

Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* says, “In Europe we thought of wine as something as healthy and normal as food and also a great giver of happiness and well being and delight. Drinking wine was not a snobbism nor a sign of sophistication nor a cult. It was as natural as eating and to me as necessary.”

Well last month at F. Scott’s I hosted Zelma Long. Her wine credits could fill this page and another one too. She started Long Vineyard. She was the CEO at Simi for several years, the winemaker in the 1970’s at Mondavi and now the owner of a famous South African wine called Vilafonte.

Her husband Phil Freese was also there. He’s one of the world’s experts on vineyard cultivation and management. Mike Ratcliff, head of the South African Wine Institute, rounded out the group.

We drank a 1929 Chateau Latour, a 1947 Louis Martini Special Reserve Cabernet, and a 1959 Grand Echezeaux from Leroy, a 1945 Montrachet and some other stuff.

One of Nashville’s great wine personalities, Elise Loehr, asked which wines we wanted decanted. One person at the table (to remain nameless) said all. Another said none.

Also, last month Sergio Esposito, America’s expert on Italian wine was here and we decanted a 1998 Barolo for four hours before we served it.

Did the wine maker have that in mind when he made it? I doubt it. So what’s the right answer? There just isn’t one.

Emile Peynaud, one of the most famous winemakers in this world thought decanting was terrible for the wine.

So the funny thing is nearly everyone has a decanter. They never used the wedding gift or heirloom from some old world relative.

Decanters were developed because wine was stored in clay jars or wooden casks. So you needed something besides the wine glass to get it to the table. The first record of a glass decanter is from the ancient Romans, who used them to serve wine at the table. The early bottles were designed to serve wine too not store it. Their odd shape wouldn’t allow them to lie stacked in a cellar and of course there were no corks in those days. Each decanter or bottle had a custom made glass stopper that was wired, tied or chained to the bottle so they were never separated. If you don’t believe it, look at an old bottle and you can see a glass rim below the opening to hold the wine or string in place.

So someone discovered that aging wine improved it and the best way to age was in bottles with corks. Now with weak fining and filtering techniques, old wine developed some sediment, haze or tartrate crystals. Enter the decanter to leave these behind. Also for large dinner parties, you could decant the wine for display and convenience before people were seated.

This practice called for demarcation and so silver wine labels were developed to hang over the decanters.

The most interesting decanter to me is the “hogit”. A decanter with a round bottom that could never be set down but had to be continually passed.

So why decant or should you at all? Here is a Tennessee wine collector’s recommendation. All red wine should be decanted with this exception. If the wine is too delicate to withstand the addition of oxygen or the abuse of pouring it into a decanter. That would be Pinot Noirs over five years old. White wines that are chardonnay based should also be decanted, especially white Burgundies.

When you decant you’re trying to do three things:

1. Add sizzle to the wine service. Who would deny the wine is prettier in a beautiful decanter than in a bottle? The salesman in me says, “Sell the sizzle, not the steak.”
2. Get rid of the unpleasant elements in the wine. The sediment, the crystals, the cork you left in the bottle, etc.
3. To aerate the wine. To add oxygen to advance the aging process of the wine. Is your last glass of wine from a bottle better than the first? Usually yes, so get there earlier by decanting. It’s extra work, but it’s worth it.

How do you decant? It’s easy with white wine. Just pour the wine slowly and gently into the decanter until only the bad stuff is left in the bottle. Red requires a candle or flashlight and goes like this. Put the neck of the bottle over the light and pour slowly into the decanter. You should see the light through the wine and the neck of the bottle. When you start to see a dark streak in the middle of the wine (looking through the neck) – stop. The wine left in the bottle should be discarded or drunk separately. It helps to have a wine funnel and sometimes cheese cloth.

Now you know more about decanting than you need to, but start doing it. You’ll be surprised at your wine’s improvement.

As usual, consider this, “If someone offers you champagne at lunch (decanted or not), there’s usually a catch somewhere.”