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## Wine & Aging

Patience is a Virtue: Looking for the sweet spot as wine waxes and wanes.

By Francis Fecteau

It's a common phenomenon: We open prized bottles, expecting a prize experience. We labor through several glasses of wine over the first few hours, but it's only during the final sips that we glimpse of greatness. "Damn it," we say, "next time we will wait and be patient." And yet, we never, ever do.

Well, with the holidays nigh, prized bottles are sure to be opened and my holiday wish for you is a measure of patience. Good wine demands it.

My brother in Seattle and I spent the recent Thanksgiving holiday exercising our palates. My brother is always good company—a hale and hearty drinker and, like myself, a fancier of all things fine and bottled. A multitude of great things were opened. Epic wines were uncorked and aired. It's a great strategy: Rather than wait for one wine to bloom, have several blossoms to investigate.

My brother and I left the wines open for three days and tasted them as the holiday wiled away. We were treated to a rollercoaster of viti-cultural expressiveness, much like watching the subway race on the big screen at Yankee Stadium during the seventh-inning stretch—wines surged and waned, thrilling at every turn until they expired.

How do we get to that "big moment" every time—that perfect sweet spot where the right wine seduces the palate? Well, wine is a food product. Once exposed to oxygen, it begins its inevitable downward slide towards vinegary death. Acetobacter takes over, converting alcohol to vinegar, and before we know it, the wine is sour and bitter. Each bottle is going to undergo a significantly different decay curve. Some will show a long, undulating thrill ride to the finish; others will crash and burn quickly. So, how do we fight, or at least delay, this inevitable wine death?

Reading the labels can help. For example, over the years I've noticed that high-alcohol wines fall flat quicker than low-alcohol wines. Wines with 14.5 percent alcohol or greater show a shorter life span, once opened. Low-acid means a quicker decay, while wines with a higher acid content are slower to deteriorate.

Keeping the wine on the rack is not a fix-all. There is always a minute oxygen exchange going on via the wine bottle closure. So even wines stashed away will eventually be rendered "over the hill." Think, then, of drinking pleasure as catching lightning in a bottle—you can't avoid the inevitable crash. Much like life itself, we just try to enjoy the undulating ride.

There are a variety of strategies that don't involve the excesses that my brother and I employed—although, admittedly, there is a charm to tasting several bottles at once over a span of hours (or days) with friends. If you know consumption is looming, pull the cork ahead of time and pour off a glass. This allows you the luxury of smelling the wine for flaws, ensuring its good health and getting a taste before the guests do. Remember, wine breathes in proportion to the surface area exposed to air.

Always store any unfinished wine upright in a cool dark place; a refrigerator is best. Chilling wine slows the oxidative processes and the wine stays drinkable longer. Be sure to allow the wine to return to its proper drinking temperature, and then taste how it develops over time. Once the aromas of vinegar appear, the wine lets us know that it's finished.

A bottle of wine doesn't need to be consumed in one sitting. Patience is a necessity in understanding the mysteries of what's in the bottle. And, patiently witnessing a wine's evolution can prove immensely rewarding.

*Francis Fecteau is owner of Libation, a wine brokerage.*

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