.

So what are the secrets of CellarTracker's success? Levine cites four key drivers. First, there was the decision to bet on the Internet. "It made no sense to me to trap this sort of cellar data on one computer," he states. "Having universal access to cellar and tasting-note data, whether from home, work, or Web-enabled cellphone, was always something I thought would be a key differentiator. In 2003, more than a few folks thought this was nuts, but that has really become the direction for so many applications over the past five years, and as we are seeing with *The Wine Advocate* and *Wine Spectator*, that is the direction the industry is taking."

Then there was the decision to make most of the features on the site user-contributable and community based. "All of the wine definitions (about 450,000 now) have been entered by users. And now, as each new user joins the site and contributes (by entering a wine, a purchase price, uploading a wine-label image, or entering a public tasting note or drinking window), the site gets a little better for everyone else using the site. At this point the site is a living organism that is comprised of so much more than just a database or software. Rather it is a dynamic combination of data, software, and users." This is Web 2.0 in action—a term and concept that didn't really exist in 2003 when Levine was designing CellarTracker. "In many respects I was quite foolish and fortunate to bet so heavily on this, but that has been critical to the site," he confesses. "Most importantly, when most people go to catalog their collection and then find that 99 percent of their wine is already in the database, they just search based on a word or two from the label, click on the wine, and then enter as little or as much data as they would like to track."

Third, CellarTracker is designed by someone who knows software development and yet is also a knowledgeable, passionate wine lover. The final major factor in the success of CellarTracker is that it is free to users. "It was always intended to be free with voluntary payment for heavy users," says Levine. "My goal was to get people to trust the site on their

own terms without any financial pressure. At the same time, the longer you use the site, the more valuable it gets for you. So my hope was that people would use it for 10, 20, 30, 40, or more years—a lifetime of wine collecting. So far we're just five years into that, but it seems to be playing out well. More than 10,000 users have made payments, and most of those continue to pay on an annual basis."

Levine has enjoyed the ride. "It has been outrageously fun and rewarding, while also very demanding at times. As someone who loves to create software, the highest compliment is to have people use your creation. And as a wine lover, one of the highest pleasures is to share the joy and passion that is wine with other aficionados." For the time being, Levine has resisted the urge to take funding to develop the project and still does all the development, testing, operations, design, and business development himself. "After more than a decade at Microsoft, I have just so relished having a chance to do something entrepreneurial, small, focused, and hopefully very impactful in a non-traditional way," he reveals.

Levine reckons his two main competitors are apathy and Excel spreadsheets. "There are an awful lot of people who either are not interested in tracking their inventory or who assume it will be too tedious to keep up with," he says. "The most common tool is almost certainly Microsoft Excel. It is very easy for anyone to put together a spreadsheet of their wines, but it quickly gets tedious." Aside from this, it is other people trying to do the same thing that he has done (the barrier to entry is quite low, but you then need to create users to generate revenue stream; people aren't going to pay for this sort of service when CellarTracker is free.) And there are still the specialized databases that used to dominate the field. "When I got started, I noted literally hundreds of programs, pretty much all special-purpose databases, that were designed to run on your own computer," says Levine. "Some were very good, but most, even the popular ones, suffered from the aforementioned problem of not balancing wine/database depth very well." Levine cites the leaders of the first wave as being Cellar!, The Uncorked Cellar, and the Robert Parker Wine Cellar Advisor & Manager (which has since been discontinued). The Web-based programs he mentions are BottleCount.com, Vinfolio, and Vintrust. "More recently there has been a bevy of flashy, splashy, pretty Web 2.0 sites that seem to be made by people who know a lot about user interface and web design but even less about wine," says Levine. "There are dozens and dozens—none with any real depth of wine data. The most recent trend has been less about cellar management and much more about community wine reviews and trying to be a shopping site. CellarTracker is in that space as well, but my primary focus has been firmly on continuing to show depth and innovation in the cellar-management space."

### How they compare

So what about the specialized databases? Those that I've looked at vary quite a bit. While most seem quite functional, I would share Levine's frustration that few seem to be designed by people with real expertise in both software and wine. After all, who wants to catalog their Bordeaux under the heading "Cabernet/Merlot blends," or their Northern Rhône reds under

the heading “Shiraz and Syrah”? I can see very few good reasons not to turn to Web-based programs, especially when they are free and allow extra features based around the substantial user-generated content that they may contain.

I asked a few well-known wine collectors about how they managed their cellars. Perhaps understandably, most didn’t want to go on record, but Russel Frye, a collector with a very large cellar, was happy to comment. “I happen to use a spreadsheet of my own design,” he reveals. “I had looked at a variety of well-known cellar-management products in the late 1990s, and none of them met my needs. I’m a PC guy [software-wise], so it was easy for me to set up and use a spreadsheet. I made sure that I included everything that I felt was important. This included the wine name, producer, bottle size, purchase source, date of purchase, condition upon receipt, cellar location, and much more. I set up my cellar with the help of Chris Campbell of Troquet Restaurant in Boston, and we used a system of letters and numbers to identify shelves, rack locations, and bottle placements. I used tags on some of the bottles to differentiate similar bottles.”

“If I were to do it all over today,” says Frye, “I’d do everything the same but I’d buy a barcode label reader/printer and link my spreadsheet to the labels. I would label every bottle.”

I also quizzed Marc Lazar, of cellaradvisors.com, about the cellar-management systems they advise their clients to use. “We have clients all over the USA and a few internationally,” says Lazar, “and the vast majority are set up to use CellarTracker. I also have clients on a variety of other software systems, but my personal bias for a new client is to begin from day one on CellarTracker. We find it the easiest to work with, both in adding wines and consuming bottles, and the support we receive from the developer is fast and friendly.”

Lazar maintains that traditional software, located on one personal computer, has quickly been surpassed by Web-based

applications—if for no other reason than the ability to access and work with your data from anywhere. Lazar says he still has some clients using the Robert Parker Wine Cellar Advisor & Manager, though he is migrating clients away from this because it has now been discontinued. “The other two major players in the cellar-management space are Vinfolio and Esommelier,” says Lazar. “Vinfolio is probably the closest competitor to CellarTracker from a distance, but under the hood there are some large differences. First, CellarTracker is much more of a community, with new tasting notes added all the time, data on purchase prices paid by other users, and so on. Vinfolio currently has a cleaner user interface but is more difficult to use, and users are reliant on ordering labels from the company and being affiliated with a retailer (which is Vinfolio’s main business).” He also cites Vintrust as being similar to Vinfolio, but less user-friendly. “The Esommelier product is novel,” says Lazar, “since it is a stand-alone hardware system with a touch-screen monitor, but the hardware is very expensive, and the software is not as up to date as CellarTracker, nor is the wine database nearly as large.”

“Once someone has a complete inventory, with wine, size, bin location, values/prices, scores, and tasting notes, they can often maintain their purchases and consumption going forward,” adds Lazar. “The initial round of data entry is the most tedious, and fortunately for us, many people prefer to have us come in and do it for them. In the past three years, we have seen business grow 50 percent per year, and I now have a full-time team that splits its time between working in our clients’ cellars and entering/editing data remotely. Once clients invest in organizing their cellar, they become very disciplined about scanning out the bottles they drink and entering new purchases (or having us do it). I’ve found that people who are not particularly computer savvy even enjoy cellar software because it unlocks quite a bit of new information about their hobby.” ■

### A SELECTION OF CELLAR-MANAGEMENT PRODUCTS

| Name                                   | Type                    | Notes   | Cost        |
|--|-------------------------|---|-------------|
| CellarTracker<br>www.cellartracker.com | Web-based               | Hugely popular, making use of Web2.0 connectivity   | Free        |
| Cellar!<br>www.cellarwinesoftware.com  | Specialized database    | One of the original cellar-management packages  | US\$49.95   |
| Bottlecount.com                        | Web-based               | Clean, simple, no-frills site   | Free        |
| Vinfolio                               | Web-based               | Online store with cellar-management element called Vincellar, which is due for a major relaunch in 2008   | Free        |
| Vintrust                               | Web-based               | Cellar management, but this isn’t the main focus; there’s also a retail side, and a barcoding/scanning element, as well as the option to store wine | Variable    |
| The Uncorked Cellar<br>www.uncork.biz  | Specialized database    | Wine cellar-management software plus a wine guide   | From US\$99 |
| Winebase<br>www.winebase.com.au        | Specialized spreadsheet | Dedicated to Australian wines, for the Australian market; has been going since 1992   | A\$75       |
| Warpa<br>www.warpa.com                 | Web-based               | Cellar management online—very Web 2.0 and rich in community features; still quite small   | Free        |

Also see: [www.baycountryliquors.com/softlink.htm](http://www.baycountryliquors.com/softlink.htm) for an extensive review of the various cellar software packages available.