



## Sock that grape away, in style

By Ailene Sankur



Between the two of them, Brian McGonigle and Paolo Mancini have more than 30 years of experience in the wine industry. They've seen their share of ways to taste, pair, collect, catalog and, of course, imbibe. They've seen the division between the rarefied world of the "serious" wine collector and the intimidating nature of crossing that schism as a new wine collector.

And they wanted to close that schism, shift the paradigm of polarized wine culture: you either

collect hundred-dollar bottles of wine or only buy what's on sale at Trader Joe's. Hence their joint project: the [San Francisco Wine Center](#) (SFWC), a wine storage facility with two rooms to be used for wine events and classes, as well as for members to just hang out and crack open a bottle.

Wine storage facilities are, typically, for the more serious collector, the ones that Brian McGonigle, co-owner of the SFWC, says "collect only expensive cult Napa Cab, first growth Bordeaux and Grand Cru Burgundy." Facilities are devoted to the idea of wine as investment—a temperature and humidity controlled place to drop off wines to ensure that they'll develop correctly. The clinical sterility is reminiscent of a laboratory, while the emphasis on wine as hoarded possession is evocative of a bank, a place to drop off an asset and watch it grow, untouched.

McGonigle and Mancini want the SFWC to be more wine community than wine depository. McGonigle says, "We want members to think of it as a private wine club that they can enjoy regularly, attending events or just stopping in to see what new wines we have open at the end of the day. When we looked at the existing providers of storage services we realized that no one was offering these types of associated services and amenities and it just seemed natural to us."

The interchange of services comes from the overlapping companies under the SFWC's roof: "Too many companies. Too little people," Richelle Corbo, sales director of Indy Wines, says wryly. "We have Indy," she spells out "I-N-D-Y wines, a wholesale distribution company, and Indie, I-N-D-I-E, a wine importing company. Also M/M Wine Consulting, a consulting company for winemakers. We often help foreign winemakers break into the U.S. Market. Brian, Paolo, and I have our hand in each company." For instance, if Corbo has wine left over from sales to the

restaurant industry with the distribution company, she'll leave it out in one of the member rooms for free sampling. Also contacts made in one company can be used for the other, winemakers brought in to teach classes or conduct tastings even though SFWC does not offer wines for retail sale.

Brian McGonigle bought SFWC's building in 2005, but it was constructed in 1926 and originally housed the Del Monte meat plant. All that remains after the building was gutted was the low redwood roof, which emits a faint, pleasantly woody smells. The roof is evocative as the only reminder of the transition from butchery to bougie—the typical SOMA switch from working-class to new money. And yet, the roof is also evocative of the building's new life: its low height and reddish wooden trusses make you feel like you're inside a wine cask.

The storage facility on the first floor looks like what you'd hastily cram your belongings into before having to move back in with your parents, except for a row of dark oak cubbies with wire doors—the smaller lockers—lining one side. Lockers range from a 20-wine capacity for \$75 a month to a 400-wine capacity for \$450 a month. Newer collectors can choose the smaller lockers, or go in on a locker with friends and family. McGonigle says, "Because storage is the key to membership but not all we offer, we're happy to have as many members as possible...



We envision that members will store their wines but also come to events with visiting winemakers and top local chefs, buy wines they taste and like, take classes, etc so it's more than just state-of-the art collector storage."

The facility is climate and humidity controlled, and the black eyes of security cameras follow you wherever you go. Corbo says, "The cameras record 24 hours a day. We have many cameras all over the building and the temperature and humidity controls are linked to our security system as well. If the temp get too warm then we get a call."

Upstairs, the City Room looks out towards downtown San Francisco through floor to ceiling windows. A black-granite topped kitchen—with all the stainless steel sub-zero appliances you could ever hope to have, and, one day, learn how to use—lines one wall. The rest is all hardwood floors, and dark oak furniture covered in black leather. It's a sleekly gorgeous space worlds removed from the concrete floors and orange metal doors down below. Here's where most wine events will be held but the room will be open to members otherwise.

### **The City Room**

The Reserve Room is located in the back of the building. This windowless room, the perimeter all wood and wire storage lockers has only an imposing black table and heavy black leather chairs. It is suggestive of somewhere that people would sit around and drink wine...then decide to whack somebody. But who doesn't want to insert themselves in a Sopranos fantasy? The entire facility has wi-fi.

One of the rooms will always be open, usually the Reserve Room. SFWC asks members notify them when they're coming by and would like to use any of the event spaces or if they're bringing

a few people with them. Members will have discounted access to book the room for their own events. Classes and events held in the rooms will most often be free.

At some point, McGonigle also worked in politics—an easy transition given the schmoozing, socializing nature of both professions – which is why he sums up, on the company’s website, his vision for the San Francisco Wine Center: "The membership experience is a little more Barack Obama than John McCain or Hillary Clinton." He says further, "The Gen X and Gen Y wine consumer is much more adventurous and less buttoned down and traditional, the way I think of Barack Obama versus other candidates that represent more of the old guard. ...We'd like those established collectors to join and share their knowledge but we also want the new wine collector to feel right at home as well."



**The Reserve Room**

San Francisco Wine Center  
Monday – Friday: 10am – 7pm  
Saturday: 12pm – 6pm  
757 Bryant Street, SF, CA 94107  
(415) 655-7300  
[www.sanfranciscowinecenter.com](http://www.sanfranciscowinecenter.com)