



About the Aging of Wine - Part II

Dr. Jeff Snow

So now that you have done the tough work of finding those “one percent of wines” capable of improvement with age (refer to May WineMinder’s “Part I”), let’s learn where to store your “treasure” to best develop those beautifully subtle and complex flavors unique to well-aged wine.

Wine writer Ray Isle¹ accompanied a marine archeologist diving into a 150 year-old shipwreck in the Bahamas, recovered intact wine bottles, then at a public event, opened one with a panel of four Master Sommeliers. After decanting it, “it was exactly the color of a cement sidewalk,” with a foul odor and a taste that was “God awful.” Why so bad? Three reasons he said, “**Temperature, temperature and temperature**”¹. Bahamian water temperature is in the 70 °s, far above his ideal of 55° F, or the range of 50° and 60° F which the Rafanelli family recommends to their customers (see Part I inset). When we are at home temperature in living areas are in the 70 °s, like Bahamian seas. Temperature fluctuation, which expands and contracts the wine, sucking in tiny amounts of air with each cycle, further threatens the wine. Think of your HVAC system and programed thermostat. And in the kitchen, especially above the refrigerator or stove. And sun filled windows and opening and closing of doors. Don’t forget hot water tanks, or water pipes, sewer pipes, and air ducts hidden in walls, ceilings and floors. So, living areas don’t work well and the worst is in the kitchen above the refrigerator or (DUH) stove.

My first basement wine cellar, in 1982, was insulated from the living areas; far from furnace, hot water tank, with no pipes or vents in walls, and on center north side, worked well for temperature. However, humidity went too low in winter and I had some corks dry out and fail. Well, why not a buy a wine storage unit? Humidity controlled, and ideal temperature range with small and probably acceptable fluctuations inherent in thermostats. So sensible but somewhat limited in size. So I bought, “How and Why To Build a Passive Wine Cellar,” by Richard M. Gold, PhD.²

In 1992 our new home was built around a wine room, carved into the granite of Browne Mt, with thermal breaks in the concrete walls and floor, double framed and insulated 40R from living areas and vapor barriers. I had to prevent humidity getting too high causing mold on corks and labels. We can tell you it really does work, especially with ageing over 15 years. If you are a fanatic, borrow the book, then build your own. But if you just find a dark quiet place, keep the temperature

in the range 50-60°F with a cooling unit, insulate to minimize temperature fluctuation, and control the humidity at 60-65%, your best wines will get even better.

So when to open and enjoy a treasured bottle? There are “rules of thumb”. Gamay up to 5 years, Pinot Noir and Syrah 5 to 10 years, Bordeaux grapes 10 to 20 years, but vintage conditions and winemaking methods can change these. Once that cork is pulled you can’t put it back. Buying many bottles and opening them occasionally to judge development is a great teacher, but it means drinking many bottles before their peak. Relax. Today we can sample an ounce or two with cork in place using CORAVIN. Totally neutral Argon gas displaces wine and if not mature it can go back into cellar and will age as if nothing happened.

Here are some practical tips on wine cellaring that I learned years ago from old guys who had years of experience, while sipping an ancient port with them:

- Sure, wine is romantic, and you want to be *that guy*. But *don't display* ageing wine. Light, handling, temperature fluctuation, and vibration will diminish quality. Instead display memorable empties, perhaps with tasting and occasion notes.
- Occasionally shine a flashlight into red wine to detect sediment forming along the bottom of the bottle. This is an early sign of maturity as tannins soften and precipitate.
- Store wine with the label up so sediment forms on the opposite side. Then pouring with the label up lets the wine run off and leaves the sediment in the bottle.
- As a wine batch nears expected maturity, check for any wine residue on capsules. This indicates early cork failure, and hence a bottle which may be maturing more rapidly than its peers, but still good. Open it TONIGHT!
- Temperature stability in a wine storage area improves as more bottles are added, because wine is 85% water, and water has high heat inertia. Not enough wine? Interspersed bottles of water work just as well to moderate temperature fluctuation.

- 1) Isle, Ray, “The True Tale of a Shipwrecked Wine”, Food and Wine, August 2015, pp 82 – 85.
- 2) Gold, Richard M., PhD, “how and Why To Build a Passive Wine Cellar”, Sand Hill Publishing, Amherst, MA, 1983.