



By Simon Tam

BEST-KEPT SECRETS

There's no point buying good wine unless you store it properly. Our wine columnist uncorks a few top tips

WHETHER IT is under the stairs or under the bed, most people have a private space to stash their wine. If a bottle is designed to be drunk in less than three years, or costs less than HK\$200, it is perfectly acceptable to keep it in a box around the home. After all, the average quaff is here for a good time, not a long time. Just ensure you store your bottles at a constant temperature in a dark area that does not see much human traffic.

If, on the other hand, you have acquired some valuable wines, you may like to enhance their worth over time by storing them properly. A high-quality bottle of perfectly stored wine will age gracefully along the path paved for it by the grape varietal, the soil and climate it was cultivated in, and the will and taste of the winemaker who produced it. But

there are certain conditions under which the bottles must be stored.

Proper wine storage is particularly important in the tropics where we, together with our food and wine, are subjected to some pretty uncomfortable weather. Not only are there fluctuations in temperature from season to season, but we also have to cope with extremes of humidity.

The perfect temperature for cellaring wine is between 16 and 18 degrees Celcius. That temperature encourages the wine to mature at a steady pace to its predetermined ripeness. A wine capable of ageing for as many as 40 years will last precisely that long if stored within the correct temperature range, and as it matures it will progressively reveal glimpses of its changing and evolving

personality every three to four years.

If, however, the cellaring temperature is decreased to five degrees Celcius, wine is unlikely to mature. Conversely, if the heat is raised to 25 degrees or more, wine will evolve at a much faster rate than it would if aged at its optimum temperature.

That is not to say that speeding up the ageing process is necessarily a bad thing, especially for impatient wine drinkers. A fast-maturing wine can, after all, be enjoyed earlier. It is just that many of the subtleties that would have developed over time at the ideal temperature are unlikely to be preserved in a bottle that is aged in warmer conditions over a shorter period.

Just as temperature affects the development of wine, so do ultraviolet rays. A

simple home experiment – perhaps with a cheap bottle of beer rather than an expensive bottle of wine – demonstrates the effects of so-called sun-striking. Simply leave a clear bottle of beer in sunlight for two weeks. Then compare the taste of the sun-struck beer (also known as “skunked” beer) with a freshly opened bottle that has been kept away from the light. The ultraviolet light destroys the beer’s organic components and it just tastes all wrong. The adverse impact of light on wine and beer is the reason most high-quality reds are bottled in dark-green glass and whites in either green or yellow “tea leaf-toned” glass.

Long-term exposure to sunlight has another effect on wine: light will fade labels over time and reduce the value and aesthetic appeal of high-quality bottles. But light isn’t the only enemy labels face: humidity can be just as destructive. For centuries, the glue used on labels was water-based, meaning that high humidity could cause improperly stored bottles to have mouldy labels, while low humidity could make the glue dry and the labels peel off. The only thing to do in that situation is to submit friends to a blind tasting and have them match the wine label to the blank bottle – but it’s an expensive party game.

While humidity, or the lack of it, can adversely affect the exterior of a bottle, there is no risk of it infiltrating the wine itself. Humidity can penetrate neither glass nor cork, the latter of which is specifically there to prevent 100 per cent humidity (that is, the wine) from escaping.

Another risk to stored wine is vibration, which disturbs the formation of sediment in the wine and therefore its taste. There are, however, few wines – and even fewer drinkers – that are sensitive enough to vibration to notice the difference.

One way to protect your wine assets and ensure that the wine you are drinking tastes just as the winemaker intended is to invest in a wine fridge. They can be a necessary, space-swallowing evil in the Hong Kong climate.

A wine fridge will control the temperature at which wine is stored, regardless of outside conditions; it will shut the door to sunlight and protect wine from the damage caused by ultraviolet rays. Some wine fridges even contain built-in humidifiers that regulate humidity and help retain the labels’ integrity. An extra component of expensive wine fridges is a quiet compressor that controls noise and vibration.

More importantly, though, 16 to 18 degrees Celcius – the level at which most wine fridges are set – is the perfect temperature at which to enjoy wine, regardless of whether it is red or white.

Wine fridges do not have to be used for wine alone; they can also accommodate opened bottles of spirits. Brandy, cognac and malt whisky will oxidise more slowly in these controlled conditions and remain in pristine drinking condition for eight to 12 months.

Investing in a wine fridge is not for everybody, though, and it is perhaps more fun to test whether a wine is well kept by

training your palate. Rather than forking out the money to buy a fridge, invest instead in some quality bottles of wine; better to spend your money on the real experience of drinking the good stuff rather than on a gadget to make you look like an expert. A wine fridge may last forever, but so too will the experience, sensuality and memories of good wine, great company and fine food. ■

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