



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## AGEING GRACEFULLY

WHEN you are a spectator at the Penfolds recorking clinic you quickly realise that there are a lot of old bottles rattling around cellars that should have been drunk many moons ago. People either store them incorrectly or they amass cellars often without a reasonable chance of ever drinking them. It's a shame. Wine is made to drink.

The home cellar can be a fixture of a palatial home or a showpiece in a modest one. It ranges from a DIY 50 bottle "under the stairs or house" type, to an architecturally designed 1000+ bottle temperature controlled palace fit to entertain in. Alternatively, if there is no space at home, or you are frightened about uninvited vino visitors, you can outsource the job to companies such as Wine Ark, Artisan Wine Storage and others.

To mature correctly, wine must be stored in the right conditions. Wine requires a constant temperature of around 15C without too much fluctuation. If the temperature varies say by 10C in a year (or a day) then the expansion of the liquid puts pressure on the cork and the seal it has on the bottle. If the cork seal is weakened then air (oxygen) will get into the bottle and the wine will oxidise. Because each cork is different, no two bottles will oxidise at the same rate, so we get what is called random oxidation.

Some students ask me why we don't simply keep wines in a fridge all the time to achieve a cool, constant temperature. Unfortunately, low temperatures have the effect of suspending the natural development of a wine and also the humidity is too low in a fridge. Humidity must be controlled. If the cork dries out and shrivels the seal will fail allowing, once again, oxygen to enter. This is why cork-sealed wine must be stored horizontally so the wine can keep the cork moist at one end. Seventy per cent humidity is regarded as ideal conditions. Cork is a

natural renewable product and as such it breathes, so wines have the potential of picking up undesirable odours from a damp cellar or garlicky fridge. However, not all fridges are bad. Depending on the amount of wine you acquire a specially designed wine fridge from companies such as EuroCave or Vintec/Transtherm might be all that is needed.

You could try and build your own cellar and install an airconditioner to maintain a constant temperature, but again the humidity has to be monitored and unless it is controlled you might suffer from rotting labels, or on the other hand, labels that dry out and fall off. Wrapping the bottles in cling

### *Why store a wine for 10+ years to only be rewarded with a faulty product?*

film will preserve the labels, but it could be a laborious process. In a home-built cellar a digital temperature gauge/weather station is a must to monitor both the temperature fluctuations and humidity level. Many natural European cellars seem ideal, but are a breeding ground for mould. I recall the fabulous cellars of Couly Dutheil dug into the chalk cliffs in the town of Chinon in the Loire Valley as a classic example. Deep in the 10th century cellars the bottles were all covered in a fine, deep dusting of mould that obscured the labels, but was so fine and dry that you could literally blow the spores off. With many wines going back 50 years it turned out to be a perfect cellar.

In Australia cork is becoming a nostalgia product - old technology. It's demise and the rise of screw caps has similarities with other products. Analogue products such as vinyl records and Polaroid cameras are

attracting niche markets over their modern digital superiors. However, cork will never challenge screw cap until the threat of TCA (cork taint) is totally removed. Why store a wine for 10+ years to only be rewarded with a faulty product?

In a cellar screw caps are low maintenance compared to cork. They are not affected by humidity, they don't allow any odours to affect the wine and they resist temperature variation a lot better than cork. Screw cap closures provide uniformity in ageing capabilities. They can also be stored standing up, which may change the entire design of the cellar. However, consultant and educator Alison Eisermann MW has done extensive research into the damage done to screw cap closures during and after bottling, and she does warn against being too rough when handling screw caps. "You need to ensure there is no cap to cap impact when taking them from the box to the racks," she warns. This is to avoid damaging the seal between the cap and bottle and risking air getting in. This is a general rule in purchasing wine as well, just be on the lookout for damaged caps in the bottle shop before buying. Eisermann also thinks it is a good idea for restaurants to present the cap like they do a cork.

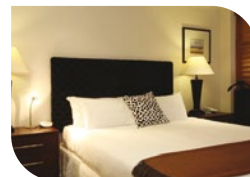
You also need to decide if you like the smell and taste of older wine. It is an acquired taste and you shouldn't feel pressured to like an aged wine. Wines undergo complex changes in the bottle. Chemical reaction such as hydrolysis which releases a flavour precursor called glycosides occurs. Colour and tannins fall out of the wine as sediment (deposit) in a process called polymerisation, which is one reason to decant a wine. Esterification will occur when acid and alcohol react with each other and produce bottle aged esters with distinctive aromas, which at their most advanced and unattractive stage, smell like nail polish remover. So as the wine ages the

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primary fruit aromas and tannins become more discreet and tertiary aromas start to appear such as leather, medicinal, earthy, coffee, mushroom, roasted nuts, prune and truffle for reds. While white wines develop honey, toast, dried fruits and raisin.

Aged wine under cork of say 10 to 20 years will slowly start to develop ullage, in other words, the fill levels will drop from the high neck of the bottle to as low as the shoulder (on a Bordeaux style bottle). It occurs as the wine soaks into the cork and is lost through evaporation. I've watched this happen with my own riesling trials and after 16 years of side-by-side cellaring of the same wine under screw cap and cork the latter has lost a good 1cm in ullage, while the screw cap fill level has not dropped at all. As a rule you should always purchase wine with the highest fill levels and subsequently drink mature wines with the lowest fill level.

A final word on choosing wine for your cellar. Balance is the key. Don't just consider your favourite wine style, try and accommodate everyone's palate and a potential food match. The cellar could be divided up into sections (and possibly easy interpreted signs) - current drinking (go for it!), medium-term ageing (sleeping- do not disturb) and long-term ageing wines (warning - do not touch) as well as a section of wines set aside to drink when you are not at home to supervise!



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