

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

A Cool Gift for Wine Lovers

Small Refrigerators Bring Home Wine's Everyday Pleasures



was packed, in a dark, undisturbed place with a fairly constant, moderate temperature and it will be fine.

Part of the Ritual

But a little wine cooler is so much better—and you can indeed keep it in your kitchen, so the wine becomes part of the whole mealtime ritual, as it should. The advantage of a 12- to 17-bottle wine cooler isn't that it provides great long-term storage, though it could. No, the great thing about this is that you (or your lucky gift recipient) can buy wine by the mixed case, therefore usually receiving a 10% to 20% discount; you will always have a bottle on hand that will be perfect for dinner tonight; and the wine you choose will always be somewhere around serving temperature whenever you want it. Sure, the whites might need a slight bath in ice water and the reds might need to warm up a bit in the glass, but cellar temperature is a good starting point for serving both reds and whites, so when you call, the wine will be ready.

For several years, we have used a Danby 17-bottle wine cooler that we keep under a counter in our kitchen. We have two other, much larger cellars, but we use this for wines we expect to drink soon, either for tastings or for not-so-special weekday dinners. It has been reliable, makes no noise in the kitchen. We didn't put much thought into buying this model, because there weren't many choices when we got it. Has that changed? We decided to find out.

We looked for wine coolers that held at least 12 bottles and cost less

than \$150. We quickly found six, in various sizes and with various features. Big retailers, including Kmart, Wal-Mart and Target, offer them. In almost every case, we saw the same cooler at several places, with competitive prices. Three good places to begin a search for a small cooler are wineenthusiast.com, winecoolers.com and beveragefactory.com. You'll get a good idea what's out there and about how much they cost; then shop around.

We tested our six refrigerators for several weeks. One thing we noticed right away was that two had compressors while four were thermoelectric. We wondered what the difference might be, so we called John Ouseph, an engineer at GE Consumer & Industrial in Louisville, Ky., who is an expert in refrigeration and systems manager for GE's side-by-side refrigerators. He explained that compressors are more efficient than thermoelectric, which is why they're used in larger refrigerators, but thermoelectric units are solid-state, with no moving parts, which should mean less vibration (he suggested we test this by putting glasses of water on top, and indeed the units with compressors had just a touch more vibration, but not enough to bother us). He pointed out that units with compressors are heavier and disposal of them is more of an issue because you need to dispose of the refrigerator. When buying a small wine cooler, should any of this matter to you as a consumer? "No to very little," he said. "Both will cool a small-size wine cooler. When you get to bigger sizes, then the thermoelectrics are not as efficient. Then it becomes an issue and you'd prefer to use a compressor."

Getting Specific

Having tested all of the coolers, the truth is we'd be happy with any of them, though we did have favorites. (They are listed in order of preference in the attached index.) There are some notes about them in general that you might want to keep in mind.

First, after spending \$100 or more on the cooler, it's worth investing \$5 in a little thermometer to go inside of it. Most of these simply have dials on the back to set the temperature to something like "minimum" or "maximum" and it takes some trial

The Dow Jones Wine Cooler Index

Here are six small wine coolers that hold at least 12 bottles and cost less than \$150. Several of these are available at additional retailers, but listed below are the places we got them and how much they cost when we bought them online. Shipping and taxes are extra. With our assistant, Melanie Grayce West, we tested each of these for several weeks and although each had pros and cons, we liked all of them generally. They are listed in order of our favorites. Dimensions (in inches) are based on our own measurements and, in some cases, differ slightly from those given by the manufacturer. One note: Except for the Magic Chef, we wish the glass doors on all of these were more darkly tinted. Because we bought these three months ago for testing, prices and availability may have changed.

Wine Enthusiast 16-bottle Silent Wine Refrigerator

\$139.95 at Wine Enthusiast (wineenthusiast.com)
 Dimensions: H: 20 1/4" W: 17 1/4" D: 18 1/2"

Cooling system:

Thermoelectric
Best overall. Fits 16 bottles easily. Very quiet and a nice, manageable size. The only one of the six with a visible, digital temperature control, and while it isn't completely accurate—ours ran about four degrees off—at least it's simple to adjust. Overall, we liked this quite a bit because of the temperature control and clean design. A kitchen-design plus: Unit comes in al-bronze, or in a black unit with a stainless steel, graphite- or copper-trimmed door.

Avanti 16-bottle Thermoelectric Wine Cooler

\$119.99 at Target (target.com)
 Dimensions: H: 20 1/4" W: 17 1/4" D: 19"

Cooling system:

Thermoelectric
 Very quiet. A nice-size unit and 16 bottles fit snugly, but you have to juggle slots for a good fit—top right slot won't fit Champagne or Riesling. Temperatures ran about five degrees cooler than the user manual suggested, but the temperature dial is more sophisticated than most others. There is a silly light inside that you need to move bottles to switch on (why bother?). This is a winner because it's easy on the eyes, fairly lightweight and has good capacity.

Koolatron Slim 12-bottle Wine Cooler

\$129.99 at WineCoolers.com (winecoolers.com)
 Dimensions: H: 25 1/4" W: 10 1/4" D: 20"

Cooling system:

Thermoelectric
 Nice stand-alone design. Tall, narrow and ideal for under-counter placement. Very quiet. Fits 12 bottles but requires some finagling—wide bottles need to be on top shelf. Primitive dial thermometer wasn't accurate at any setting. The warmest temperature we could reach with the unit was just 52 degrees; the manual says it should reach 59 degrees, plus or minus five degrees. We called Koolatron customer support, which advised us to send the unit back for a replacement. If it worked properly, this would be Melanie's favorite because she felt the design would work best in a smaller kitchen.

Danby 17-bottle Wine Cooler

\$98.86 at Wal-Mart (walmart.com)
 Dimensions: H: 20 1/4" W: 17 1/4" D: 19 1/2"

Cooling system:

Compressor
 Great price. Reliable, though not as attractive as some others and a bit bulky. Ours arrived with a slightly skewed door. Leveling the unit was a challenge and you might need some shims. It doesn't really hold 17 bottles unless you jam them in, but 14 fit comfortably. This isn't very elegant, but it's hard to beat the price.

Magic Chef 16-bottle Deluxe Wine Cooler

\$129.99 at Home Depot (homedepot.com)
 Dimensions: H: 19 1/4" W: 18 1/4" D: 19 1/4"

Cooling system:

Compressor
 Heavy unit that seems clumsy, like a modified dorm fridge. Snugly fits 16 bottles. Temperature setting is unsophisticated—best to simply use a thermometer. Compressor is quiet and there is only a little vibration. Nicely tinted door. This is perfectly acceptable, but no more.

Haier 12-bottle Thermal Electric Wine Cellar

\$124.99 at Kmart (kmart.com)
 Dimensions: H: 15 1/4" W: 18 1/4" D: 21"

Cooling system:

Thermoelectric
 Very small unit best designed for countertops or credenzas (or, in our case, desktops). Thermoelectric motor is nearly silent. But the unit just didn't give us bang for the buck. The turn-dial thermostat is designed with a two-option setting of "White Wine" or "Red Wine." A customer service agent told us that the range could be anywhere from 45 to 65 degrees. Some of our wider bottles didn't fit that well and slipped out of the racks. Plus, the unit didn't have the strongest door seal. We were least impressed with this cooler.

full. The whole point here is to have an ever-changing inventory of wine in there to enjoy on a moment's notice. With a lovely mixed case of everyday-drinkables sitting right there in the kitchen, just about begging you to pop them open, it seems likely that the wines really will be drunk every day, which will make meals more fun and life a little better. What is the first mixed case we'd stuff into the cooler? We'll write about that next week.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at wine@wsj.com.

