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COMING OF AGE

WINE is a glorious way to celebrate a milestone, be it a birthday, wedding anniversary or new arrival to the family. It can be a spontaneous act of bravado, splashing out on an expensive bottle of fizz or it might be a well-thought-out plan with the wine being purchased many years before the event and nursed carefully in a cool, dark cellar or swish, swanky wine cabinet.

Uncorking an aged wine can be a challenging proposition and once open they pose a few risks. When friends share their special bottles with me and we cautiously sip their wine, I see that apprehensive look on their face as they ask: "is it OK?" and, "should it taste like this?" The truth is, far too many people like and drink young wine, and when confronted with an aged wine they find it is not to their taste. However, the opportunity to open an old bottle is what separates wine from other beverages because it is such a unique experience.

Red wine is the most common special occasion wine, but there are other options. For example, a good quality vintage sparkling wine or, better still, champagne is one option. In my experience a Blanc de Blanc style (made from 100 per cent chardonnay) can last for up to 20 years. These wines will have higher levels of acidity which is a key to its longevity. What you will find on tasting mature champagne, is that it has lost a touch of its sparkle but will have gained weight/body and have toasty, honey notes. The oldest champagne I've tasted was a 1945 and it had only a whisper of fizz left inside and was really like drinking an old white wine, but still enjoyable.

White wines are another option, especially unwooded styles. Admittedly, they are not often the "prestige" labels, but still offer excellent cellaring opportunities at a fraction of the cost of most red wines. First and foremost is Hunter Valley semillon, a wine that can effortlessly age for up to 20 years. They retain their acidity well and can still taste zesty with flavours of lemon zest or curd, lanolin, honey and toast. In blind tastings they are

often confused with an oaked wine. Riesling is another option for extended ageing. These pick up similar aromas as semillon as well as kerosene or petrol. France's sauternes is the leading region for this style and they can age beautifully, still drinking well after 20 years in a good vintage. The key again is their high acidity. Our own Riverina examples also have some longevity. When they get a couple of decades under their belt they become more savoury, nutty and dryer. I'd also recommend 5 or 6 Puttonyos Tokaji from Hungary.

Delicious French Vouvray, made from chenin blanc, from the Loire Valley can last for up to 30 years. With high acidity and often some botrytis characters, either demi-sec or sweet in style, the wine is concentrated with custard

shiraz. Internationally, Bordeaux takes the cake for cabernet sauvignon and merlot, while the Northern Rhone is home to syrah. Barolo and barbaresco are Italy's best bet for ageing, although the style has been modernised over recent years and it might not be as age-worthy as it once was. Barolo is an enigma, it can display roast meats, roses, herbs, licorice or raisins. Valpolicella amarone or recioto is worth a mention with some spectacular aged wines showing lovely dried fruit and richness.

Wines undergo complex changes in the bottle. Chemical reaction such as hydrolysis which releases a flavour precursor called glycosides occurs slowly. Colour and tannins fall out of the wine as sediment in a

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apple, honey, apricot and lanolin flavours. If you have a sweet tooth the dessert wines from the Loire such as Quarts de Chaume are also age worthy but hard to come by in Australia.

With the exception of chablis, chardonnay can only aspire to medium-term cellaring, but if you want to try ageing them it is prudent to choose a barrel fermented wine over one that is fermented then transferred to barrel, and one that has only limited malolactic fermentation. There are exceptions, with some Beechworth chardonnays clearly drinking well at the 10-year mark.

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process called polymerization. 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. The esterification process softens a wine's acidity.

So as the wine ages the primary fruit aromas and tannins become more discreet, tertiary aromas start to appear such as cigar box, leather, medicinal, earthy, coffee, mushroom, caramel, roasted nuts, toasty, licorice, prune, dried fruits and truffle.

A final suggestion would be vintage port as a wine to age. These wines of the Douro Valley in Portugal are made with the express purpose of ageing in the bottle for 15 to 20 years where they display dried fruit, prunes, chocolate and earthy aromas. Australian "vintage" is often richer and requires even longer to mature, and is a suitable birthday wine for even old chaps like me.