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THE SPECIALIST CLINIC FOR A FREE CONSULTATION AND TREATMENT

LONG-TERM cellaring it can be a bit of a lottery. Did the cork hold? Is the wine past its best or was it still too young to drink? Once you open it, there's no turning back. Trying to work out the optimum drinking age, after factoring in your particular cellaring conditions, is fraught with danger. But what if you could preview the wine before opening it?

That is what happens at the Penfolds red wine recorking clinic, now into its 18th year. The experts have tasted and then recorked an incredible 100,000 bottles and, while around 80 per cent have been Grange, the service is open to all Penfolds reds. The clinics are held in all major cities in Australia as well as overseas destinations such as Los Angeles and Hong Kong.

The Treasury room at Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel was a recent venue, aptly named as Foster's global wine business had just been rebadged as Treasury Wine Estates. As you enter

with the owners the patients' well-being. He carefully assesses its condition, building a biography of the wine - how long has it been owned; what have the cellaring conditions been; is the label in pristine condition, which is an indication of the storage conditions. If the wine is to be 'examined' further then the capsule is cut so the ullage - the fill level of the wine and the loss from leakage or evaporation - and cork condition can be seen more clearly. At this point comes a discussion about what to expect when the cork is pulled, softening the owner up for, "I'm afraid I've got some bad news".

The winemakers have cracked the art of opening old bottles with fragile corks. Tools in their armoury include the twin prong, Ah-So opener or Butler's Friend. This gadget teases down the sides of the cork without piercing it and the cork is extracted with a twist and pull action. This takes practice, but it does

knows there is bad news coming. In a Bordeaux-shape bottle if the ullage level is anywhere in the neck of the bottle then it is a good sign. Wine levels at the very top/very high shoulder are expected in a wine of 20 years or older. High shoulder is okay, while mid-high shoulder, mid-shoulder and, finally, low-mid-shoulder are all treated as signs that the cork has lost its grip, allowing evaporation and/or leakage to occur. This invariably means the onset of bad oxidation.

Immediately on opening, the wine is gassed with a mixture of nitrogen and carbon dioxide to protect it in the open bottle. The wine is tasted and checked against the current tasting note for the vintage of a perfectly cellared museum example. Now the owner gets the chance to taste - an invaluable chance to check the progress of the wine and decide, with expert advice, when to drink it or sell it. The wine is now topped up with the current vintage, Grange with Grange, Bin 707 with Bin 707 and so on. The maximum addition is 10-15ml, equating to around 2 per cent, which Penfolds believe does not affect the integrity of the old wine. Wines that do not pass the taste test get a white spot stuck on their shoulder, are resealed with a plain cork and are not topped up.

If the wine is approved, a clinic label, numbered, dated and signed by a Penfolds winemaker, is attached to the back of the bottle to certify its condition. While this is an excellent way of building customer brand loyalty it is also gets bad bottles out of the secondary market and provides a measure of quality assurance to future purchasers. Finally, after levels are checked, bottles are resealed with either a Grange cork or Penfolds corks for all other clinic wines, then capsulated.

This is a free service. You can line up with one or a couple of dozen bottles, whatever Penfolds reds you like, and the service is the same.

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the receptionist ticks you off on the appointment list and asks you to take a seat. The similarities to a medical appointment are abundant. White-coated medico-types float around looking superior while nervous owners sit with their ailing 'patients'. Some of these patients are wheeled in by the case, while others are hand-cradled, preciously wrapped, as though to avoid catching a chill. You can flit through magazines or sip a coffee to while away the time. Finally it is your turn, and you half expect to hear 'The doctor will see you now'.

That white-coated medico, otherwise known as a Penfolds winemaker, begins by putting the client at ease, then discusses

work. Alternatively, the experts use two Teflon-coated long wire corkscrews that go down either side of a cork. If debris does end up in the wine a cork retriever is brought into action. One owner, Claire, receives advice on drinking her Grange: "Best to double decant it by pouring it into a decanter and then back into the bottle. When you open this you want to make sure the bottle is seen on the table," comments winemaker Kym Schroeter.

The youngest bottle accepted at the clinic is a 15-year-old. These rarely need recorking, and if they do then it raises questions about their storage conditions. Badly ullaged bottles are not even opened. By this time the owner usually