

CELLARING AND STORING WINE

Originally Published *CMAA Wine Society Newsletter*, March 1998

© ALAN E. ACHATZ, CCM, CHE

Compliance & Documentation Services

www.ClubSafetySolutions.com

Having worked in the private club industry for over 25 years, belonging to many wine groups during this time and being an avid consumer of wine, I have had the opportunity to enjoy innumerable bottles. Some good, some great and some that had gone over the hill – in some instances – the wine starting out quite acceptable and turning into vinegar while in the glass!

All wine goes through a life phase just as we do. It has birth, growth and death. The most important facet and that of which we are most concerned is that of its growth. After the wine maker has done all of his/her magic – it's now up to us to be knowledgeable in the care and nurturing of this marvelous product.

Knowing the characteristics of each different variety of wine, the vintage (and the factors involved with it), winemaker's style, how we can best market the wine and how can we educate and/or expose them to a different type/style of wine are just the beginning.

Developing your own knowledge of wine while working in the club industry is easier than that of the average layperson (depending on the liquor laws of the state in which you work), since most vendors are willing to share their products in anticipation you'll be purchasing from him/her.

We all know the right wine further enhances the dining experience. The questions start to arise when you have a wine list that has more than a few bottles on it.

It seems in the club environment that storage space is always at a premium. How much room do you have devoted to your wine? Does the space contract during the busy season when the liquor, beer and soda are coming in and going out by the truckload? Are you fortunate enough to have a special self-contained temperature and humidity-controlled cabinet or area?

Wine's greatest enemy is temperature fluctuation. Obviously freezing and or boiling will push the cork out and leave you with a mess to clean up. But what is the best temperature to store wine?

Recently, I have done quite a bit of research on wine storage. One reason is I am building a passive cellar in my house (more on passive cellaring in a bit) and the other is for a presentation to one of my wine clubs.

The ideal cellaring temperature for all wine is said to be 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Above this temperature, wine will mature faster; and below, it may not mature or will develop very slowly. If you plan on cellaring wine for over 10 years, your temperature should not be above 65 degrees F.

Where are your storage areas?

Do you store all the white and sparkling wine in the walk-in cooler? Do you ever find small crystalline deposits in the bottom of your chardonnays and other white wines? Do some of your expensive champagnes/sparkling wines get returned because they do not taste quite right? (They're a little 'flabby', 'fat', 'flat' or maybe even 'cidery'?) Did you ever think this was due to your storage techniques? Once wine is stored under 40 degrees F white wines form tartrates precipitates or simply tartrates, which are harmless and just look like sugar crystals.

What about red wines? Do you store them in the liquor room? Do you have a thermometer in there? Is the temperature constant year round? Or does it fluctuate according to the season? Is there any means of circulating the air? Do you pay any attention to the humidity? Do you leave the wines in cardboard boxes for extended periods of time – a year or more?

In the past, I only paid attention to the temperature. Always trying my best to maintain a constant year round range with no major temperature spikes. Ensuring that the walls were insulated and also that the heat pipes/vents were not causing potential problems.

Now I monitor the humidity. There's a lot of debate as to the correct level of humidity in a wine cellar. It is said that 50% humidity is essential, that 70 – 75% is ideal and above that may cause problems. At 95% humidity, mold starts to grow and will destroy your labels.

What can you do if you don't have a specialized temperature and humidity controlled storage unit/area? You can manage your passive wine cellar by monitoring your temperature and humidity. An easy solution is to put a portable \$40.00 humidifier in your insulated room and ensure that you have air circulating, as this will eliminate hot/cold spots. What about the wine stored in the cooler? As we all know, a refrigerator is a dehumidifier. You may consider putting another humidifier in there. Also consider your shelving, does it allow for air circulation? If you will be storing wine for an extended period of time that arrived in cardboard boxes, remove them from the boxes as the chemicals used to make the box can/may impart odors and flavors to the wine.

What types of wine you carry and are able to market depend on your membership. It is up to you to know what the aging potential for your various wines are. Obviously a grand cru white Burgundy will have a much greater aging potential than a Californian sauvignon blanc. Likewise a first growth Bordeaux will last much longer than a Beaujolais Villages. What if you carry wine that have become a few years older than the rest? Are they "throwing off" sediment? Do you have someone that can properly decant them? Is the level of wine (ullage) in the bottle evaporating at an acceptable rate? Or are you experiencing leakage whether through improper storage, low humidity, or a bad cork? (A quick note on corks; if you are fortunate to have older Bordeaux, you should have them recorked every 25 to 30 years. The major Bordeaux houses perform this service free of charge and normally they do this in major metropolitan areas).

What about your record-keeping? Obviously inventory is maintained that lists quantity on hand and price; but do you keep tasting notes for your and your staff's edification? Do you include information such as the vintage, producer, wine name, type of grape(s), appellation, vineyard

name, region, country, type of wine (white, red, rose, aperitif, sparkling, dessert or port), size of bottle and most recent value? You may consider updating your tasting notes as the wines age to include any variances in the color, nose or taste.

All the above factors are those you can control; but what about your purveyors and those that ship the wine to them? Do they have temperature-controlled warehouses and shipping containers? When was the wine shipped – in the middle of winter or summer? Was it left on the dock in the sunshine for any extended period of time? These are areas that you must investigate or have a good working relationship your purveyor to assure this can never happen.

A philosophy you may want to implement in an effort to build a cellar with wine that is starting to mature is to commence a four-year program to annually purchase \$4000.00 of wine to put into inventory. At the end of the fourth year you ‘release’ the purchases from the first year. You will continue to purchase \$4000.00 of wines that would be age-worthy every year. This increased inventory will enhance your reputation as a special place to get that great bottle of wine that isn’t available elsewhere in town. You will be able to charge a nominal premium to cover your carrying costs.

How much and what type of wine you buy is always predicated on what you think you can sell what you like and what you can persuade others to try. The most important item to consider is that you pick the right time to enjoy a wine before it passes it’s maturity.

I always tell those around me that when I purchase wine for my cellar, I buy three bottles. I try one and if I like it, the other two go in my cellar. If I don’t like it, I give it away. Now that you know this, I’ll have to make sure I share one that we’ll both enjoy.

In Vino Veritas,