



BIG QUESTION
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Is This Bottle Corked? The Secret Life of Wine

Does wine make you bad in bed? What happened to Cleopatra's pearl? And is this bottle corked? Your oenological queries answered by Kathleen Burk & Michael Bywater

Saturday, 6 September 2008

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Waiter, is this wine corked?

There are ways of arresting the attention of sommeliers other than by throwing a bottle at them. To ensure their respect, we suggest the following Dos and Don'ts:

Do send a wine back, saying that it is corked, if it has the characteristic musty smell which resembles mushrooms or the result of striding through the dead leaves of woodlands in the autumn. If the sommelier has sniffed the cork after pulling it, he ought to have already spotted it for you – you might then look him straight in the eye in an inquiring manner as you suggest that it is corked.

Don't use the term "corked" to refer to any other fault in wine.

Do send back white wine if it is oxidised or "maderised", in which oxygen has managed to slip into the wine through the cork, turned it a dark yellow, and given it an aroma resembling madeira.

Don't say that a wine is faulty because it has left a deposit in the glass: it may indicate that the winemaker expects his customers to know that the deposit is harmless and to appreciate his reluctance to risk wine quality with the rather drastic processes of "tartrate stabilisation". What is corking? 2,4,6-trichloroanisole – or TCA for short – is the chemical compound blamed for the "corking" of wine and is produced by the action of fungi on cork in the presence of chlorine. The fight between the proponents of screw caps and of corks is bitter, and cork taint is the main battleground. A screw cap eliminates the main source of TCA contamination in wine, but also that frisson of excitement when the cork is pulled, as you sniff for mushrooms and autumnal woodlands, wondering whether the



ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL BLOW

The idea that wine ought to be drunk at room temperature or "chambré" is no longer a good one

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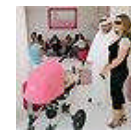
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Exposing excess divides the critics

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What was the truth about Cleopatra's pearl?

In order to impress Mark Antony, Cleopatra supposedly dissolved a fabulously valuable pearl in her cup of wine and drank it. Anyone who has tried this will realise that any wine that you might be able to stomach would not be acidic enough to destroy a pearl. Pliny, on the other hand, wrote that "the servants placed in front of her only a single vessel containing vinegar, the strong rough quality of which can melt pearls" (IX.58). This is more plausible, for the acetic acid concentration in vinegar might be sufficient to dissolve a pearl, which is mostly calcium carbonate; however, unless it was crushed first, the process would take rather a long time, and Mark Antony might have lost interest and left. Furthermore, the residual acetic acid would have made the drink distinctly unpleasant. Perhaps she looked into his eyes in a sultry manner in order to distract him while she drank the wine and just swallowed the pearl.

Why do we drink red wine too hot?

You are tired and hungry after a long, hot day, and you decide to go to your local Italian restaurant for some comfort food. In spite of the open windows, the restaurant is hot from all of the people and the continual cooking. You order some of the restaurant's decent and reasonably priced red wine to go with their excellent food. The bottle is opened, but the wine is warm, and it tastes rather limp. You boldly ask the waiter for a bucket of water and ice, and partially submerge the bottle in it. After 10 minutes, you find that the wine has cooled nicely, and now tastes as you expected.

Hugh Johnson, in the inside cover of his annual Pocket Wine Book, has a chart of recommended drinking temperatures. The range for red wines is from 11C for Beaujolais to 18C for the best red Bordeaux and other top reds. For "standard daily reds", he recommends 13-14C. The Italian restaurant stores the wine on shelves which can be seen by the diners, and thus your bottle has reached a temperature of, say, 27C: the wisdom of the ice bucket is confirmed. Go back 100 years and imagine that it is wintertime. Some wine-drinking gentlefolk have the butler bring up a bottle of their best claret from the cellar, which has a temperature of about 10C. They may be well off, but keeping their high-ceilinged dining room much above 18C is well-nigh impossible. Consequently, they have the bottle opened and left in the dining room for several hours to allow it to warm to the right temperature. In the summer, when the dining room is rather warmer and the cellar may be at 15C, they will not have to wait as long before the wine is at the perfect temperature – that is, winter room temperature – to be best appreciated.

Nowadays, most wine drinkers lack both cellar and servant, but they do have central heating. Winter or summer, if they leave the wine around the house, or, worst of all, just keep it in the kitchen, they will regularly be drinking red wine at a temperature that unbalances the flavours. The idea that wine ought to be drunk at room temperature or "chambré" is no longer a good one. Room temperature has outpaced the traditional advice, and too many wine drinkers fail to store the wine in a cool environment in the first place. So, in the absence of any cool storage for your red wine, you need to do the opposite of what the gentlefolk of 1908 did, which is to cool it. If you haven't got any ice handy, you can use the refrigerator: it is not as fast as the water-and-ice bucket, but it works. Your fridge is at about 7C, and it takes about 1 hour and 45 minutes for a bottle of wine to split the difference of temperature when moved from one place to another (this conclusion is the result of original research which is first revealed here). So if the house is at 21C, and you are drinking a "standard daily red", 1 hour and 45 minutes in the fridge will bring it to the correct temperature (14C) for pleasurable drinking.

Does wine really provoke the desire and take away the performance?

It's been the butt, as it were, of jokes since time immemorial, summed up by a drunken porter.

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Porter: Faith sir, we were carousing till the second cock: and drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things.

Macduff: What three things does drink especially provoke?

Porter: Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine. Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance: therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

That it provokes the desire, taken in the right measure, seems unequivocal: "beer goggles", with their strange illuminating power of augmenting the beauty of whomever is seen through them, are available through the foot of a wine glass too, and perhaps even rosier. And the mechanism of these magic glasses is clear, too. Contrary to how it may initially seem, after that first soothing yet invigorating pair of glasses when the company grows more welcoming, the room warmer, and the wits sharper, alcohol is in effect a depressant. Even champagne, twinkling in its flute, hides a blackjack in its innocent pétillance, and in the heel of every fine burgundy lurks a thug with a sock full of wet sand.

Now we know it vulgarly as the Brewer's Droop, but is there any evidence that drink really does take away the performance? Hunt through the libraries, trawl the internet, and you will find thousands upon thousands of assertions that so it is: drink takes away the performance. Look more carefully, though, and it begins to acquire something of a slightly shady air. Dr Irwin Goldstein, who founded the Institute for Sexual Medicine at Boston University Medical School, told a television audience that "alcohol use was actually not a statistical indicator of erectile dysfunction unless and until the alcohol consumption was fairly excessive. There are lots of reports that minor use of ethanol actually prevents vascular disease, which turns out to be probably the basic underlying dysfunction." In other words, a few drinks keep the pipes clear and should make things better, not worse.

So the answer to our question is: it seems to, sometimes, but we don't really know why. Yet what a fragile flower the act of love proves to be, particularly from the male's point of view. Cast by a harsh world in the character of ravening satyr, he is truly so delicate that the very elixir of a southern hillside needed to brace him up to approach his desire can prevent him from consummating it. Though the reason would seem to be, not alcohol itself, but an excess of alcohol. Falling asleep, an attack of the Whirling Pits, a raging thirst or an attack of nausea are equally effective at terminating a night of passion before it has begun. The fault (as Shakespeare almost observed) is not in our glass, but in ourselves.

Can anyone remember why we drink to forget?

That reminds us of the one where this guy is getting plastered in a bar and the barman says, "You've had enough, pal," and the guy says, "No, no, you can't do this to me, I'm drinking to forget," and the barman says, "Forget what?" and the guy thinks for a bit and says, "I can't remember."

"That reminds me of the one..." The cry of the bar-room bore throughout history. But there's some truth in the joke: we do try to drown our sorrows in wine. Alas, there is also some falsehood in the joke, because it simply doesn't work. After a while, even the most hardened drunk becomes maudlin. Colour, bouquet, taste, finish, all are subsumed in an onrush of terrible remembering, as grievances and hurts bubble to the surface on a tide of tears.

The drunk never remembers anything new to be sorrowful about. The reminiscences seldom vary: their mother was cruel to them, their father abandoned them, their wife had an affair, they were bullied at school, unappreciated at work. All are legitimate sadnesses, but through the refracting glass of wine they are magnified, rehearsed, and magnified again. We may drink to forget, but what we forget is... how to forget. And now science has come out in support of the terrible memoriousness of the drunk. An article published in the Journal of Neuroscience in 2007 declared that moderate amounts of alcohol offer the brain a challenge to which it responds by improving memory. But one has to judge intake carefully. One of the article's authors, Professor Matthew During of the University of Auckland, told a reporter that "contrary to popular belief, our work suggests that heavy drinking actually reinforces negative memories". Which still doesn't explain why it also makes the opposite sex look so very much more attractive.

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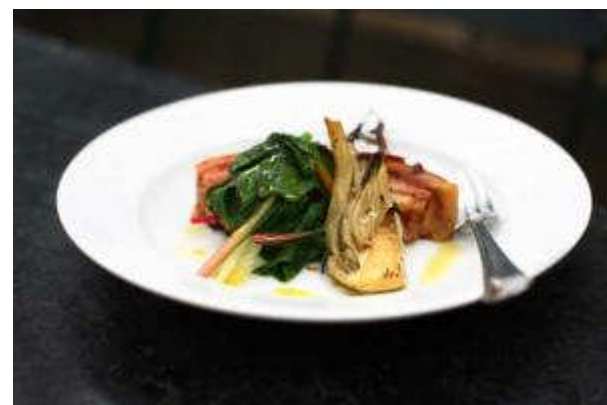
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more attractive.

Is wine becoming more alcoholic?

Wine is definitely more alcoholic than it used to be. The tendency towards a higher level of alcohol began with Californian, Australian and other New World reds. In the introduction to his Pocket Wine Book 2008, Oz Clarke complains of winemakers "following the False High Priest of superripeness" – could this possibly be the American Robert Parker? – and producing the consequent high alcohol levels. Even France has succumbed, he says. Red Bordeaux used to be 11.5–12.5 per cent alcohol, and now there are wines over 14.5 per cent alcohol. Too much alcohol for a particular wine style spoils the taste and makes it hard to enjoy more than a glass.

The Government is becoming concerned about problem drinking in the middle classes. They are increasing their alcohol intake, which, given the increasingly high levels of alcohol, rises even if the volume of wine they consume does not increase. In a rather obscure effort to deal with this, Westminster is urging the EU to make it easier to sell wines with an alcohol level as low as 6.5 per cent. Ridiculously, the British Food Standards Agency has in recent years had to impound low-alcohol wines in order to comply with EU rules. If you don't want to wait for the EU regulations to be changed, try some older German rieslings, which should be well below 10 per cent alcohol.

Is English wine any good?

The answer to this question is yes – and some of it is very good. It is primarily white and sparkling, and there is not very much of it. England and Wales have fewer than 800 hectares (three square miles) of vines for winemaking. Even in England, only a minuscule proportion of the wines on sale are English, and outside England, you are likely to encounter English wines only at a reception in your local British embassy.

The relatively cool English climate and its often cloudy weather are the reasons for the scepticism implied by the question. Winemaking in the world is largely confined to two belts: from 30° to 50° north of the Equator and from 30° to 50° south – beyond 50° north and south, it is too cold for grapes to ripen, while in the reaches between 30° north and south, there is no cold season to allow the vines to rest. Only the tiniest bit of England, the tip of the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall, just scrapes into the vinegrowing belt. Yet the temperature is not the most crucial consideration: rather, it is sunshine. Vines normally require a minimum of 1,500 hours of sunshine, with more needed by red than by white grapes. One drawback to growing vines in England is immediately obvious. The other is the propensity to rain all year, in contrast, for example, to the Mediterranean or California, where there are wet seasons and dry seasons. The dry, sunny weather before the grape harvest which is characteristic of those two areas is a gift to winemakers: the weather concentrates the sugars in the grapes, and the subsequent fermentation converts the sugars into a high level of alcohol. A lack of sunny weather means a lack of sugars and a high level of acidity. Too much rain fosters disastrous rots; and if, by some dispensation from heaven, rot is held at bay, the vines will suck up the rainwater and dilute the grape juice.

There are now many small- and medium-sized wineries in England and Wales. Although some growers persist with red wine grapes, most of the wine produced is white. The glory of English wine, however, is sparkling wine, at least two of which are of international standard. Global warming, while not precisely providing the south coast of England with a Mediterranean climate, has made it easier to grow grapes. Indeed, the climate in Sussex, home of the best of these wines, is not so far removed from that of the Champagne region of France a century ago. Sussex also has a similar terroir, sharing the chalk-based soil which runs from Champagne through the White Cliffs of Dover to Sussex. Indeed, there are repeated reports of champagne firms sniffing around Sussex for possible purchases of land, which, as expensive as land is in England, is spectacularly less so than land in Champagne. In short, a good deal of English white wine is very good – and most of the sparkling wines are excellent.

Do you understand winespeak?

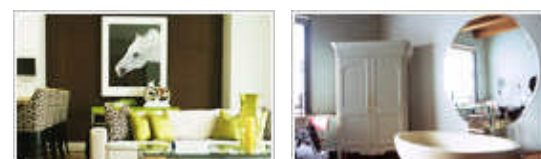
Regular buyers of wine probably read wine columnists and wine guides. They may wonder which guides to trust: what do the adjectives and nouns really mean? These are important questions. The conscientious writer tries to convey the experience you will have if you drink the wine. and this requires some detail. What most people probably want to know is what

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the wine, and this requires some detail. What most people probably want to know is, what does the wine taste like, and will I like it? Flavour, however, is actually made up of two components: its "nose" and its taste. The sceptic about the importance of its aroma should try drinking a glass while holding his or her nose. Certainly, part of the fun of drinking wine is catching the differences between what a wine smells like and what it tastes like. For many, the nose is almost more interesting, because layers of smell are sometimes more complex, and easier to discern, than layers of taste.

Indeed, the aroma (of a youngish wine) or bouquet (of a more mature wine) has produced some arresting characterisations of individual types of wine. One, ascribed to the writer Jancis Robinson MW, is for wine made from the sauvignon blanc grape, whether a Sancerre from the Loire or the eponymous wine from New Zealand: "cat's pee on a gooseberry bush". Now, let us think about that. The scent of gooseberries, yes, nettles, and sometimes elderflowers, and often grass and some herbs, but the cat's pee is more difficult. What if you do not own a cat? Would you recognise this particular scent? Even more to the point, would this description encourage you to buy it? Another columnist's recent description of a certain New Zealand sauvignon blanc was that it reminded him of "a rugby club changing room": we can only hope that this was more dismissive than descriptive. Wine columnists often pile on the more agreeable nouns. Here is one that described a Chilean wine made from the cabernet sauvignon grape: "gobs of fruit, blackcurrants and dark berries, notes of leather and pencil shavings, a hint of liquorice, chocolate and coffee". There can be several responses to that. You could pour a glass of the wine, sniff it, swirl it and sniff it again, and try, with increasing desperation, to find each of these scents. You could consider whether you really wanted to drink a wine that smelt of pencil shavings. You could give up on the smells and taste it, trying to tease out everything promised by the adjectives. Or you could quote Robinson's reported comment that few can really discern more than a small handful of scents and tastes, and just pour yourself a glass, drink it, and decide whether or not you like it.

What appears to lure consumers into the shops are the adjectives describing fruit – lots of fruit – whether it is tropical fruit and melons for Australian chardonnay, blackcurrants for claret from the Médoc and especially from cabernet sauvignons from the New World, dark cherries from an Italian Valpolicella – as well as vanilla from heavily oaked wines. What often happens is that the scents on the nose seldom translate directly into tastes in the mouth. Some do, of course, particularly the aggressively fruity New World wines. However, perhaps we should be thankful that leather, pencil shavings, rubber, stone and compost seldom do. One of the more interesting disjunctures can happen with dry Alsace or German rieslings of some age, when the honey on the nose does not appear as sweetness in the mouth; a similar experience can happen with an Alsace gewurztraminer, when the rose petals, or Turkish Delight, or lychees on the nose cannot be tasted, more's the pity. Indeed, these experiences demonstrate why anyone drinking wine should sniff before sipping: the pleasure is doubled. In short, winespeak can take you only so far: after that it is up to you.

What can you do with left-over wine?

Both at home and in restaurants, it is often only two people who share a bottle of wine. Now that so much wine has such high levels of alcohol, two people sharing a standard bottle (75cl in volume) could feel unpleasantly inebriated, as well as feeling guilty at exceeding the daily alcohol consumption recommended by doctors. An upmarket British supermarket chain has launched a range of 50cl bottles so that their customers (the middle-class ones about whose drinking habits the Government is becoming concerned) are neither tempted to overindulge nor annoyed by the waste when they don't finish the bottle.

But, if one does start with a standard 75cl bottle, and has wine left over, what should one do with it? The problem is that if you leave, say, 25cl of wine in a 75cl bottle, even if recorked or with the screw cap put back on, the oxygen in the air above the wine will still attack the alcohol quite rapidly and form acetic acid (the main constituent of vinegar after water) and ethyl acetate. The wine will not be terribly nice to drink.

The classic answer is to use the left-over wine for making a sauce in cooking the next day. A red wine sauce for two fillet steaks might be made as follows. Put olive oil in the frying pan, cook chopped shallots in it till yellow, pour out the contents of the pan into a bowl through a metal sieve, put aside the sieve with the filtered-off shallot, and return the olive oil in the bowl to the pan. Now put in the fillet steak which you have already seasoned on both sides with salt and pepper. Fry for five minutes on either side (for a one-inch-thick steak). While

you are doing this, boil the 25cl of left-over red wine in a small pot until the alcohol has been boiled off (as judged by passing a flame over the pot) – the particularly nasty ethyl acetate has a lower boiling point than alcohol and will have been boiled off as well. Put the cooked steaks on plates pre-heated in a 100C oven and gently pour away the olive oil. Add the still-hot wine to the pan and also the shallots from the sieve. Resume heating the pan and scrape off any meat residues from the base with a wooden spoon. Reduce the volume and add butter according to taste. Take the plates with the steaks out of the oven and divide the red wine/shallot/ butter sauce over them. Serve with vegetables and a freshly opened bottle of red wine.

But if the wine one has not consumed is really good, it would be a terrible waste not to keep it drinkable for the next day. The chemistry is simple in principle: it will go off more slowly the less "head space" there is above the wine; it will go off more slowly the lower the temperature in which it is stored overnight; and it will go off more slowly if the head space is not air at normal pressure but a blanketing inert gas or a partial vacuum provided by the air-pumping-out devices one can buy in the shops. You will preserve your wine reasonably well if you keep around some third- (25cl), half- (37.5cl), and two-thirds (50cl) bottles, put your undrunk wine in the appropriately sized bottle, pump out the head space, and keep the wine in the refrigerator overnight. You just need to remember to take it out of the refrigerator long enough before you drink it to get it up to the right temperature. On the other hand, champagne and other sparkling wines keep very easily. Just put the bottle back in the refrigerator without bothering to stopper it. The slow evolution of carbon dioxide bubbles will keep the air away for a long time before the wine goes flat.

What is a connoisseur?

The question is perfectly answered in the definition, and example, given by Ambrose Bierce in *The Devil's Dictionary*, and nothing else needs to be said: Connoisseur, n. A specialist who knows everything about something and nothing about anything else. An old wine-bibber having been smashed in a railway collision, some wine was poured on his lips to revive him. "Pauillac, 1873," he murmured, and died.

Taken from 'Is This Bottle Corked? The Secret Life of Wine' by Kathleen Burk and Michael Bywater, published by Faber & Faber, £12.99. To order a copy at a special price (including p&p) call 08700 798 897

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