

Snow on Wine



TRICKS TO KNOWING HOW A WINE WILL AGE

Dr. Jeff Snow

Education Director

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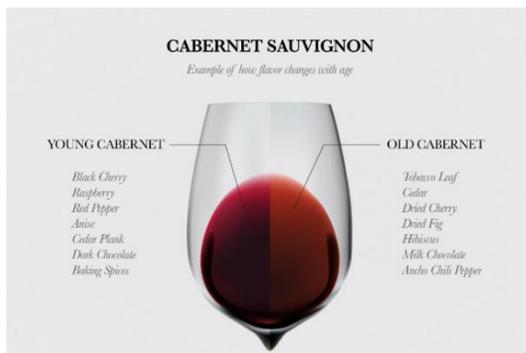


You have all likely heard the myth that wine improves with age. Most wine is as good as it will be when purchased. However, somewhat less than 1% of wine greatly benefits from bottle ageing. That same wine is in fact often unpleasant to drink young. Is it worth pursuing you ask? My unqualified answer is yes. The most lovely, soft, pleasurable to drink wines with profoundly complex layers of beautiful flavor are the result. So there are two ways to have such wine treasures. If you have deep pockets, go to wine auctions and buy old wine which wine writers have extolled. Alternatively you can devote time and effort to learning how to recognize and buy at release, a wine which has great potential.



Taste wine on release, buy those you judge age worthy, and lay them down in good storage conditions. For me this has been a lifelong learning pursuit, and a fun hobby.

Tannin, acid, and sugar are the natural preservatives which allow wine to age. But let's just focus on table wine where sugar is not a consideration. Tannin is what makes your mouth pucker. Acid makes us salivate. The large amounts of either needed for long aging can be harsh and even unpleasant when young. In aging of wine think of a "slow motion race" -- the softening of the tannin and acid, against the loss of fruit. So first and foremost, in my humble opinion, there must be an abundance of fruit. A prospective wine to age should show an initial burst of fruit. But the length of time the fruitiness persists on the palate is even more important. I look for fruit that lasts three, four or even five minutes after swallowing (or spitting). Then there will be flavor, more nuanced, complex and layered, which still remains at the end of the "race".



Tannins can vary from harsh to softer, and with aging tend to move toward softness. This happens as these polyphenolic biomolecules polymerize – in other words, form longer chains. In general, the longer and larger the molecule, the softer and less astringent it seems on the palate. Eventually the molecules become so large that they precipitate and form sediment, further reducing the wines astringency. Shining a light through the bottle and seeing the accumulated sediment can be a useful sign about how this component of aging is progressing. Tannins are also balanced by acids which contribute fresh, tart and sour sensations which "balance" the bitter astringency of tannins.

The three most important acids in finished wine are 1) tartaric, 2) malic and 3) lactic acid. During aging tartaric acid may precipitate with tannins. Tartaric acid is important in maintaining color, so seeing the initial deep violaceous red fade gradually to brick is a sign of aging progress. The slow infusion of oxygen through the glass/cork interface of the bottle closure reacts with acids to help soften them. Malic acid is named for “la mela” or apple, and is crisp like a “granny smith” apple. A little helps maintain the fresh fruit sense – too much makes it harsh.

Well made red wine will have had secondary malolactic fermentation in barrel prior to bottling to convert much of it into the softer butter like lactic acid. Further softening and integration occurs with time in bottle.



That is the “nutshell” you need to start building a cellar of well aged wine. To perfect the skill of identifying ageable wine, and the ageing timeline each needs, you must study the wine. At purchase make extensive notes of what you tasted, then buy a good quantity to lay down (usually 1 case). Now, after a few years open 1 bottle, and then every 6 to 12 months, making extensive notes each time. If you drink the last bottle before the wine begins to fade and loose fruit you will never know how much further it could go and what additional nuances might develop. And you must do this with

different sorts of grapes and different appellations. Bordeaux varietals, Rhone varietals, and Pinot Noir all age much differently. Furthermore, Bordeaux varietals from France and California age differently, but in my experience Bordeaux and Walla Walla Cabs and Merlots very similarly. Likewise Pinot Noir from Burgundy, California and Oregon are different animals. As an example, in the last few months Julie and I have shared two fully mature 1986 Bordeaux wines, and several Washington and California Cabs from 1997 to 2003, and found similar fully mature California or nearing maturity Washington -- all wonderfully developed wine. Quite a variable time horizon for one grape family!

If you are beginning your wine aging journey don't hesitate to talk with any older SES members who have long experience in wine aging. You will certainly get a variety of opinions, as pallets do vary. But you will find much agreement as well.



Often at tastings ageable wines tend to be more spendy, and will receive less popular votes (for most members it's about which drinks best now). That is usually because the “preservatives” (tannin and acid) dominate and make the wine harsh. Saving some wine in the glass for air exposure up to an hour can help you see past this to the persistent fruit. If you are unsure, buy a bottle, open it at home, and taste a glass a day for 4 or 5 days, leaving the bottle uncorked but covered with a layer of muslin to keep fruit flies out.

As your experience and your cellar grow, your skill and confidence will develop into excellence, and you and your family and friends will enjoy delightful wine.