

My wine friends and I got into a religious discussion and we decided it wasn't grapes to make wine that Eve ate in the Garden of Eden because she repented. Seriously, someone was walking around my house recently looking at old bottles of wine and asked does the wine really improve with age? This is a fantastic question. It goes with great thoughts like "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

Mike Shmerling's mom sold me some old wine from a dirt cellar that had not been touched in 20 years. Had it improved with age? Some had, some had not and some people wouldn't be able to tell either. Tom Cassidy and I looked at an old cellar that was for sale and the answer was the same. Maybe yes, maybe no, who cares. Here are some things to be said about aging wine.

First, not all wine was meant to age. We know that the average cellaring time for American wine purchases is less than 24 hours. Basically, it is the drive time from the wine shop / liquor store to your house. So American wine makers are making wine ready to drink today. Even high priced wines are being made more approachable so we can get pleasure from drinking them when we buy them.

On top of that we have lots of people who prefer young wines to old wines. Remember the primary principal in whether wine is good or not is the drinker's taste. If you like young wines then it's crazy to think aging them would be better.

However, there is a larger body of people who like wines with age. So these people should age their wines. Most wines will soften with age. However, they will also begin to show flavors with age if they are not made well. I've had plenty of old wine that was bad. One time Ed Sbragia of Beringer Vineyards visited me and I opened a bottle of 1959 Petrus. We poured it down the sink. I doubt if 20 years earlier we would have. So here are some recommendations about aging wine. First, heat and light are enemies of wine. So if you are aging do it right. Put it in a cool place that is dark. In France many cellars are not temperature controlled. They are dark, cool and moist. Many experts believe that wine in these conditions will actually heal themselves over time. In these conditions they will not suffer. Extremes of heat and cold are bad because they cause the wine to expand and contract. If you are aging wine then store it on its side. The corks must be kept wet. If your wine is in a box or has a screw top, drink it now. I've never seen a cellar full of box wine. If the cork is not kept moist then it will shrink. Let in air and your wine will oxidize and eventually dry out. Storage is key for old wines.

If you buy old wines do not buy bottles with faded labels – they have probably been in the sun. Cooked meat is good. Cooked wine is bad. Also, do not buy wines where the cork is protruding. This is also a sign of heat. The bottle of old wine in the wine shop window may be a bargain, but it's probably been heat damaged. Another bad sign is a low fill. That is a sign the wine has been improperly stored. It is not worth the financial risk.

What wine ages well? Usually it is wine the wine maker made to age. Twenty dollar bottles usually don't meet this criteria. It can be white or red. It can even be sparkling wine like Champagne but one thing the price point tells you is probably its aging potential. The longest lived wines are Cabernet, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Syrah, Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. Any decent wine shop can give you this advice.

Does wine need oxygen to age? Yes, but how much it effects aging is unknown. The more you have the faster it ages. So many other factors are also significant. The wines total acidity as well as the type of the acid. Also, critical are the wines phenolic structure and its overall PH. The higher the PH the less stable the wine. Is this too complicated? Then just know that too much oxygen is bad.

One more thought for the impatient. You can soften wine and give some aging characteristics by using a decanter. This goes for both white and red. Decant your wine earlier. The oxygen will help it age. Some wines should be decanted hours before serving. Also, you can shake your wine up in the decanter to put more oxygen in it. I almost always do this with younger wines. You'll be surprised how much age you can give them.

One final thought on aging. Most wine will not last over three days once it has been opened. The best storage method once it has been opened is to cork it and put it in the refrigerator (white or red). The higher the acid in the wine the longer it will stay drinkable after opening.

As usual a closing thought from wine expert Oz Clarke. "To let opinions rule your appreciation of wine and to be unable to feel that the wine on the table, however unsung and lacking in renown, is, for that short moment, perfection itself, is to miss the whole heart of wine, and of life too."