

TIME IN A BOTTLE

Many wines get consumed before they peak

Check the circa-1965 YouTube video of Mick Jagger and Stones crooning “Ti-i-i-me is on my side, yes it is.” Mick looks like a kid; they all do, the whole band. Well, time is not on your side, or mine, or Mick’s or wine’s.

Simple fact: Wines change over time. Some mature gracefully, some go through awkward stages, some die young. But except for *nouveau* (new) wines, the first pressings of a vintage intended to be quaffed almost immediately, most wines, even most whites and nearly all reds, could benefit from lying cool, quiet and dark, on their sides, still in the bottle, for at least a year, maybe longer, time enough for their flavors and textures to meld, allowing their “best” character to emerge.

Rarely do they get that time. Wine-marketing researchers tell us that 90-plus percentage of a vintage will be consumed within a year after release; 99 percent will be consumed within five years. Time, clearly, is *not* on the wine’s side, or the buyer’s. Who’s to blame?

Consumers? Typical buyer behavior involves purchasing a bottle, taking it home, pulling the cork, drinking the wine with the night’s dinner. A tiny percentage of buyers have the patience and resources to cellar or store their wines for (sometimes) years. For most consumers, this just ain’t gonna happen. What? Blame ourselves? Not likely.

Producers? Most wineries, especially in Oregon, are small family operations, surviving (barely) on thin margins of revenue. They need all the sales (and none of the inventory) they can get. Few producers have the resources of, say, Chateau Musar, the famous Lebanon-based winery owned by the Hochar (pronounced “hoshar”) family that commonly holds its best big-red wines for up to four years after



bottling, giving their wines enough time to enter their promising adolescence.

Musar wines can often improve for decades. Their current release is **Chateau Musar 2007** (\$49), their signature blend of cabernet sauvignon, cinsault and carignan, yielding deep, rich flavors of dark berries, earth and (I swear) whiffs of spicy gun-smoke (grapes are grown in the Bekaa Valley, site of trade and warfare — and grapes — for thousands of years). Musar also markets a line they call *Jeune* (young) wines intended to be glugged soon after release; **Ch. Musar 2012 (Red) Jeune** (\$22) is soft, bright, pleasant to drink, even now.

Retailers? The best wine specialty shops might warn a customer that some particular wine really needs time to settle down; for instance, newly bottled pinot noirs are notorious for going into “bottle shock” and a “dumb stage” from which they will emerge in (sometimes) just a few months, so a wine-shop steward might advise a different wine — or taking more time.

So, blame no one. Life is fast, and good wine is good now — and sometimes later.

The last few years since 2008 have brought Oregon’s vintners some superb vintages (and challenges): International praise has been heaped on the 2008s, ’12s, ’14s and now the ’15s (maybe “the best ever”). Time, however, has redeemed the 2007s, ’09s (bold, “hot-year” wines). Many wine-wags have found the ’13 wines very appealing. For example, **Bethel Heights 2013 Pinot Blanc** (\$24), a dry white wine with complex flavors, versatile with a wide variety of foods, has been judged “excellent.” Locally, **Territorial Vineyards** scores with **2013 Pinot Gris** (\$16), gold medal white. **Territorial 2014 Riesling** (\$16), still very young, already dubbed “superb.” With a few years of maturation, this lovely white might be called “classic.” Time will tell.

Much more to say, but we’re out of space — and time.

Happy New Year. Resolve to drink some good wines: It’s time. ■

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