

Aging Gracefully

(Number 61 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine by John Smith)

As someone who has reached the age when Medicare applies, and who like all of us will someday need a place for that “final storage,” I thought it might be appropriate to consider the same things about wine — how to age it and where to store it. It is accepted in the wine industry that about 95% of bottles purchased in this country are consumed within 24 hours of purchase (you can find sources on the Internet quoting the percentage anywhere from 70% to 99%), but this article is primarily for those who buy the other few percent and keep the wine for a while.

Should You Age?

One of the reasons there are so many wines to choose from is that people have widely varying tastes in wine. Some like it only sweet, some dry, while others have learned to appreciate the subtle rich flavors that only appear when wine is aged until it reaches its optimum. This, too, is a matter of taste. Some feel that wine is just starting to peak when others would consider it unappetizingly old. Since there's such a variation, most wine consumers learn to judge for themselves just how much age is enough. The trick is deciding what to age and how to do it.

What to Age

One of the hardest questions to answer in the tasting room is “How long should I store my wine?” The issue is complicated by at least the following questions — is it red or white, what grape did it come from, in what year was it grown, in what area was it grown, who owned the vineyard (and who managed the vineyard), what's the soil like, what kind of exposure does the vineyard have, what kind of trellising, what kind of irrigation, who was the winemaker, and where was it stored before you bought it? As an example, I recently had a call from someone who had found a bottle of our 2000 Merlot and wanted to know if it was still a good wine. Thinking that it had been hidden in a corner of his cellar since it was released in 2002, I gave him the particulars of that wine and how we had seen it mature. After receiving the information, he told me he had bought it just that week at a Long's Drugstore for the bargain price of \$13.99, and if the wine was good, he planned to go back for the other five bottles they had. This represents what may be the worst possible storage conditions: standing upright on a shelf for about five years (and we were using natural corks in those days that dry out after a few months), in a store where they may have turned off the air conditioning at night. It's a pretty safe bet he didn't retrieve the remaining bottles!



Wine Guidelines

Before we begin, please remember that these are not absolutes but generalizations, and your mileage may vary.

- Red wines will age better than white wines — there are very few domestic white wines that are enjoyable more than five years after the vintage even with proper storage, with the most frequent exception being Chardonnay.
- The heartier the wine, the longer it will age. This includes things like higher alcohol content, higher acid levels, and most importantly, higher tannins. Tannins are antioxidants, and they do the same things for wine that they do for us — extend lifetimes. Another thing is what’s technically termed “extract:” the degree of concentration of the wine. If the wine came from a very concentrated harvest of old or low-yielding vines, it will survive longer than one made from overcropped vines. Alcohol and (rarely) acidity will be indicated on the label, but for the others, you’ll need to try a bottle or, if you buy wine expensive or famous enough to appear in magazines, read a review. One of the things you can’t easily judge or measure is whether the wine was bottled with enough sulfite to help insure a long life — you generally can’t taste it, and measuring it requires a wine laboratory.
- Certain wineries have established reputations for making wines that last, while others produce only bottles for immediate consumption. Serious wine drinkers have learned that places like Ridge Winery, where the capsules are cut short to allow reading the date on each cork should the label deteriorate, intend their wines for longevity. Beware, though, the new winemaker or new owner following a corporate takeover — they may have less dedication to those who cellar wines (or just be more greedy in turning out wines with less heart). Wines like “Two-Buck Chuck” that sell for \$1.99 at Trader Joe’s should usually get most of their aging in the back of the car during the trip home.

Buy in Bulk

This brings up an important issue of storing wine. Buying a single bottle and sticking it in the wine refrigerator is like driving to a distant area and choosing a random local dive for dinner — it may be great, but more likely it will lead to disappointment. If you plan to

store wine, you should either go to the winery where you can taste the wine before buying, or buy in enough quantity to try a bottle initially (to make an assessment of how long it will age) and a year or two later (to check on the accuracy of your projection). Knowledgeable tasting room people, (or even better, the winemaker) can give an indication of which wines are likely to reward cellaring, but be suspicious of a back label that indicates all the winery's products will "improve over many years." With the growth of blogs, Internet chat rooms, and through networking with other wine nuts — excuse me, *connoisseurs* — you can increase your awareness of what's likely to last, and share your experiences with others.

You Put It Where?

Throughout most of this great country, where territories were settled before the 1950's, houses were built with basements. These extra spaces, completely unfamiliar to native Californians, are places for furnaces, extra junk (believe it or not, in some states, people actually keep their *cars* in the garage because they have a basement to store all the junk they've accumulated), and wine. Since they're underground, they tend to be cooler than the upper floors, and less subject to temperature fluctuations. If you don't have one, it's best to find a place that is the closest to a cellar; that is, on the ground floor and away from the walls. A closet in the interior of the house is best, and most people who are serious about their wine are willing to sacrifice an extra linen closet. If you do this, though, don't think of turning off your air conditioning when you go on a summer vacation—two weeks of 90 degree temperatures are usually enough to cook the bottles.



If no such space exists (or if your desire for aged wine is overruled by the true owner of the house), it's best to buy a wine refrigerator. These are available in sizes from a few bottles to many hundreds, and as plain or fancy as your budget permits. With high efficiency refrigeration systems (many today are solid state and create no vibration or noise at all), your wine can be held at an ideal temperature until it's ready for consumption. What temperature, you ask? Historically, wines were kept in deep cellars where the temperature never varied from about 55 degrees, and some people hold to that as the ideal, but any steady temperature of 70 degrees or below will preserve the wine —

the lower, the longer it will last. Just don't expect these refrigeration units to handle excessive heat loads — one acquaintance installed a unit in a garage that got as hot as 110 degrees, and the unit failed during a spell of extreme heat, requiring him to start his wine collection all over again.

If you suffer from too much money (another way of saying you haven't yet planted a vineyard or started a winery), you can buy a truly elegant wine storage unit, some of which are large enough to serve as a walk-in closet. Here's a catalog description of one that should leave all well-heeled enophiles drooling: "The artfully distressed Heirloom Oak finish of this quaint cabinet, combined with its straight lines and heavily seeded glass, creates a charisma of a laid back sort of countryside charm, yet still reflective of sophistication and maturity in any setting."