

THE BASICS

OF

Wine

Everyone has questions about wine. It's complicated. Dr. Vinny has opened your mail, done the research and delivered some answers

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I like the advice "Vinny" provides. But why is he a cartoon superhero character, holding up a glass of wine? I find it silly to ask a cartoon character questions.

—Marc, Canada

Dear Marc,
Wine can be so stuffy and serious, I think it helps some wine lovers (especially newer ones) to realize that it's OK to relax and feel silly—and still learn something.

—Dr. Vinny

*H*i, my name is Dr. Vinny, and I'm a wine advice columnist. My readers christened me. An online naming contest came down to contenders such

as "Mighty Souse," "Wally the Wine Wallaby" and "Conrad Connoisseur." In the end "Dr. Vinifera"—Vinny, for short—endured.

For the past 10 years, I've

been asked and have answered thousands of questions about wine. I've learned as much from your queries as, I hope, you've learned from my replies, not just from my research but in my improved understanding of how to talk about wine.

You want answers, but poetic wine talk confuses (and sometimes annoys) you. You want wine to be both mysterious and easy to understand. You want permission to like what you like.

I'm here to remind folks that wine can be fun and not intimi-

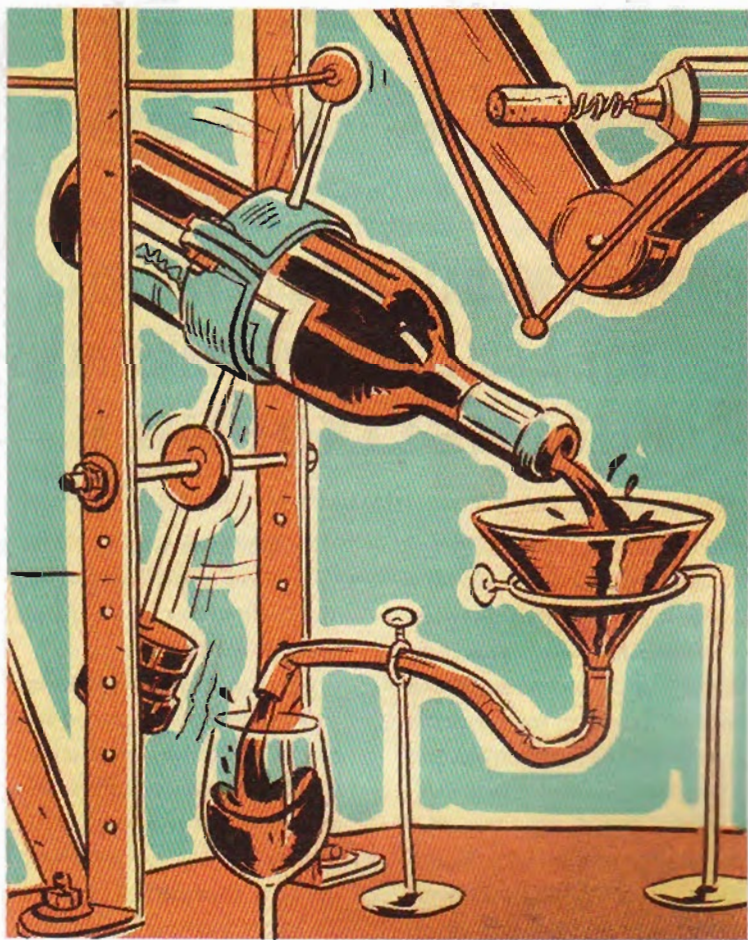
dating, but most of the questions I've received have been quite serious. I get it—wine is a vast subject, and it's in our nature to want to make sense of it, to give it some context. We like the romance of wine, but also want to understand its secrets.

In these pages, we address your most frequently asked questions and lay out some basics about enjoying wine. We hope you'll find it both entertaining and educational. If we've left something out, well, the doctor will always be in.



DR. VINNY'S ASSISTANTS INCLUDE MARYANN WOROBIEC, BEN O'DONNELL AND ESTHER MOBLEY

SERVING & HANDLING



Wine is the only beverage we drink that requires a special tool to open. Who decided that wine bottles should be stoppered with pieces of tree bark, anyway? And why do corkscrews resemble instruments of torture?

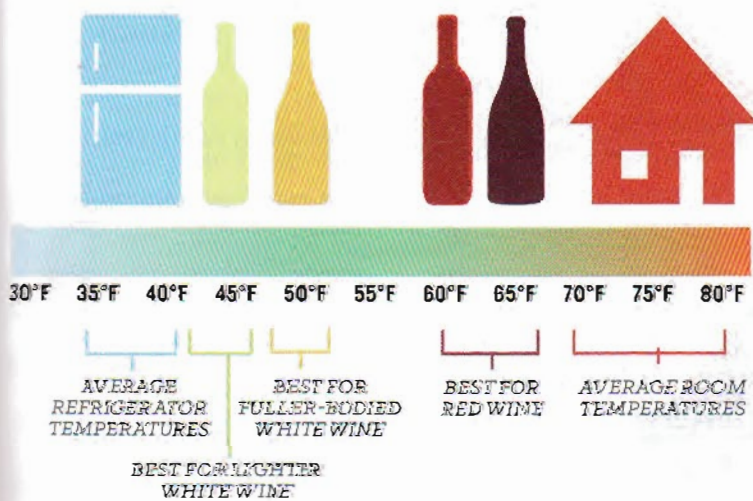
And that's only the beginning of the complications. Once you get the bottle open, a whole new set of questions arises. Is my wine too cold or too warm to show its best? Should I decant the wine? What type of wineglasses should I use?

Serving and handling wine to best advantage requires a confident approach and a bit of knowledge. But the reward is big. Fine wine, properly served and matched with good food, is an eye-opening gastronomic experience. What follows are a few basic guidelines to master in order to maximize that pleasure (and, incidentally, impress your friends).

Serving Temperature

Serving temperatures, like much about wine enjoyment, are largely a matter of personal preference. Many connoisseurs think that Americans tend to drink whites too cold and reds too warm. I bet that's because most people chill whites in the refrigerator,

where they can get cold enough to suppress the wine's aromatics, and serve reds at the ambient room temperature, which can be on the warm side in many homes. Think of serving whites just a bit cooler than a wine cellar, and reds just a bit warmer than cellar temperature.



Dear Dr. Vinny,
I was told that a bottle of wine should be drunk the day it's opened. I don't drink a whole bottle in a day or even two. Can it be stretched to three or four?
—Janey T., Bradley Beach, N.J.

Dear Janey,
It varies from wine to wine and palate to palate. Young, robust wines last longer than delicate or older wines, and whereas some folks can only enjoy a wine for a day or two after opening it, others will find it palatable for a week or longer. Though there are a lot of gizmos to preserve wine, I personally don't own any of them. I simply transfer my leftover wine to a smaller container (to limit oxygen exposure) and store it in the fridge (yes, reds too). I do own a fridge!

Champagne stopper, in the rare case a bottle of bubbly lasts at my house once open.
—Dr. Vinny

Dear Dr. Vinny,
Can I use an old cork to seal a half-bottle I filled with leftover wine?
—Dave C., Centennial, Colo.

Dear Dave,
You can try. Corks expand once removed from the bottle neck, so it can be difficult to reinsert one. Then there's the concern of TCA (2,4,6-trichloroanisole) on the old cork, which could impart dank, musty notes. But minus signs of TCA, it's OK to reuse your corks.
—Dr. Vinny

Opening the Bottle

When it comes to convenience, screwcaps rule! To add some flair, grab the cap firmly with one hand and twist the bottle with the other to create a loud "crack" noise—the closest you can get to a cork's "pop"—as the seal breaks.

If the bottle is topped with a cork, you'll need a corkscrew. First, though, you're probably going to encounter a foil capsule or a wax topping. Both are pretty much decorative now (historically, they were used to prevent cellar pests from enjoying the wine before you did). Removing them will not break the seal of your wine.

The foil is part of the wine's formal dress. So in a formal setting, cut just the very top off to expose the cork. At home, feel free to simply pull off the entire capsule.

Most wax capsules these days are pliable and penetrable; estimate where the center of the cork is and just stick the corkscrew through the wax. Before the final tug to extract the cork, brush off any stray bits of wax that could fall into the wine. Older-style wax capsules can be brittle and will need to be chipped away or heated (over a candle flame or under hot water) and peeled off before you can make your way to the cork.

There are many kinds of corkscrews, and it's worth noting that many cheap versions do a better job of turning a cork into sawdust than of extracting it. Avoid the T-shaped corkscrews, which require superhuman strength. I'm also thumbs-down on winged corkscrews that seem easy to use but are almost guaranteed to



CORKSCREWS DATE BACK TO THE 18TH CENTURY. A COLLECTOR OF CORKSCREWS IS CALLED A HELIXOPHILE.

make your cork crumble.

I like what's called a "waiter's corkscrew"—one of those small, hinged versions with a spiral corkscrew "worm" on one end and a lever on the other. You can find a good model for less than \$10, and they also fit handily into a pocket.

At \$15 or \$20, you should be able to find models with hinged levers, which increase your leverage, a welcome feature when you're extracting an extra-long cork. You can pay a lot more for ivory handles, forged blades and whatnot, but they won't make opening bottles any easier.

However, if you're opening a lot

of bottles, an investment in a fancier, labor-saving corkscrew (from mechanical to gas-operated) could be worthwhile.

For older, crumbling or longer corks, try the two-pronged wine opener commonly called an "ah-so." With this type you don't pierce the cork, but rather slide the prongs into the space between the cork and bottle. I start with the longer prong, and slowly rock it back and forth until the top of the opener is resting on the top of the cork. Then, twist the cork while gently pulling it up. It takes a couple of minutes, but that patience keeps the cork in one piece. □

CLOSURES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER



From left: Screwcap; synthetic closure (made from solid plastic compounds); natural cork; composite cork (cork granules bonded by polyurethane); Nomacorc (foam-based synthetics)



Dear Dr. Vinny, I have always been confused by decanting. How is it different than just removing the cork and letting a wine breathe?

—Neil M., New York

Dear Neil, Popping a cork and decanting a wine do the same thing: They give the wine exposure to oxygen.

If you just pull the cork, the only wine that's getting direct exposure to oxygen is the bit that's on the surface. If you then pour some wine into a glass, the wine that's released from the bottle will

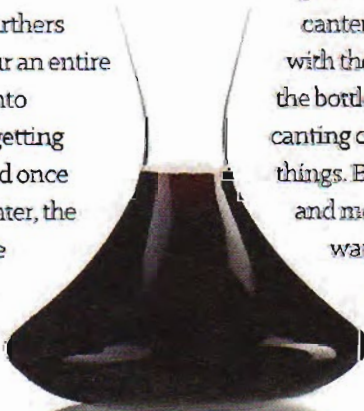
get some air while it's being poured, and then the wine that's in your glass will have a larger surface area than it did in the bottle (and the wine remaining in the bottle will likely have a larger surface area too).

Decanting furthers this. As you pour an entire bottle of wine into a decanter, it's getting a blast of air, and once inside the decanter, the wine has a huge surface area to mingle with oxygen. Then it gets

more air as it's poured into the glass, swirled, and so on.

Besides air exposure, there's another reason to decant. When you have an older wine with sediment inside, you may want to pour the wine into a decanter and leave the dregs with the bits of sediment in the bottle. Sometimes decanting can take care of both things. But if a wine is older and more fragile, you'll want to limit its exposure to oxygen so it won't fade quickly.

—Dr. Vinny



FLAWS

It happens sometimes. You take a sniff of a glass of wine and something's not quite right. Here are four of the main wine flaws. Keep in mind that even the most flawed wine—as unpleasant as it is to taste—will not make you sick if you take a sip.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF YOUR WINE SMELLS LIKE:

Wet, musty cardboard and basements: TCA

Leather, Band-Aids and cow pies: Brettanomyces

Rotten eggs, struck match or rubber: Sulfur compounds, probably mercaptans

Nail polish remover, vinegar or Magic Markers: Volatile acidity

Stemware

Another way wine differs from most other beverages is in the variety of containers designed to sip it from. Sure, you can enjoy wine from a jelly jar. But for centuries, special glasses have been thought to show particular wines at their best, from the coupes and flutes of Champagne to the green-stemmed bowls traditional for Mosel Riesling. And considering that you can pay hundreds of dollars for stemware, how do you decide?

Many wine lovers find that an all-purpose, everyday wineglass does the trick for them. If it's within your budget and cabinet space, you might prefer wineglasses designed to showcase specific types of wines—say, one for Pinot Noir that's different from one for Bordeaux-style wines. They're certainly an indulgence, but I've done side-by-side experiments with these variously shaped glasses, and there absolutely is a difference in how they make a wine taste.

At the high end, handblown glass is generally thinner and more graceful than machine-made glass. A lighter-weight wineglass balances better in your hand,

and a thin, smooth edge where your lips meet the glass is ideal for taking a sip. These days you'll find quite a few "combination" wineglasses, having handblown bowls and machine-made stems and bases. These can be a good compromise between aesthetic and cost.

Stemless wineglasses fit more easily in a dishwasher, they're easier to store, and they don't tip over or break quite so easily. The downside is that holding a wineglass bowl in your hand will warm up the wine. Plus, fingerprints on wineglasses drive me batty, and my swirling expertise becomes useless without a stem.

The "perfect" capacity for a wineglass is whatever works best for you, but I personally don't go for anything smaller than a 10-ounce volume. Keep in mind that wine lovers typically fill their glasses no more than one-third full at a time. This allows plenty of space to swirl the wine around without spilling it, and a chance to stick your nose into all those aromatics. With this much wine in your glass, is it balanced and comfortable? Or do you feel like it's going to topple over? If it's not working for you, try something smaller.



Dear Dr. Vinny,
What is the best way to clean wineglasses?



—C., Irvine, Calif.

Dear C.,
It really is best to wash glasses by hand. Rinse, rinse, rinse, with hot water. Hot water is your friend; residue-leaving soap is your enemy. Try to wash them (or at least rinse them) as soon as possible, before stains set in—if it's the end of a long evening of revelry, you can soak them in warm water overnight. For stubborn stains, I've found products that work: baking soda, special foamy brushes designed for crystal, and those disposable white sponge-things such as Magic Eraser.

Though some wineglasses are dubbed "dishwasher-safe," I know firsthand that some really awesome wine lovers have put glasses in a dishwasher with bad results (ahem). If you're going ahead anyway, make sure they're secure and well-spaced, wash them in a cycle by themselves, and open the door to let the steam escape after the cycle is over. You are warned: Multiple trips through a dishwasher can lead to cloudy glasses.

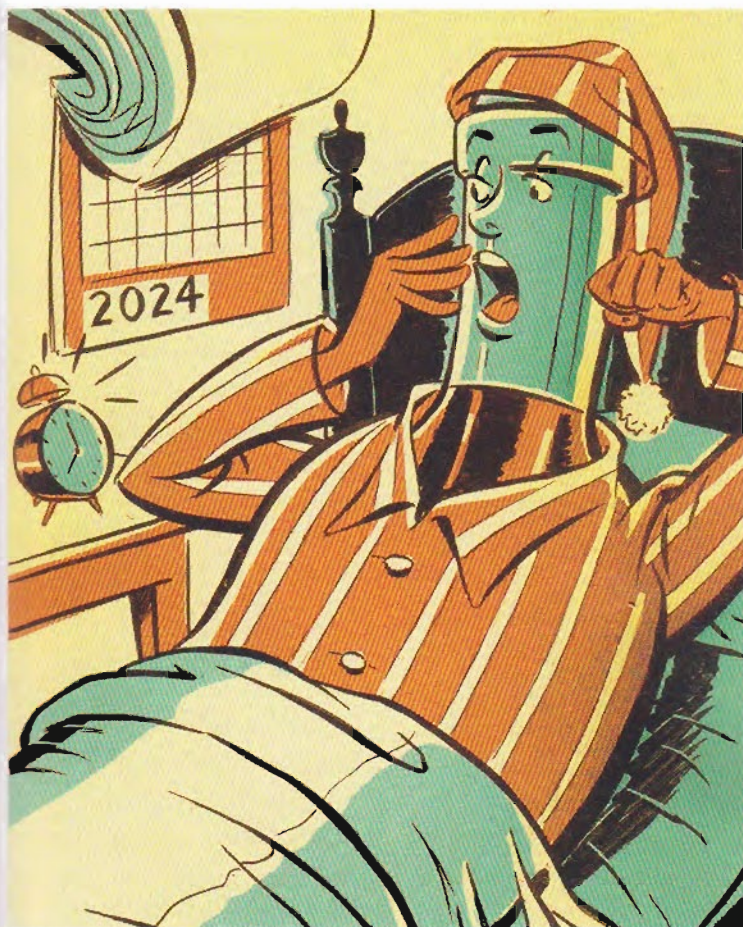
Drying wineglasses is where I'm most likely to break a glass. Never use a twisting motion—if you twist the bowl from the stem, you might just end up with the bowl in one hand and the stem in another. Dry and polish with a lint-free towel. A drying rack is also a good idea.

—Dr. Vinny

TIP There is an etiquette to holding a wineglass properly: Grasp a glass by the stem or base, not by the bowl. It may look affected, but really it's utilitarian. Doing so avoids unsightly fingerprints and your body temperature affecting the temperature of the wine. Not only that, it makes it easier to swirl and look at the wine.



COLLECTING & STORING



Collecting wine involves effort, expense and, above all, patience. Not every wine improves with age, and not every drinker enjoys aged wine. Yet those who have acquired the taste will tell you that mature wine, when well-preserved, is among the few transcendent sensory experiences available in this life.

Most wine drinkers don't start out as collectors. At first, they buy wines to drink immediately. Then they find a wine that they really like, and instead of buying a bottle, they buy a case. When a new vintage comes out, they buy another case. One day, they discover they have several dozen bottles on hand, far more than they could drink all at once, and some seem to be getting better with time. They have become wine collectors.

Wine Evolution

Wine's basic aging mechanism is oxygen, which slowly reacts with the wine over time. Too much oxygen all at once, and the wine gets, well, oxidized (this is what you're tasting when a bottle has been open for a couple of days). But when oxygen is introduced to the wine at a very slow rate, through cork, new and desirable characteristics can develop.

The flavors of a young wine are generally straightforward, with ripe, fresh fruit and the toasty, smoky notes imparted by new oak barrels. With time, alcohols and acids combine to form esters, which express new aromas. The fruit character evolves from fresh to dried: spices and savory flavors emerge. The texture changes too. Phenolic compounds (such as tannins and anthocyanins, aka pigments) bind together and change, turning a chewy wine smooth, and sometimes forming solid particles known as sediment. The wine becomes more complex and harmonious.

Think of the life of an ageable wine as an upside-down U: The wine gets better, better, better ... then sits at its peak for a while ... then declines. But it only gets better if it's properly stored.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I read about auctions selling wines that are a hundred years old, or even older. They can't possibly be any good, can they?

—Jerry, Minneapolis

Dear Jerry,
Most wines are made to be drunk more or less immediately, and they'll never be better than on the day they are released. Wines that develop well with age mostly reach their peak by year 30 or 40. But I've had much older wines—including a century-old Port—that were fantastic.

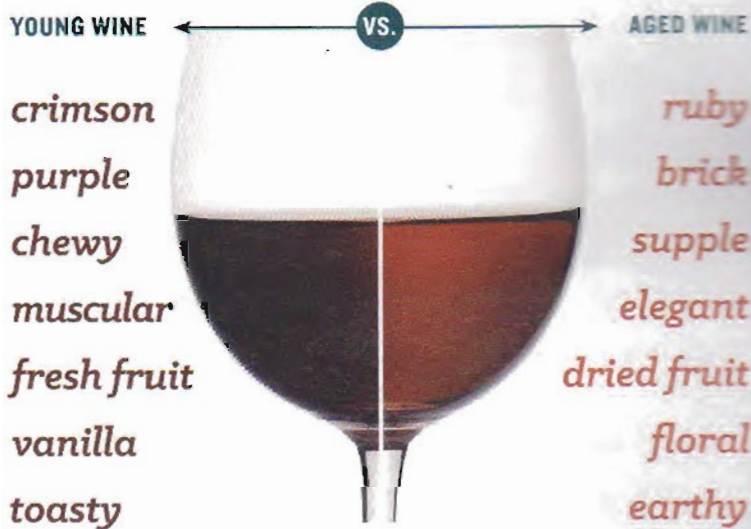
Many variables come into play. The wine has to have the structure to age, the storage conditions need to be optimal, and for any of this to be worthwhile, the person drinking the wine at the time the cork is ultimately pulled has to be a fan of the distinctive characteristics of older wines.

This is a good time to point out that a wine cellar is not a wine hospital—bad wines don't get magically better with age, they just get older.

—Dr. Vinny

AGING RED WINE

A wine's characteristics change as it matures. The graphic below depicts the general color, texture and flavor evolution of an ageable red.



Where to Store Your Wine

The ideal place to store wine is in a dank, dark, underground cave, which is exactly what people did for thousands of years and what deep-pocketed collectors today can imitate in their custom-designed home cellars.

But you needn't be a cave-dweller or hire an architect to keep your wines happy and healthy. Do you have an empty closet? A max-min thermometer (about \$20) will allow you to determine if its temperature stays below 60° F. If so, you're good to go, at least for short-term aging.

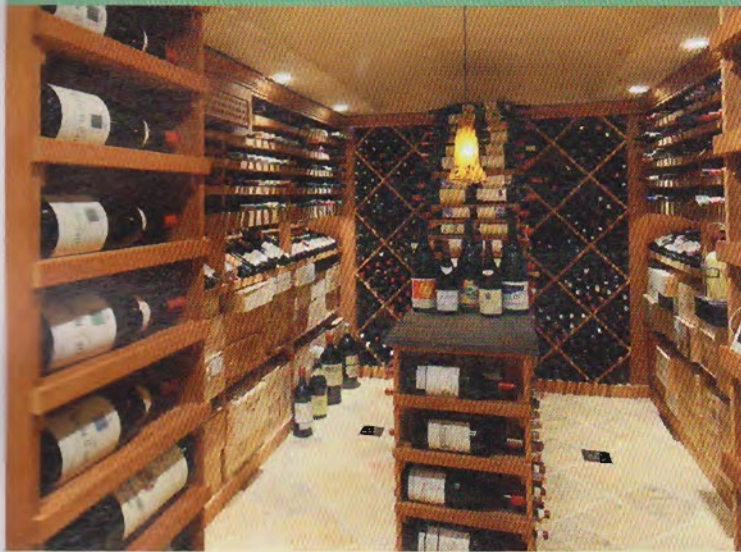
You might consider buying a small wine cellar unit, which holds from 50 to 200 bottles and costs a few hundred dollars. Just make sure it includes both temperature and humidity controls.

Once you accumulate more bottles, or wines you hope to age for more than a couple of years, you'll want to improve the storage conditions, and this will require some investment.

The most important principles of wine storage are temperature and humidity, but there's no single gadget that every wine collector must purchase in order to protect her wine. Anything that gets you closer to approximating ideal conditions, and makes sense within your budget, will do. A small, portable A/C unit (about \$150, plus a bump on your electric bill) can cool down any room, as long as the unit has a place to drain. Not sure what the room's humidity is? Buy a hygrometer (about \$30) to measure it. A desktop humidifier or a tabletop fountain (each around \$50) can provide a steady supply of moisture. Putting blackout curtains over windows and insulating the walls will improve storage conditions, as will eliminating your wines' exposure to any vibrations.

But whatever you do, don't underestimate your wines. Just because you're not stocking verticals of first-growth Bordeaux or *grands crus* Burgundies doesn't mean your collection doesn't deserve careful storage. If you drink wine thoughtfully, and if your bottles carry sentimental value for you, you'll be losing more by not taking care of them.

PROTECTING YOUR BOTTLES



CELLARING PRINCIPLE

WHY?

Keep constant temperature of about 55° F

High temperatures accelerate aging; fluctuating temperatures can expand and contract cork

Keep humidity at about 70 percent

Corks must remain moist so as not to crumble

Keep it dark

UV rays can penetrate bottles and deteriorate wine

WINES THAT ARE GOOD CANDIDATES FOR AGING NEED SUFFICIENT STRUCTURE—TANNINS, ACIDITY, SUGAR, ALCOHOL—TO SEE THEM THROUGH THE YEARS.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
Why should I add a cooling unit to my wine room? The temperature is 55° F from November through April, 60° F from May through October, and the rest is 66° to 68° F. Is it OK to not spend the \$1,000 plus?

—Bob, Columbus, Ohio

Dear Bob,
Hold on there, fella. I never told you (or anyone) that they needed to buy a cooling unit. All I suggest is that you do what you can, within your budget, to get as close to ideal storage conditions as possible.

What you have is what's called a passive cellar; that is, one that's not climate-controlled. That's fine—many of the best wineries in the world have caves and cellars dug into the earth because it provides a good wine environment. Will your wines taste better with a cooling unit? It's possible that they would stay fresher longer and

age more gracefully. If you hold on to rare or collectible wines (especially if you might choose to resell them), or if you like your wines with greater bottle age, a cooling unit becomes a little more important than if you're a "drink 'em now" kind of guy.

I can't tell you whether upgrading to an active cellar is a good idea for you. But let me ask you this: How much did you spend last year on your wine habit? If a \$1,000 cooling unit represents less than 25 percent—or, especially, less than 10 percent—of your annual wine-buying budget, you might want to think about it more carefully. Anyone who cellars wine already has an investment in wine. Might as well start thinking about protecting it.

—Dr. Vinny



The Payoff



Collecting is an investment. Typically, wines are less expensive, and easier to come by, on release than when they are mature. Conversely, you can sometimes sell well-stored mature wines for more than you paid on release.

But the greater investment here is emotional. Cellaring grants you control over your drinking—if you build yourself a library and take the time to maintain it, you won't be at the mercy of the wineshop down the block when a special occasion calls for a special libation. And even absent a grandiose, custom-built cellar, wine storage provides a display of sentimental treasures, like paintings hung on the wall or shelves of well-loved books.

For those who have gotten a taste of mature wine and like it, the question of payoff is self-evident. When it's been kept properly, there's simply nothing in this world like the exquisite taste of an aged wine.

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Scientists have observed that people who drink wine as part of their regular diet tend to live longer and healthier lives. You may have heard of the French Paradox (the relatively low incidence of heart disease in that country despite its population's generally rich diet) and the heart-healthy Mediterranean Diet (which includes regular wine consumption). Some of wine's positive effects are debated, but the drink has been linked to improved heart health, combating the effects of aging and even helping to prevent diabetes.

I'm not a real doctor—and I only play a wine doctor on WineSpectator.com. But I still get a lot of questions about wine and health. Here are some of the most popular topics.

Sulfites

Most wine labels carry the words "contains sulfites." That tends to scare people. But sulfites are found in all wines, as well as in other fermented products, such as beer and cheese, not to mention dried fruit, molasses, bacon, olives and jam. If you can enjoy a handful of raisins without suffering shortness of breath, wheezing, hives or swelling, it means you're lucky enough to not be part of the roughly 1 percent of the population—typically those with asthma—sensitive to sulfites.

Sulfites are a natural byproduct of fermentation, and many winemakers choose to add additional sulfites to protect wines against spoilage. Some winemakers, including those following organic-certification protocols, do not.

Since 1987, wines sold in the United States are required to carry a "contains sulfites" warning on the label even if sulfite levels in the bottle are as low as 10 parts per million. Thus, consumers may be reacting more to a danger perceived from the labeling than to any health risk posed by consuming sulfites.

Headaches

Some people complain that wine—particularly red wine—gives them headaches. The science behind this phenomenon



TIP All wine has sulfites, but wines sold in the U.S. have to say "contains sulfites" on their labels, whereas wines sold in some other countries do not.

..... remains a mystery, making it tough to give concrete advice.

Definitely not responsible are sulfites. Histamines are possible culprits, but their link to headaches is unclear. Some experiments show that tannins (which are present in the skins and seeds of grapes, as well as in oak barrels) provoke blood platelets into releasing serotonin, and high serotonin levels can be associated with headaches. Chocolate too releases serotonin, and some people complain about chocolate headaches.

Further complicating matters is the fact that wine contains alcohol, a well-known trigger of migraine headaches. Plus, the symptoms of red wine headaches and hangovers can overlap with those of migraines. Of course, you can always blame your parents, as susceptibility to migraines seems to be hereditary.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
When I drink red wine, I often get the dreaded "red wine teeth." Is there any way to reduce this affliction without hampering my enjoyment of reds?

—Will, Augusta, Ga.

Dear Will,
Good news! Recent research reveals that a class of chemical compounds found in wine can help inhibit the growth of the bacteria that causes tooth decay. That purple grin may actually be good for you.

How much pigment ends up on your teeth (and tongue) has a lot to do with the pH in your saliva and the protein in your mouth. If you haven't eaten in a while and are dehydrated, your mouth will be more purple than if you've been drinking water and eaten recently.

So, eat something. Cheese is perfect, because between the protein and the calcium, it can form a protective layer on your teeth. Foods high in fiber, such as vegetables, will help your mouth produce more stain-scouring saliva. Drink plenty of water—particularly sparkling water—and swish it around your mouth. Water's neutral pH will help restore your mouth's natural balance.

Wait about an hour after drinking before brushing your teeth. A mouth fresh with wine is often also full of acid and sensitive to abrasion; if you brush too soon, you risk damaging your teeth and possibly making your staining problems worse.

—Dr. Vinny



Calories & Fat

Wine is fat-free, but it does have calories—about 125 per glass. These calories come mainly from alcohol and carbohydrates, including sugar, so higher-alcohol and sweeter wines are going to be higher in calories. Some research has suggested that wine's antioxidant properties may compensate for its calorie content by mitigating fat accumulation, but the jury's still out.

CALORIE COUNTS	
1 GLASS (5 OUNCES) TABLE WINE	120-130 CALORIES
1 BEER (12 OUNCES)	150 CALORIES
1 SHOT (1.5 OUNCES) LIQUOR	100 CALORIES
1 CUP (8 OUNCES) ORANGE JUICE	125 CALORIES
1 CAN (12 OUNCES) COLA	150 CALORIES

SOURCE: U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

ODDS & ENDS

Dr. Vinny's mailbox testifies that people have an insatiable curiosity about wine. And that they are eager to ask any and all questions in their search for knowledge. Here are some of the less mainstream but still frequently pondered topics broached by wine lovers.



Dear Dr. Vinny,
How can less expensive wines be as good as more expensive wines?

—Cory, Oconomowoc, Wis.

Dear Cory,
Expensive wines are usually expensive for two reasons. First, they can cost more to make. But production costs aren't the whole story. Some wines are expensive simply because they can be. Small production, high ratings and trendy labels can all push demand—and prices—up.

At *Wine Spectator* we taste wines blind—we don't know the producer or the price—so every wine has an equal shot at 100 points, whether it costs \$10 or \$110. It's not unusual for us to take the bags off and discover we've given a higher score to a wine that costs less.

Of course, you should always trust your own palate. But be aware that you might find yourself more emotionally invested in a wine you paid big bucks for, which may influence how much you like it compared to one that was less expensive.

—Dr. Vinny

Dear Dr. Vinny,
Does it take experience to recognize great wine?

—Craig C., Alamogordo, N.M.

Dear Craig,
No. A truly great wine should speak for itself. But experience will help you understand why a wine is great.

—Dr. Vinny

Dear Dr. Vinny,
Can one say that wine has life, based on its development and evolution?

—Robert, Houston

Dear Robert,
Like many wine lovers, I often talk about wine as if it were alive. It evolves, it "breathes," it reacts to stimuli such as light and heat, and I've described wines as having personalities or going through "dumb" phases. But strictly speaking, wine does not meet the scientific definition of "alive"—the biggest bummer of which is that it doesn't reproduce.

—Dr. Vinny

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I've been buying wine for 20 years. The wines have been stored properly (I hope), but it's mostly a random assortment of bottles. What's the best way to make sense of it all and determine value? And once a value is determined, how do I go about selling my wine?

—Jeffrey H., Woodbridge, Conn.

Dear Jeffrey,
Let me be straight with you.

Random bottles with uncertain storage won't have high resale value. Simply being rare or old doesn't make a wine valuable.

I'd start with *Wine Spectator's* auction price database, which tracks many collectible wines, to get a rough idea of your wines' value. If you think you have a gem, you can start by contacting an auction house. Auction houses will want documentation of how the wine was stored, and they prefer larger collections to individual bottles. You might also find person-to-person wine-auction sites on the Web. But be careful: Some states' liquor laws stipulate that individuals can't sell wines without the proper permit.

—Dr. Vinny

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I have heard different versions of how the tradition of clinking wineglasses got started. Do you have insight on that?

—Manfred S., Oakland, Calif.

Dear Manfred,
There are two main schools of thought on this one. The most popular is that in medieval times, when wine was generally safer to drink than water, it was common to poison an enemy's wine. A good host would pour you a glass, then pour himself a bit to prove it wasn't poisoned. But if you trusted your host, you'd just clink your cup against his in a "Hey, man, I totally trust you're not gonna poison me" gesture. It was also customary to



Dear Dr. Vinny,
Looking for help on how to pick wine to cook with. How does reducing wine for a sauce change the elements of wine?

—Michael, Milwaukee

Dear Michael,
A good rule of thumb is to never cook with a wine you wouldn't be happy to drink. As the wine is reduced during cooking, it boosts the dish's overall richness and also contributes its own nuances. With this in mind, I suggest wines that emphasize fruit over oak and spice. In reds, think young Grenache, Syrah or Zin; on the white side, a richly flavored Sauvignon Blanc.

—Dr. Vinny

make a sarcastic joke about staying healthy; the thought is that this is how toasts came to call for one's continued health.

Of course, there was more thudding and clunking of wood and metal drinking vessels than clinking of glasses back then. As glass became more common, it was thought that the clinking, chiming noise was a happy sound, reminiscent of church bells, which would come in handy if you were trying to scare the devil away, which is the other theory for this tradition. The devil was believed to lurk around festive occasions, and bells and clinks were a way to drive him off.

—Dr. Vinny

TASTING & LEARNING

Some things are beautiful for their simplicity—a smoldering campfire, a tune you can whistle. Others reward deeper examination—an antique timepiece, a perfectly executed triple axel and, yes, a fine wine.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, people got scared, as if appreciating wine requires acing some mad professor's graduate-level class in foreign languages, history, geography, geology, genetics, agriculture, economics and the art of faking self-confidence.

Well, yes—learning is involved. But wine isn't busy-work, it's a collection of stories to be consumed and contemplated: The smell of flint ferries you down a river and then spirits you up a steeply terraced vineyard first plied by the ancient Romans. The taste of raspberry and cherry takes you back to the revived ranch of an ambitious young Californian exploring new possibilities of



what wine can be. The pungent aroma of blood or ink conjures visions of a fearless experiment in the vineyard or cellar, perhaps gone wrong.

Doors open to special places. Passionate craftsmen, generations of tradition and glances toward future possibilities all come together in a glass of wine. By tasting wine, you learn to collect the clues and cues; these are the keys. But it starts with opening a bottle.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
Can the average wine drinker's palate be trained to recognize all the subtle flavors, aromas and nuances of fine wine? Or are great tasters born, not made?

—John P., San Francisco

Dear John,
Anyone can improve his or her tasting skills through practice. The biggest difference between a *Wine Spectator* taster and most wine lovers is that non-professionals don't typically blind-taste flights of 20 different wines several times a week.

It helps to have a personality that is naturally curious about the way things taste and smell. Memory is also crucial, to put your taste experiences in context; taking notes is a big help here.

Learning to describe your sensory experiences allows you to share them with others, and to learn from their responses. Jump right in! You should hear me go on and on about that hot dog I had at the ball game last week.

—Dr. Vinny



Blind Tasting

There's a reason that statues of justice are portrayed wearing a blindfold. Impartiality is crucial to fairness; good judges base decisions on facts, not favoritism. At *Wine Spectator*, all wine reviews are the result of blind tastings: The critic doesn't know the producer or the price. This eliminates subjective bias; we think it is the most objective and credible way to evaluate wine.

If you taste a wine "blind," you aren't influenced by its reputation or your expectations, and you'll learn to trust your own palate. Blind tasting ensures that each wine has a chance to show its best, on a level playing field. Sometimes the results will surprise you!



The Mechanics of Tasting

After taking a moment to admire the hue of the liquid in your glass—straw, amber, brick, perhaps the burgundy tone of a wine so revered they made up a color name just for it—swirl the wine, either gently with the base of the glass on a hard surface, or clumsily in your hand (you'll get better!). This is done for aeration: With exposure to oxygen, the wine "opens up," stretching its legs after being cooped up in the bottle.

Next, get your snout in there and take a few whiffs. What's that smell? Grapefruit, mango, apple, lime, orange, a whole fruit salad? This clue might reveal the grape behind the wine. Good chance it's made from one of what are

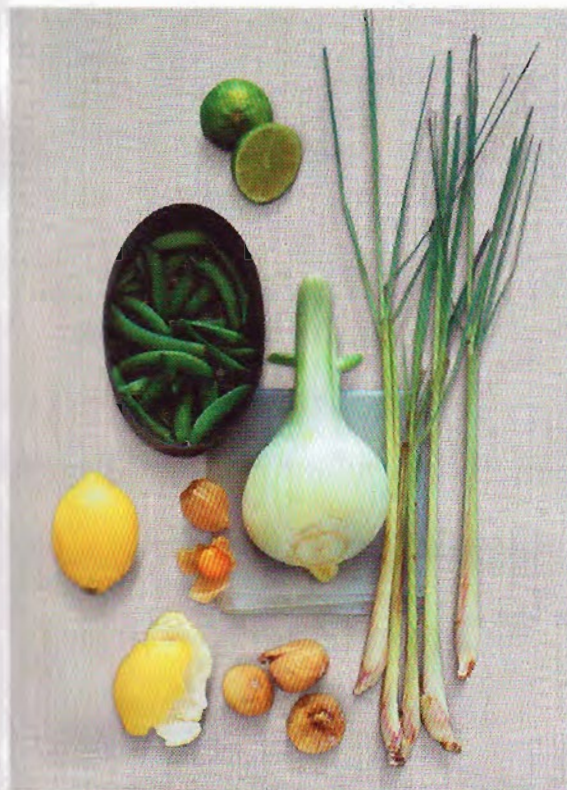
called the "aromatic" grapes: Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muscat and Viognier all share certain odor chemicals with some of the fruits found in a healthy breakfast.

Or maybe it's a more of meaty, even smoky aroma that's wafting up. This might point you to a place rather than a grape: For example, the iron-rich soils found on the slopes and in the valleys of France's Rhône or Australia's Barossa. While the connection between soil type and wine flavor is not completely understood, vines are just plants soaking up nutrients inevitably garnished with the essence of the dirt they're in.

Or perhaps that's something nutty you're sniffing out? A wine's aroma can also tell you a thing or two about how it's made: Bold reds like Cabernet Sauvignon may be fermented or aged in oak barrels, where the wood itself and the exposure of oxygen through its pores can impart toasty, nutty and vanilla scents.

Can we drink already? Take a sip, and draw in a bit of air once the wine is in your mouth, paying no heed to the unbecoming gurgling noises you emit. The air you're drawing in carries aroma to your olfactory gland through the back of your throat.

Note that flavor and taste are not the same thing. Taste happens on your tongue and comes in only five varieties—sweet, sour, salty, bitter, savory/umami—while flavor is a many-splendored phenomenon that



Flavors in wines made from the Sauvignon Blanc grape can range from herbal to citrus to tropical.

tangles and elevates smell and taste to something more than the sum of their parts; it's why your sense of "taste" is diminished by a head cold. A wine may taste sweet, but its flavors may be caramel, honey, gingersnap.

Now take a few seconds to swish the wine around in your mouth. What does the texture feel like? Is it astringent and papery? Tangy and acidic? Smooth and creamy? This is your tongue at work, along with the nerves in your mouth, sussing out the structural components of a wine: sugar, acidity and tannin, alcohol. (Not all four are usually present at once: Dry table wines have very little sugar; white wines seldom have much tannin.)

In a good wine, these partners tango in tandem, without one tripping over the others. Different drinkers will have different tolerances and preferences, of course. Balance, to an extent, is in the palate of the beholder.

Tasting bad wines is instructive too. They signal potholes to avoid on the road to harmony and complexity. A wine that's too acidic will taste lean and tart; a wine that lacks acidity is flabby, and the flavors will feel simple and dull. A sugar bomb is cloying. Noticeably alcoholic wines are "hot." And there are also more objective flaws that may be introduced in the winemaking and packaging processes.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I hear a lot about what are called "corky" wines. What are "corky" wines like? What can you do if you have one?

—Patranun L.,
Bangkok, Thailand

Dear Patranun,
When someone describes a wine as "corky" or "corked," that means the wine is suffering from the

musty, dank-smelling compound known as TCA (the abbreviation for 2,4,6-trichloroanisole). It's caused by interaction between mold, chlorine and phenols (organic compounds found in all plants). It can develop in corks themselves, which is why TCA is linked to corks, hence the "corky" or "corked" term, but it can originate in other places in the winery as well, such as wooden barrels

and fermentation vats.

Once you've had some experience, TCA flavors in a wine are very distinctive. Think of old books or wet cement. When you drink it, that musty quality overwhelms the fruit flavors of the wine, and TCA often leaves a dry, gritty, aspirinlike taste.



—Dr. Vinny

READING A TASTING NOTE

CHÂTEAU BARDE-HAUT ST-EMILION 2011

This pumps out some mouthfilling plum, blackberry and boysenberry compote notes, studded with licorice snap and fruitcake hints and backed by a long, charcoal-studded finish. Shows ample toast. A not-shy version that should knit together well. Best from 2016 through 2023. 3,330 cases made.

In addition to the many actual foreign languages you'll navigate in the world of wine, the language of wine tasting itself can seem alien. Who made toast, and why is the wine knitting?

Let's start with the easy stuff: Plum, blackberry, boysenberry, licorice—these are common enough flavors in red wine, and the dessert "compote" form suggests a richer, denser, perhaps sweeter-seeming wine. It's a good sign that the grapes ripened amply. So is that "mouthfilling" quality.

When you think "ample toast," think of vanilla, nut, charcoal and other savory-sweet flavors; these are imparted by barrel aging.

In good wines, the after-taste will linger, sometimes even revealing new angles and layers of flavor. This is the wine's "finish."

This wine is true to form: St.-Emilion is a wine region on the Right Bank of France's Gironde estuary, north of the city of Bordeaux. Its wines are famous for their many layers of distinctive flavors, primarily from the Merlot grape.

A château is simply a vineyard property. Barde-Haut tends 42 acres, and in a moderately challenging vintage—2011 indicates the year the grapes were harvested—the wine scored 91 points, an "outstanding" rating at a friendly price of \$30.

Dear Dr. Vinny,
I recently turned 21 and started serving at a higher-end restaurant. I have been studying wine, but I really want to know what people want to hear when they ask questions like, "How does it taste?" All wine sort of seems to taste similar to me, so I'm wondering how to describe wines and what to say about them to better help at work.

—Taylor, Napa, Calif.

Dear Taylor,
When you're first learning about wine, it's not unusual to have trouble distinguishing wines from each other.

Taste one wine a day from your restaurant's list, and do some research on your own. Look up its website, learn a little about it, see how winemakers describe their own wine, and then maybe check out how an independent critic describes the wine ... like, say, *Wine Spectator*, which has hundreds of thousands of reviews available on its website or in our handy apps.

From there, the world is your oyster. If only you lived in a culture immersed in wine ... oh, wait, you live in Napa. Wine is your backyard. Go to tastings and take tours! But no matter where you live, you can start

reading, join a tasting group or take an online course.

As far as describing wine, I think for most people, you just need to stick to the basics, especially until you develop your own wine vocabulary and comfort level. For reds, I'd describe the body, level of tannins and how oaky the wine is. For whites, I'd mention the acidity level. You can admire a wine for its pure fruit flavor, its spiciness, or its floral aromatics. Someday you'll be writing evocative tasting notes. Good luck!

—Dr. Vinny



Advanced Degree

Go forth and taste! Never have there been so many opportunities to get your teeth dirty, from the comfort of one's couch to the holiest sanctums of wine geekery.

You might kindle your relationship with wine where many relationships first spark, in the intimate setting of a house party with friends and plus-ones. A wine-tasting party needn't cost more than the price of a set of stemware. Pick a theme and have each guest bring a bottle: at first something simple and broad, like rosé or Riesling, then, as your wine understanding deepens, something more defined—Bordeaux from a specific vintage, or single-vineyard bottlings of California Pinot Noir.

Try blind tasting—paper-bagging the wines and attempting to identify them based on your understanding of "textbook" styles—you'll sometimes find yourself surprised and adding footnotes to the textbook. Share your thoughts and notes, and agree to meet at the same time and place next week.

Now hit the books or hit the town. Wine classes and seminars are widely available, often inexpensive, and many cities keep active online listings of such wine goings-on. Get a date and go to a walk-around tasting featuring wines of Spain or South Africa, stopping to chat with the winemakers. What is the proportion of different grapes in this blend? What made this vintage unique? Why did you decide to use this method, or that?

Dive in, pay attention, keep your eyes, ears and nose open. Don't feel overwhelmed or intimidated: Remember, you're not drowning in the rushing river of wine, you're sailing along it. □

Finding the Keys

At first glance, a wine tasting appears to be the ultimate buffet of refinement: smartly attired minglers about with glasses in hand, open bottles of fine wine lined up on long tables, all for you.

Then you notice the glamorous women and distinguished gentlemen leaning over buckets and expectorating like tobacco-chewing prospectors at a saloon. Spitting may look gauche, but it has its merits. You maximize the number of wines you can taste while avoiding palate fatigue and other, more glaring, embarrassments. So go ahead: Swirl, sniff, sip, savor, expectorate.

Then, take out your notepad/tablet/smartphone and begin to write or record, describing the aromas, the flavors, the textures. A picture begins to emerge, one that you'll continue to color in as you learn more about wine.

Aromas, textures and flavors offer clues about a wine, though they may elicit more questions than answers. A wine may have fruity or floral notes, from apricot to violet, because the wine is young; because the grapes were picked at lower ripeness levels (in the range of lavender or lemon) or higher (plum, raspberry); because the wine is made using neutral, oxygen-blocking containers like stainless steel; because the winemaker likes those flavors and he's going to make what he wants to drink.

Or a wine may have savory, cedary, chocolaty notes because it was made using barrels; because it has been exposed to oxygen; because it has been aged and the fruit has mellowed into something more nuanced; because the winemaker likes those flavors and she's going to make what she wants to drink.

Taken on their own, the sensations you're recording can mean many things, but supplement your tasting with a little book learning and you'll start to put it all together. Chablis, in Burgundy, is pleasantly citrusy, slightly chalky, zippy with acidity and light in the mouth because it is made from Chardonnay, grown in limestone soils in a land where the cool climate pushes against ripeness, and often is vinified in stainless steel. That's one of many wine styles you'll be able to parse if you simply pay attention.



A tasting room in California's Monterey County

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