Which wines are worth ageing

6 Oct 2006 by JR

Whether to store wine

Most wine made today should be drunk as young as possible, while its youthful fruit can be enjoyed. But the myth that all wine improves with age lingers on and the reality is that far more wine is drunk too late than too early.

Wine, like any fresh food, changes with time. But whereas most consumables deteriorate from the moment we buy them, wine is one of the very few things we buy regularly that has the capacity to change for the better. Perhaps the top 10 per cent of all reds and five per cent of all whites (and those are generous estimates) will be more pleasurable and more interesting to drink when they are five years old than at one year old.

The top one per cent of all wine made has the ability to improve for a decade or two or, in some cases, even more. The great majority of all wine, however, will actually start to lose the fruitiness that gives it youthful appeal within six months of being bottled. But how is the poor old consumer to identify which bottles to store lovingly and which to consume as fast as he or she possibly can?

The supermarkets, to give them credit, have in recent years responded quite well to this problem. Many back labels on their own bottlings give specific advice on when to open them (typically 'within six months to a year of purchase'). But it can be extremely difficult to get reliable advice on when to open finer wines. How many people realise, for example, that the most expensive bottles of red wine in a store are probably those least likely to give pleasure that evening - because they are the ones with a long life expectancy which have been stacked full of mouth-puckering, inky tannin and are generally commercially available only in their youth?

The most obvious candidates for long-term ageing in bottle are reds made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah and Nebbiolo, botrytized sweet wines such as top Sauternes, Loire wines made from the Chenin Blanc grape, most wines made from the Riesling grape and expensive white burgundy.

Much is made of a wine's need to 'settle down' after a journey, and certainly any wine with a sediment (i.e. no wine younger than five years old) will need to be stood upright for an hour or two simply to allow the deposit to fall. But it is difficult to see what would be particularly traumatic for a bottle about its journey from shelf to household. The most traumatic operation a wine is ever likely to be subjected to is bottling, and many commercial bottling lines shake up the wine so much, and expose it to so much oxygen, that it can take some weeks afterwards to recover from 'bottle sickness', before all its ingredients have fully reacted with the oxygen that has dissolved in the wine. More sophisticated bottling lines treat wine more gently by using inert gas. Some wines, particularly slightly sweet, very cheap ones, may be pasteurized before bottling so that they are incapable of any change in bottle. But how is the consumer to know how long ago a wine was bottled and in what way? The best advice I can give is to relax. Unless a wine has sediment, or is extremely expensive, it can usually be opened as soon as you like.

What happens when wine ages?

The more fruit, acid and phenolics that go into a bottle of wine at the beginning, the more complex interactions there can be between all these compounds and the more rewarding it can be to age that bottle. This means that the less water there is in the grape (and therefore the thicker the grape variety's skins, as a result of a drier growing season or less irrigation used), the more likely it is that the resulting wine will repay cellaring. Tannins and colouring matter known as anthocyanins are the most obvious types of phenolics and what preserves red wine as these interactions occur. These and other compounds continue to interact, forming bigger and bigger complex compounds which after a few years are too big to remain in solution and are precipitated as sediment. So as good quality, concentrated red wine ages it becomes paler and softer to taste, while gaining considerably in the range of flavours it presents (which by now constitute a bouquet rather than simple aromas). Any red wine with visible sediment is likely to have completed quite a bit of its ageing process. Even less is known about how white wine ages, although acidity is thought to be the preservative white counterpart to tannin.

Certainly, the longest-lived white wines are those with good extract but good acidity too. The fact that white wines have far fewer phenolics explains why fewer of them can last as long in bottle (although botrytis, or 'noble rot', can preserve sweet white wines for decades). Very few rosé wines improve with age, presumably because they tend to have less acidity than white wines and far fewer phenolics than reds.

Wines to drink as young as possible

It follows from the section above that the great majority of wines, made to be easy to appreciate in youth, are not worth giving 'bottle age', the jargon for what happens when wine is kept for years in sealed bottles. The economics of producing almost any wine selling for less than about £5/$10 a bottle mean that there is unlikely to be a sufficient concentration of ageable ingredients in that bottle. (The only possible exception to this might be an inexpensive non-irrigated red from an under-developed wine region such as some in Greece, Morocco, Argentina or parts of Spain.) All of the following should usually be drunk within a year or bottling, and ideally even sooner when their youthful fruit is at its most obvious:

table wine (Europe)

jug wine (US)

wine in boxes, cans or tetrapaks

less expensive vins de pays

nouveau/primeur/novello wines

branded wines under £5/$10 – indeed most branded wines

rosé and blush wines

inexpensive sparkling wine

vermouth, basic port, most sherry, all spirits, sweet Muscats

Wines that repay keeping

In very general terms, the more expensive a bottle, the more it will repay bottle ageing. One simple clue to how long to keep a bottle is (yet again) the principal grape variety from which it was made. Below are some rough guidelines with an approximate number of years in bottle in brackets (although there is considerable variation between wine regions and different vintage conditions):

Red wines

Agiorgitiko of Greece (4–10)
Aglianico of Campania (4–15)
Baga of Bairrada (4–12)

Cabernet Sauvignon (4–20)

Grenache/Garnacha (3–12)
Melnik of Bulgaria (3–7)
Merlot (2–10)
Nebbiolo (4–20)
Pinot Noir (2–8)
Rabosso of Piave (4–8)
Sangiovese (2–8)
Saperavi of Georgia (3–10)

Syrah/Shiraz (4–16)

Tannat of Madiran (4–12)
Tempranillo of Spain (2–8)
Zinfandel (2–8)

White wines

Botrytised wines (5–25)
Chardonnay (2–6)
Furmint of Hungary (3–25)
Hunter Valley Semillon (5–15)
Loire Chenin Blanc (4–30)
Petit Manseng of Jurançon (3–10)
Riesling (2–30)

Storage conditions, about which I shall write elsewhere, can affect the rate at which wine ages.