

An Aging Story

Written by Terry Connor
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Back in the mid 80s, when this wine hobby of mine was in its infancy, I found myself in a discussion about the aging of wines. The discussion was limited to Fine Red Wines, as in First or Second Growth Bordeaux, a premier cru Burgundy, or a premium California Cabernet Sauvignon.

We arrived at the point where we were talking about bottle aging when the Discussion Leader brought up the point that wines go to "sleep." We all looked at each other and then to Mr. Harkey. Realizing that the term "sleep" needed some clarification, Mr. Harkey made a nice recovery, explaining that when wines are maturing they often shut down for a period and go through what is called a "dumb phase."

Is this true? It is absolutely true. (Let's keep our discussion limited to wines that we purchase for consumption in the distant future.) Are we able to predict when a dumb phase will occur? Probably not, though years of experience will help. Let's take an example. You go down to your local wine dealer and purchase a case of 2009 Cakebread Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine is already five years old. You try one as soon as you arrive home, and – voila! – the wine has a bouquet to die for, the feel in the mouth is pure silk, and the finish is long. Great purchase! With confidence you put the remaining 11 bottles into proper storage and save them for a future dinner party. Two years pass. It is time to break out the Cakebread for the dinner party. You open a bottle four or five hours before dinner for breathing, try a small taste, and a look of disappointment comes over your face. The bouquet is weak, the taste is ordinary and the finish is just so-so.

What happened? Therein lies the mystery – a phenomenon certain to confound until the end of creation. However, there are a few basics that we can look at. One is consistency. We know that wines are not consistent because we often talk about the difference of a particular wine from year to year. Winemakers struggle with many variables in their growing conditions, such as the weather. A winemaker has to play the hand he has been dealt each year, and each year is different. Another basic is the grape juice itself and its associated aromas. There are literally thousands of organic compounds in grape juice. The identification of specific compounds, with their associated aromas, is a work in progress which will continue for years to come. What can be said now is that it's certain the array of aromas are constantly changing as the alcohols and acid present in wine combine with each other as the wine ages in the bottle. It would appear that there is a lot going on inside the bottle, whereas I'd thought it was only the dissipation of the tannins and the ultimate evolution of a nice smooth wine. I was wrong, so let's continue.

The next basic is transportation. Wines become agitated in transport due to motion and exposure to variations in temperature. If you purchase a wine that is from a well-known vintage, bring it home and lay it down for at least six months. This rest will enhance the structure of the wine and affect aromatic development.

I want to introduce another example. This is from Robert Wolfe of the Oregon Pinot Noir Club. His nickname is "Pinotguy." Mr. Wolfe is able to express aging in simple terms as he is dealing

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with only one grape, that being Pinot Noir, which possesses different aging characteristics than, say, Cabernet Sauvignon. His first term is YOUTH. He explains that Youth occurs when the wine is so new that the fruit, the acid, the oak, and the tannin can all be tasted individually. Should this be the case, the wine is too young to enjoy. His second term is INTEGRATION. Here, all the components of the wine have blended together via anaerobic (the absence of oxygen) activity in the sealed bottle, and the rough edges have smoothed out. While not mature, integrated Pinots are very enjoyable to drink. Watch for integration to occur one to five years after the published vintage date.

Mr. Wolfe's last term is MATURE. The Mature stage is the most desirable stage for drinking Pinot Noir. The wine is at the point where all of the elements have blended, and none of the individual components can be differentiated from the whole. It would indeed be terrific if we had the patience to wait this long for each and every wine we purchase to arrive at the desired maturity. I guess it would take a special blessing from the Almighty.

WINESPEAK

After recalling my first lecture on this subject, and doing some additional research, I realize why some folks are so passionate about wine. Aging is a "mystery" of sorts that collectors are continually trying to resolve. Another reason is that, and speaking practically, collectors need proper storage space in order to age their wines, thus creating the need for a wine cellar. And further, there is the vintage that will appear next year and every year thereafter.

So, you go into your favorite restaurant and order your favorite Cabernet. The waiter says in reply that the wine is asleep and cannot be disturbed. I would pay the price of a newly minted bitcoin for the look on your face.