

WINE AND AIR

Is air a friend or foe of wine? It is in fact both. The most important factors are: when in the life of the wine is the air in contact, what style of wine is intended, and what is the intended cellaring period for the wine. Air here really means its oxygen component.

Letting Wine “Breathe” This is a topic on which I have heard many speak and say many things. I have made observation myself over many years and many bottles. I have read what the great wine experts have written. Upon that, I state the following:

- ◆ Taking the cork from a bottle and letting the bottle stand there awhile before you drink it does next to nothing. The physical laws do not allow sufficient contact between wine surface and air in order to introduce air in any but miniscule amounts into the wine. (Half a day, or 24 hours may be enough time, especially in a drafty room).
- ◆ Pouring the wine out of the bottle and into a clean container, from a sufficient height to cause turbulence, is called *aeration*, and this process benefits the enjoyment of many bottles. (I return the wine back to the bottle or into a decanter, using a hard plastic funnel.) While sometimes I take a taste before and during this process, deciding whether to undertake it is a decision based on my hunch that the wine is not yet fully mature, or has tannins that can be toned down with air. It is true that tannins can be toned down somewhat with sufficient exposure to air. Aeration does not replace – or match in quality – the beneficial maturation that takes place in a bottle of a wine that is meant to age further. Champagne and other sparkling wines do not improve with aeration; never treat a bottle roughly, as you will want to keep the magical fizz in the liquid, not spread loose in the air.
- ◆ There is an industry built around trying to separate air and wine after a bottle is opened. This is not uniformly a beneficial process. The line of demarcation appears to me to be between wines meant to age for a moderate to a long period, and wines meant to be drunk young. For wines made by the producer to be drunk soon after release, extended contact with air appears to be a foe, even if aeration was used beneficially before the initial drinking. Experienced drinkers will often speak of a bottle of a very fine wine meant for aging getting better the second or third day after being left uncorked. Few wines with a price of under \$30 are made for aging, and even fewer with a price of \$100 or more are not made to be capable of aging. I apply similar rules to both white and red wines, knowing that only a very few whites are made for aging. Champagne and other sparkling wines keep only for a couple of hours after opening.

An Oxidized Bottle. This refers to a bottle’s poor condition after having been exposed to small amounts of air over a very long period. Most often, if not always, the oxygen comes by way of the cork. For example, the white wines of Burgundy (100% Chardonnay grape) for the years 1995 and 1996 have been turning up with a much higher rate of oxidation than is normal for those wines 10-13 years after bottling (now in their normal prime). This is newsworthy because Burgundian wines of that age are very expensive. However, for hundreds of years the process has been known to occur, and turns up in a random bottle of red or white every now and then. Air entering through or around a cork for an extended time is damaging to wine in a bottle. Keeping the cork moist, by laying the bottle on its side, inhibits one method of oxidation.

Air Used in Making Wine. From the moment of breaking open the grape skins, oxygen contact presents an issue in winemaking. Oxygen is removed during the creation process by the winemaker's introduction of sulfur. (One sulfur molecule binds two oxygen molecules, SO₂.) The goal is not to eliminate all dissolved oxygen in the wine, but to reduce and control it. Later, during the fermentation process and the maturation process, oxygen is slowly introduced if the wine is placed in wooden barrels, as oxygen moves in and out through the wood. Understand that while the wood is used primarily for the flavors it introduces, less expensive wines obtain oak through sawdust, chips, vat linings and the like, during which there is not the exchange of oxygen that occurs with wood barrels.

Sparkling wine has that character from the presence of dissolved carbon dioxide, a gas of one carbon molecule and two of oxygen. The best examples have the gas created from the fermentation process itself; the worst from the introduction of carbon dioxide gas in the same manner as Coca-Cola.

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