

SNOW ON WINE

Dr Jeff Snow, Education Director

About the Aging of Wine Part I



It seems that while almost everyone “knows” that wine improves with age, very few people regularly (or ever) enjoy fully mature red wine. And when folks learn about our large wine cellar there are sometimes questions which reveal a misunderstanding of wine ageing. A common one has been, “do you go to the cellar every day to rotate the bottles a quarter turn?” These are people who have visited, or read about, the legendary cellars of Champagne. During the bottle fermentation stage of sparkling wine production the partially inverted bottles are indeed rotated a quarter turn regularly, to collect the sediment in the neck of the bottle (this is called riddling). But the final product, like all wine, is best stored motionless, excluding even vibration caused by loud sound. The Rafanelli winery (where they make truly age worthy Zin and Cab) tries to correct such misunderstandings by including a “how to” card with wine shipments. (see illustration). Although most modern wine can be kept for a few years in good storage conditions without deterioration, only about 1% of wine will actually improve with age. In this two-part series this first installment discusses how to identify age worthy wine. Next month the discussion will be wine storage options – ***awful to optimal***.

Ideal Conditions For Storage

- 56-60 degrees Fahrenheit
- Store lying down
- Darkness
- Low noise levels
- No extreme temperature changes
- Humidity 60/70%

My mother taught me to avoid prepared foods with added **chemical preservatives** like sodium benzoate. But she home canned using sugar to preserve fruit in jam, acid (vinegar) to preserve cucumbers in pickles, some cherries preserved in alcohol, and cream of tartar (chemically identical to tannin) to preserve beaten egg whites in some baked goods. **Sugar, Acid, Alcohol, and Tannins**. These are the four **natural preservatives** in wine, and if at least two are abundant a wine may last many years. Think of vintage Port. It can improve for a century. It has 20% alcohol, 10% sugar, mouth puckering tannins, but also huge amounts of fruit when bottled. Wine writer Ray Isle¹ states “we age wines because we want them to get better, or at least to become different in a fascinating way. The direct fruit flavors of younger wines develop more savory nuances; tannins soften and textures become more silky; aromas gain layers of nuance and complexity.” But the aromas and flavors, derivatives of fruit, also fade with time, so having abundant fruit to begin with is essential. Writers who evaluate young wine note that the seeming intensity of fruit is less important than the length of time it persists on the palate after swallowing (or spitting). Some view ageing as a very slow race between gradually softening and mellowing tannins and acids, and fading fruit flavors.

So let us imagine that we are on a Napa wine tasting adventure to identify some great cellar candidates. We are in the tasting room at Stags Leap with beautiful views, wonderful like-minded companions, and a lovely barista pours you a rich looking red wine. You **swirl & sniff** – nice blackberry smell, then **sip** – an involuntary pucker shows gobs of tannin, and soft but abundant acid spreads laterally over the tongue. Now you **taste** black cherry, blackberry, cassis and coffee. **Swallow** -- carefully note how long fruit flavor persist on the palate. If it is minutes, not seconds, you may have found a keeper. But remember, many studies have shown that beautiful, romantic surroundings make everything seem better. Restrain the urge to “stock up” and just take one bottle as a “tryer”. More wineries await. Another day you can evaluate and compare your “treasures” in neutral surroundings where nothing distracts from the true merits of the wine itself.

When Julie and I bring “tryers” home to decide what to buy in quantity we may do several things to help us decide. First, **uncork** and **aerate** (pour through aerator, decant, swirl, etc.) take an initial taste and let time pass. Wine that seems “tighter”, may need more aggressive aeration and more time to get it to “open up” and show its stuff. Re-taste at intervals ranging from a few hours for wines that tend to mature more quickly (like Pinot noir) to days for wine like Barollo (Piedmont, Italy) or Bordeaux which may need 20 to 30 years to mature. **Rule of thumb**: 1.5 to 2 hours in a wide bottom decanter or 1 day in open bottle (poured down to it’s shoulder) approximates ageing for 1 to 2 years. **Comparison** is powerful, so we like to do this with 2 or more wines of same grape and vintage side by side. **Prejudice** can mislead, so we sometimes bag the bottles to isolate the aroma and flavor from preconceived ideas. A single layer of paper towel secured over open wine containers with an elastic band saves the lives of many fruit flies which otherwise would dive in and drown.

One final note. Today’s winemakers know that most wine is drunk the day (or even the hour) of purchase so they have developed techniques to mimic some beneficial changes of ageing. These include fining, filtration and micro-aeration and more barrel time before bottling which softens and smooths unpleasant aspects of tannins and acids. Such wines are designed for immediate consumption and early on can taste quite good -- initially better than young wines which are age worthy. However the, because the “preservatives” are reduced, they will fade with age, and will never achieve nuanced aromas, complex layered flavors, great depth, character and beauty, which can still only come with patient cellaring.