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## ELIMINATING BOTTLE SHOCK

CHOOSING to buy a bottle or case of wine can be an emotional decision taken in the heat of the moment and you could end up regretting the purchase when the credit card bill comes in at the end of the month. Maybe the bill is quickly hidden away from a loving partner in sheer embarrassment. Sound familiar?

Choosing wisely isn't easy. Do you believe what the sales person is saying? Can you trust what the back label boasts? Has a wine writer got a vested interest in recommending a wine? When all is said and done, you have to make decisions with a cool head and sound palate, and not get wrapped up in the occasion or pressurised into something you simply don't want.

There are a number of decisions to make about a wine when deciding to purchase it, besides whether you can afford to buy it.

First is to always buy after assessing the quality. Let's consider what a great wine should have as characteristics. It should have a good level of concentration or intensity. That is, concentration of flavour on the palate which holds your attention. Mouth filling or texture is another way to express this. It should also have great balance. The word well-balanced is often thrown around; it means the wines constituents – sugar, acid, alcohol, flavours and tannins should all be there but in balance with each other. Also an aroma or flavour should not dominate in a negative way. Wine, both red and white, shouldn't have too much acidity nor too little. Red wine should not be too tannic but just the right amount, depending on the style. Next comes length and finish which are vital. A great wine should travel across your palate (length) and have a long aftertaste (finish) after you have consumed it. Finally, a great wine should be complex and make you burst into song as you express all the aromas and flavours you can identify. Young wines should have primary aromas that are commonly fruit based or vegetal, herbal or floral in nature. Young wines could also display secondary aromas and flavours coming from time in oak barrels and other winemaking techniques such as yeast influences, time spent on lees, pre or post skin maceration, or malo-lactic fermentation. Primary and secondary characteristics are what notch up the complexity rating.

If the wine has seen bottle age or extended time in barrel it should display tertiary aromas and flavours such as dried fruits, honey, toast or marmalade in white wines and forest floor, mushroom, meaty or farmyard nuances in red wines. The Holy Grail is to get all three – primary, secondary and tertiary in a single glass.

Quality factors vary on the wine style or grape variety. A great nebbiolo will have high tannins when young that could be considered by many as unbalanced, but in that grape they are expected. Nebbiolo is a grape that often demands time in bottle to develop and therefore it could be argued that it can only be described as good quality when it is young and a wine that shows the promise of future greatness. Here is a contentious statement. A young unoaked semillon, sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio or verdelho can never be outstanding in quality. They simply lack complexity.

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Hunter Valley semillon needs bottle age to become complex and outstanding, and does an unoaked sauvignon blanc or pinot grigio ever achieve agreeable complexity? An aromatic and refreshing sauvignon blanc is delightful on a hot summer day and with the right food but is it an outstanding wine? Maybe it can be described as outstanding for a sauvignon blanc and that is how we can get around that contentious statement and not upset countless hard working winemakers. In other words you have to take assessing quality by grape varieties and change the parameters slightly. However one factor that applies across every grape variety is length and finish. I've yet to experience a very good or outstanding wine that had short length or finish.

Second, and this is related to quality, ask

yourself does it represent value for money? There is a marketing segment known as "mainstream bargain hunters" that are looking for a wine that is performing above its price point and I think that is what a lot of people want. I recently witnessed a worrying trend; wineries are pushing their flagship wines to incredibly new heights, not in quality, but price. The rationale is simply a case of supply and demand. If it sells out too quickly then it must be too cheap, so the producer pushes the price up to achieve a balance. Many cultures treat wine as a status symbol, snobbery in some cases, and the more expensive the bottle the more it says about the purchaser. Wineries are cashing in on this and rightly so. Wine is after all a consumer item, a commodity, and can be bought and sold. Some wineries have kept prices reasonable only to see their current release being quickly re-sold on auction sites for a lot more than they sold it.

A third decision to make is do you really need it? Many people don't outlive their cellar. If that sadly does happen, will the cellar of immaculate wines go to a good home? There is an old story of a wine lover stopping at a roadside when he saw discarded old bottles heaped in the gutter and finding bottles of Grange. That couldn't happen today, or could it?

The shelf life of wine has also to be considered. Don't over order drink-now wines. Pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc might be lively and crisp at cellar door when you purchase it but it will only be like that for a couple of years, rosé wines are the same. You must be able to drink or give away those wines before they expire. Not all people like the aromas and tastes of aged wines. Riesling, for example, picks up toasty, kerosene and petrol aromas, and these are an acquired taste. Cabernet sauvignon can display tobacco, cigar box, earth and leather, far from that lovely blackcurrant, rich black cherry wine you tasted at the bottle shop.

Finally consider the occasion, in other words, when are you going to drink it? Have that in mind. Is it a special occasion wine or is it bought for a particular person, perhaps your partner? Watch the wines you cellar and ensure all palates are covered or else it becomes your cellar and not for the enjoyment of others or the matching of food. 1