

SNOW ON WINE

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BREAKDOWN ACCELERATES AGING

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SES virtual tastings have helped all of us to escape some of our social isolation and boredom, thanks in a large part to Dave Whipple and Paul Hersey who came-up with the scheme to **breakdown** each bottle of wine for tasting into 12 small (2 oz) bottles, with one small bottle of each of 6 tasting wines in a sack for each member attending the virtual tasting. Dave, Paul and other members who cellar wine, have closely observed how wines **age** with cellaring. This **“aging”** is mimicked when open bottles are left standing, and when wine is decanted or poured through wine aerators. So naturally they expected that the **“breakdown”** would also mimic **“aging”**. Of course theory and speculation abounded, but those of us who did the **breakdowns** (pouring wine into the little 2 oz. tasting bottles) on a Friday preceding the tasting, could actually taste the wines as they came from freshly opened bottles (as SES members normally experience it at tastings), and again on a Monday night during our excellent virtual tasting events.



And this also begs the question of how to preserve leftover wine (whatever that is) for another day and how long it will keep. So dear fellow SES members, normally when you buy wine after a tasting (which participating distributors and merchants offer at generous discounts), you likely open and enjoy it within a few weeks. What you taste at home is typically essentially the same as your “taste memory” from the event. Julie and I both tasted each virtual tasting wine at breakdown (only to ensure all bottles were sound, of course). Three days later during the virtual event Julie exclaimed *“these wines taste **WAY** different now.”* “In what way,” I prodded her. *“It’s like they have aged for 3 or 4 years in our cellar, or we had decanted them for two or three hours,”* she said. As always, I of course agreed that my dear bride had hit the nail (and not me) on the head. I had made particular note of the Obsidian Cabernet (sampled at the Wanderlust Wine and Cheese Tasting), which in my humble opinion had become much better. The nose had opened-up, more layers of fruit appeared on the palate, tannins had softened, and acid balance improved.



The point is that members who purchased these wines have a “taste memory” from that virtual event. However, they should expect that when opened, the taste “right out of the bottle” will likely differ significantly from the “taste memory” they formed at the event. But it is possible to reproduce that remembered taste by allowing enough time to decant the wine. After decanting, taste it at intervals to determine how long it takes to approximate your “taste memory” from the virtual event. Don’t be surprised if it takes two or more hours in a decanter. You are now on your way to becoming a wine **aging** and **“breathing”** expert **for your own personal tastes!** And if you are into wine and food pairing, the flavor matching and contrasting works best when the wine is actually the same as your “taste memory.” Of course, to do all this you must plan ahead and open the wine much earlier than usual. Or you could just wait for four years for the wine to age before drinking it.



Now, on the preservation of “leftover wine,” there are two primary concerns: 1) limiting the amount of air exposure of the wine you are saving, and 2) slowing the rate of chemical reaction in the wine by refrigerating it.

Often by the time you realize there will be some leftover wine in the bottle, it has been open to air for some time. This cannot be undone but at least further breathing and **aging** can be slowed by sucking air out of the bottle with a vacuvin (rubber stoppers with a suction pump available at Vino! A Wine Shop and other wine stores). Even better, if you plan to drink only about half a bottle, immediately upon opening it pour off half the wine into a smaller bottle (such as a saved empty 375 ml bottle) and seal it with the cork or even better use the vacuvin.



In either case then refrigerate. It is known that in general the speed of organic chemical reactions (such as wine oxidation and aging), decreases by 1/2 for every 18 degrees F. Thus, lowering from room temperature (72 F) to fridge temp (36 F) will slow the **aging** effect by 1/4th, and thus the wine can be saved **four** times longer.

Virtual tasting has been a fine gift allowing us to continue wine education and enjoyment and socializing. But we all need to remember the effect of the big to small bottle **breakdown**, so there are not “taste surprises” when we open these little wine bottles. And if anticipating “leftover wine,” it is best to plan ahead, as this wine will change in a similar way to the virtual tasting wine after that gets broken down into the small bottles. Every wine and each palate is different but you will learn by doing and observing the results how to make these general concepts work for you.

Addendum: For SES members seeking deeper understanding, consider going to the SES website <http://spokaneenologicalsociety.org> and under the “Wineminder” tab open May 2019 and scroll down to **Snow on Wine, About the Aging of Wine, Part I**, and June 2019 **Snow on Wine, About the Aging of Wine, Part II**.

There are two other concepts to help understand how wine “opens,” “breaths,” and “ages,” after opening a bottle:

- 1) Surface to volume ratio (S/V). Imagine how the exposed wine-air interface changes from the opened wine bottle (surface is the cross section of the bottle neck at 1.5 cm² and volume is 750 ml. So $1.5/750 = 0.002$) to the small “**breakdown**” bottle (surface is cross section of bottle neck at .75 cm² and volume is 60 ml. So $.75/60 \text{ ml.} = 0.0125$). Thus, we see the “**breakdown**” bottles have a 6.25 times greater S/V. Similarly, decanters of different shape have differing S/V ratios. You can do the math, and to shorten the time it takes for a given wine to breath, chose the decanter with the larger S/V ratio.
- 2) Pouring the wine through the spout into the small bottles produces agitation and many bubbles. The surface area of bubbles is much larger than most people imagine and expose large albeit temporary surface areas of wine to air. This is why wine aerators are so effective in “breathing” newly opened wine.