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Proper Storage Brings Out Wine's Best

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: If you have ever brought home more wine than one evening's dinner required, or couldn't resist buying a case at that enticing discount, it's time to consider the care and storing of wine.

A wine cellar isn't always a practical solution, but wine should be protected from heat and light, the twin demons of wine spoilage. You don't have to lay a wine bottle on its side unless it won't be opened for some time. Still, you want to avoid having a dried-out cork.

Heat and light should not be present in your choice of wine store, either. Fluorescent lights, in particular, can play havoc with wine. If only the high-dollar wines are kept in a special cellar, while the lower-priced stuff is subjected to room temperature under rows of fluorescents, you might want to consider another store. Unless the store moves wine out quickly, the effect on sitting wine will not be good.

Opened white wines can survive for at least a week in the refrigerator, but don't try that with red wine unless you're using it for cooking. Various products like VacuVend remove air from a partially empty wine bottle, preserving the red wine for one or two days, and are well-worth the money in saved wine.

The oxidation of wine begins when the wine is first opened. The first breath of life is good for both reds and whites, and while many white wines do not require a long time before consumption, red wines do.

Unless it is a light-bodied red, such as a Beaujolais, allow at least an hour for the wine to breathe. Some complex, big reds may require up to two hours before they can be fully appreciated.

For those of you impatient to taste the wine, and I belong in that category, consider that if you drink the wine too soon, you are getting only a fraction of its qualities. I can't tell you how many times I've said, "Wow, this wine is tasting great now," just as I finished the last half glass.

A quality corkscrew

One solution to this long, long wait is the wine decanter. Before wine filtering became the standard, winemakers used decanters to remove the sediment that forms at the base of the bottle. Now the decanter can be used to oxidize the wine and shorten the waiting time.

It's called a flash decant, and you can achieve it by pouring the wine

rapidly into the decanter, shaving 20 minutes off the wait. By continuously swirling the wine in the decanter, even more time can be stripped off, but please don't use a blender. Overkill.

Investing in a quality corkscrew is also a good idea; cheap ones are best employed to chew up the cork and leave lots of cork deposits in the wine. Oops, time for the decanter again. Many older style corkscrews don't do well with synthetic corks either, which are becoming much more common as cork prices spiral upward. It's well worth your while to invest in a well-designed, user-friendly corkscrew.

Know the numbers

A chart of serving temperatures is also good to have on hand. A red wine that is too cold closes down its taste, while serving it too warm may make a big red too big for your palate. The "right temperature" varies with the wine and your own taste. Try tasting wines at different temperatures; you'll be surprised at the changes.

If you buy wine by the case, a wine cellar is a must unless you have a cellar under your house. Most of us in the Southwest do not. Free-standing wine cellars are available in anything from 50 bottles to 1,000 or more. Mine holds 880 bottles, or it would if I didn't keep taking bottles out. These units have their own compressor, similar to those found on refrigerators. Fancy glass-door versions get a bit pricey, unless you like to show off your wine cellar.

Do-it-yourselfers can also purchase wine racks and compressors separately and turn a closet into a wine cellar. However, moving a built-in unit is not too easy. I had my free-standing cellar shipped here from California, but I transported the wine myself. (I saw the way the moving guys were eyeing all those bottles.) My car was scraping bottom the entire trip, but I didn't lose one bottle.

After wine is transported— either because you bought it via the Internet or while on a winery tour, allow a few days for the wine to settle into its new home. This is particularly true of red wines.

How long does wine keep? Most white wines are ready to drink immediately, but some will benefit from one to two years in the cellar. In the past, red wines, even domestic ones, could be laid down for several years before drinking. In the 1980s many winemakers, realizing the American penchant for instant gratification, created red wines ready to drink when purchased or within two to three years. Many French red wines are still crafted the old way, but be very careful with domestics. If in doubt, ask the winery. The only thing worse than opening a bottle too soon, is opening it too late. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com.

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