

A Collection Born of Song

In tenor Joseph Calleja's Malta home, a wine retreat

BY SOPHIE MENIN

Known to his fans as the Maltese Tenor, Joseph Calleja performs the arias of Mozart, Verdi and Puccini in the world's most hallowed opera houses. Over the past four years, amid taking the stage at the likes of London's Covent Garden and New York's Metropolitan Opera, Calleja, 37, built a house of his own, in Mellieha, a coastal town in his native Malta. Built around an interior courtyard, the multistory house sits on a ridge overlooking a nature preserve and the Mediterranean Sea. Calleja's private quarters are on the top two floors, where his collection of Grand Cru Bordeaux resides in a 400-square-foot cellar next to his office.

Custom mahogany shelves hold more than 4,000 bottles, including cases of Château Figeac back to the 1960s, decade-long verticals of Châteaux Angéhus, Ausone, Coutet, Cheval-Blanc and La Serre, and treasures from St.-Estèphe and Margaux. The floor is white marble, as is the tasting table that runs the length of the room, recalling a central nave of one of Malta's Baroque cathedrals.

Initially, Calleja planned to have a sand floor that would be sprayed with water to control the room's moisture level, but given Malta's Mediterranean climate and the home's close proximity to the sea, the room naturally fluctuates between 75 percent and 85 percent humidity, well-suited for wine storage. No cooling units are needed between December and March, when the insulated room maintains a steady 62.5° F to 63° F; Calleja has installed two air conditioners and four gauges to ensure stable temperatures during the summer months.

Calleja's passion for Bordeaux first emerged in 2004, when the maestro Brian Schembri invited him to a party at the home of Malta wine merchant Michael Tabone. The host—who also happened to be the chancellor of Malta's Jurade, the international society devoted to promoting the wines of St.-Emilion—laughed with excitement when Calleja said he was unfamiliar with the region's wines. Tabone immediately retreated to the cellar and returned with bottles of Château Monbousquet, Château Fonplégade and Château Bel-Air, all from 1978, the tenor's birth year. The introduction gave rise to an invitation: Tabone asked Calleja to sing at the next Ban des Vendanges, St.-Emilion's annual harvest festival.

A former choirboy, Calleja is in turns bouncy, lusty and gregarious in a way that makes him seem like Pavarotti's impish nephew. When Tabone broached the subject of a fee for the Ban des Vendanges concert,



Custom shelving and marble accents create a minimalist feel.



Joseph Calleja

WHAT'S IN JOSEPH CALLEJA'S CELLAR

NUMBER OF BOTTLES: 4,100

CELLAR CAPACITY: 8,000 bottles

HOW THE COLLECTION IS INVENTORIED: *VinoCell*

OLDEST BOTTLE: *Château Lafite Rothschild 1942*

BORDEAUX VERTICALS: *Châteaux Angéhus, Ausone, Cheval-Blanc, Coutet, Figeac, Grand Corbin-Despaigne, La Serre*

the tenor cut the negotiations short. "I love wine," he announced. "Pay me in kind whatever you think the concert was worth." Calleja is discreet enough to dodge the question of how many cases he received, but the region's most esteemed châteaux all pitched in to show their appreciation. After the performance, Calleja felt joy that he will never forget, standing in the garden of a townhouse overlooking St.-Emilion's Monolithic Church, holding his children close while watching fireworks color the sky above the medieval town.

As Calleja has grown into a more seasoned Bordeaux connoisseur, he's discovered more and more parallels between the development of a fine wine and that of a distinctive voice. Both winemakers and opera singers need raw material of exceptional quality and distinction. For winemakers, it is a vineyard's *terroir*; for singers, it is a voice's timbre. Both vocations involve long periods of development to reach excellence. Both reward consistency. "No great career has come out of one performance, and no great house has earned its reputation from one vintage," Calleja notes. Finally, both realize their full potential only with maturation. Handled with care and intelligence, great wines and great voices have the capacity to evolve over the course of several decades or more.

Calleja's schedule is booked five years in advance. Thus, he has returned just once to St.-Emilion for the Ban des Vendanges. Now, having been honored as a Pair de la Jurade, he has organized his schedule to ensure that as of 2017, attending the festival will be an annual event. *Sophie Menin is a freelance wine writer based in New York.*