



To Age or Not to Age Wine?

By: Allison Bettin





Photo courtesy of: aglassandabottle.blogspot.com and Winefolly.com

Much like humans, a bottle of wine endures a fascinating and complex life journey. There is the nature of things - the vines, the grapes, the sunshine and rain. And there is the nurture of things - the winemaking, the oak aging, the cork used and the particular position a bottle is stored in. All these nuances will acquiesce into a wine of unique distinction and character, with its own unique terroir. And much like us, a bottle struggles its way to that golden hour when time offers clarity, complexity, and wholeness.

Yes, wine really does get better with age... at least some do. And while it's easy to be seduced by the magic and romanticism of it all, it's really a science. In each bottle you'll find a solution of alcohol, acids, phenolic compounds, and flavor compounds, all of which are constantly reacting to each other. Their complex interactions are why a wine changes over time, for better or worse.

Let's use an Old World, high-end Bordeaux as our test subject. The Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc grapes used to make this wine were picked at their peak, when ripeness and acidity levels were in balance. The winemaker aged this blend in a combination of new and used oak barrels, to complement the wine's natural complexity. Real corks, made from cork trees, were used to allow for a very, very small amount of oxygen to seep in as it lays aging in its cellar.

After years, or perhaps, a couple of decades in the cellar, our Bordeaux has reached its peak. With much anticipation, we pour. Immediately we notice it has lost its vibrant ruby hue, and pours with a brown tinge. Yes, this is normal - red wine loses color as it ages. As oxygen slowly interacts with an aging wine, its phenolic compounds begin to bind together, like little magnets. These are the compounds responsible for tannin, the mouth-drying component that makes our young

Bordeaux taste so astringent. They are also responsible for a wine's color. The phenolics will continue to bind until they become so large, and so heavy, that they fall to the bottom of the bottle as sediment. And so, we see our wine has lost its vibrant color, and we can expect its tannins to be less punchy.

Back to our glass. We smell and taste. Our wine is softer than it was in its youth, with noticeably silkier tannins. Now we know why! It's also a little less fruity. This is because esters, which once made our wine taste fresh and vibrant, were destroyed in the aging process. Ripe current and black cherry have yielded to dried fruits, leather and spice. But somehow, it's better. What was once tightly wound, tannin packed and fruit forward is now open, elegant, and balanced, with layers upon layers of complex flavors. Our wine is in its golden hour, a delight to behold... and to drink.

After such an experience, one could surmise that all wines should be laid to rest for years! Unfortunately, that's not the case. Our Bordeaux was crafted for the cellar, but most wines on the market, an estimated 99%, are in fact made to be drunk immediately. Let's take an inexpensive California Cabernet Sauvignon as our example. The grapes for this wine were most likely picked when over-ripe, leading to super jammy fruit flavors and low acidity. The winemaker would have allowed little time for the wine to age in oak, and the bottle was most likely sealed with a screw cap or a faux cork, allowing the wine nearly no oxygen contact.

When the wine is young, it's a crowd pleaser... jammy and fruity. But if we were to let this wine sit for years in the cellar, it too would lose its fruit flavors, just like our Bordeaux. The problem is, there's really not much complexity to make up for this loss, and there wasn't much acidity in the first place to keep the wine vibrant. Now it tastes flat, lifeless. So are the woes of a wine aging experimentalist. The good news is there are some hard and fast rules when it comes to knowing which wines should age and which should not.



Photo courtesy of: aglassandabottle.blogspot.com and Winefolly.com

The most important, by and far, is that a wine needs excellent structure to age, as we saw when comparing our two wines. High tannin, high acidity, and even high sugar content all act as natural preservatives, affording the wine greater longevity. This is why wines like red Bordeaux (high tannin), German Riesling (high acidity), and Port (high sugar content) are classically known to age well.

White wines are often overlooked in the cellar, but can offer incredible wine tasting experiences when aged. Oak-aged Chardonnays, for example, age exceptionally well due to higher tannins imparted by oak. And cool-climate Rieslings, like those from Germany and America's northern states, have such high acidity levels they can last for decades.

Another simple rule? Corks. Wines that are sealed with screw caps or faux corks offer almost zero oxygen exposure, and are almost exclusively meant to be drunk young. There have been studies that show that some wines can in fact age with a screw cap, but they're very, very rare. Real corks, made from cork trees, allow wine the opportunity to breathe, offering a chance for those wonderful chemical reactions to happen in the bottle.

But not every wine with a cork is meant to be aged. In fact, corks are often used as a sneaky marketing tactic. Wines with corks often look more expensive, and can fetch higher prices than those sealed with a screw cap. So the best way to ensure your bottle was crafted to be laid to rest is to chat with the winemaker, or to consult a rating site. If you're buying directly from the vineyard, ask the winemaker when you should open the bottle. No one knows better than the craftsman him/herself. Many are now including this information on the label,

"In fact, corks are often used as a sneaky marketing tactic. Wines with corks often look more expensive, and can fetch higher prices than those sealed with a screw cap."

too. Bonafide wine scorers also offer keen insight as to aging potential, and often include a time frame for peak drinkability at the end of a review.

If you're eager to start your own wine cellar, it is best to invest in proper equipment to keep your wine safe. There are many wine refrigerators with temperature control on the market, at all different price points and sizes.

They keep your wine at the proper temperature (55 is the magic number) without the massive investment of converting your basement into a cellar. Always keep wines laid on their side to allow the liquid to keep the cork moist - corks can, and do, shrivel up and fall into the bottle if they dry out.

But most importantly, choose wines that are ageable, and that you want to drink. In general, the more expensive, the more likely to have aging success. Yes, aging wine is an investment, both in time and money. But for those who can see beauty in craftsmanship, and the poetic passage of time, it is well worth the expense.



About the Author

Allison Bettin is a wine columnist and industry professional, with a Level III Award in Wine and Spirits from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust. She has been a passionate student of wine for the last decade.