

Storing and Serving Wine

By Bruce Sanderson, Wine Spectator Tasting Director

A few basic guidelines in storage and service will go a long way to enhance your enjoyment of wine. The idea is to recognize which of your needs are most important when selecting a wine, its proper serving temperature, and glassware to accommodate the occasion, whether casual or formal.

Storage

Once you have purchased wine, whether it's a few bottles or several cases, the issue of storage must be addressed. Since most wine is consumed within 24 to 48 hours of purchase, for many wine lovers a small rack away from a direct heat source provides an ideal solution. If you plan to collect fine wines that benefit from additional bottle maturation, proper storage is essential. Before choosing a space be sure it will be large enough to accommodate future purchases. In some cases, vacant space beneath a stairway is sufficient, in others it may be necessary to allow for hundreds of wines stored both as individually racked bottles and full cases.

One of wine's greatest enemies is extreme heat. Temperatures greater than 70 degrees Fahrenheit will age a wine more quickly, and can also "cook" a wine until the fruit character becomes blunted, resulting in flat aromas and flavors. Equally important is the rate at which temperature changes. Rapid temperature fluctuations may cause pressure changes within a bottle, forcing the cork upwards and allowing leaks while permitting air to enter the bottle. Air is another of wine's enemies. Any prolonged exposure will lead to oxidation, which produces a brownish color and Sherry-like flavors.

Therefore it is important to have a cool space with constant temperature for long-term storage. If your storage area is naturally cool (for example, a below-ground cellar), that's fine; if not, it may be necessary to invest in a cooling unit. Light may also harm wine over time. Bottles should be kept from direct sunlight, preferably in darkness, and should be stored on their sides, either in cases or racked.

Humidity is more controversial but it's nothing to worry about unless you're keeping wines for the long-term. Some experts advocate a constant humidity of 70 percent to prevent corks from drying out, while others maintain that if a bottle is on its side, the cork is constantly in contact with moisture inside the bottle and external humidity is ineffectual.

Serving Wines

Most wines may simply be opened and served. Sparkling wines, dessert wines and light-bodied whites need to be chilled to preserve their freshness and fruitiness (34 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit), while fuller-bodied whites such as Chardonnay and white Rhônes may be served slightly warmer. Light reds (most Beaujolais, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc from the Loire Valley) benefit from being served slightly cooler than full-bodied reds such as Australian Cabernet and Shiraz, California Cabernet and Meritage blends, Bordeaux and Rhône, which are best at cellar temperature (55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit). Of course, these are general guidelines, and individual tastes may vary. Most wines are finished with a cork, covered by a capsule of either metal or plastic. To open, cut the capsule around the neck just below the lip of the bottle and remove the top of the capsule. Wipe the top of the bottle with a damp towel or cloth if necessary. Use a corkscrew to remove the cork. There are several different models of corkscrew available; again, the choice is a matter of individual taste.

Champagne and sparkling wines have a different closure, and must be handled carefully since the contents are under pressure and could cause injury. Remove the foil and, with a thumb over the metal crown to prevent the cork from ejecting, loosen the wire fastener. Without removing the wire, grasp the cork firmly and with the other hand turn the bottle, slowly releasing the cork. This process is easier when the wine is well chilled.

In certain instances, it will be necessary to decant a wine. Fine reds with bottle age produce a natural sediment as color pigments and tannins bond together and fall out of solution. Decanting is simply the process of separating the clear wine from the sediment. Before decanting, the bottle should be upright for a minimum 24 hours for the best results. Remove the capsule and cork, and with a light under the neck of the bottle (a candle or flashlight works well), pour the wine into a clean vessel in a single, steady motion until you can see the sediment reach the neck of the bottle. The wine is now ready to serve.

Wine Glasses

Wine appreciation involves all the senses, and the choice of glassware will influence the sight, aroma, and taste of a wine. Georg Riedel, director of the Riedel glass company in Austria, has done extensive experimentation using blind tasting trials with professional tasters. He divides glass design into three elements: Clarity and thinness are important for visual perception. The size and shape of the bowl determine the intensity and complexity of the bouquet. The shape of the rim determines where the wine initially lands on the tongue, affecting the perception of its taste.

Clear glass and a thin-rimmed bowl reduce the barriers between the wine lover and the wine. The clearer the glass, the richer the wine's color appears. The thinner the rim, the less the glass distracts from the wine as it enters the mouth. The stem should be long enough so that the hand doesn't touch the bowl, obscuring the glass with fingerprints or warming the wine above proper serving temperature. If the stem is too long, however, the glass will tip too easily. The stem should be about as long as the bowl is tall.

A large bowl and a narrow opening work together to magnify the wine's bouquet. They give plenty of space for the aromas to expand, but only a narrow escape. If the bowl's widest point is too high or too low, a normal serving of wine won't have the maximum surface area for aeration. If the opening is too small, drinking will be difficult.

Many glasses are too small; few are too large. Our evaluations suggest that a good red-wine glass will have a capacity of at least 12 ounces. Generally, glasses for red table wines are wider than those for white, but beyond that it's really up to your personal preference. Champagne flutes should hold 6 1/2 ounces or more. Sherry and Port glasses traditionally are small, because Port and Sherry are fortified wines, and usually drunk in small quantities.

With the exception of sparkling wines, it's best not to fill a wine glass more than half full. This will leave enough air space to release the aromas. Most importantly, find a balance of wine-friendliness, aesthetic appeal and price, and settle on the glass that seems best for you.

--Excerpted from Wine Spectator Magazine's Guide to Great Wine Values.