

AGING WINES II

The real value of saving great vintages

Valentine hugs and kisses to all y'all! But first: Last month, we glanced briefly at benefits of maturing (aging) fine wines. The subject is too complex for one skimpy piece. Besides, we must tell the story of Bill Wilson, about time and wine and love.

In 1985, Bill was already in his mid-60s, white hair, walked with a cane, always wore his father's Iron Cross on a ribbon around his neck. He ambled into Ambrosia, introduced himself. We talked wine.

At that time, I held the title of wine manager and was busily spending the owners' money, filling our wine list and basement cellar with "great" wines — we listed more than 20 vintage ports, many single-vineyard barolos, hundreds of others, the best of Italy and Oregon that we could acquire.

Bill and his beloved wife, Ginger, had been avid collectors. He was a font of good advice. Now, Ginger was wasting away, a victim of MS, in a Medford hospital. Bill visited often although each visit seemed to break another piece of his heart. Meanwhile, their wine collection was being depleted as Bill sold or gave away bottles of the best, sometimes sharing with friends (I was one of the happy recipients).

But Bill saved two bottles of classic Bordeaux, **Chateau Lafite-Rothschild** from the epic **1945** vintage; he showed me one bearing the distinctive V label added to the neck, reading *L'année de la Victoire* (year of the victory, end of WW II, liberation of France). Bill saved those precious vessels (valued now in tens of thousands of dollars) for a final dinner with his wife.

That final night came. Bill later told me the story: Though Ginger had little appetite, Bill organized a sumptuous dinner delivered to her hospital room. He brought the two Bordeaux, treating them like museum pieces (which they were). He opened the first bottle: "It was horrible," he said. He opened the second: "It was profound, the best we had ever tasted."

They drank that profound wine, shared their last laughs, "to the dregs." Call that a valentine. Or just love.

Bill Wilson schooled me in the real value of saving a great wine (it ain't

the bux). My pal Larry Malmgren recently gave me another lesson when he came to Kat's dinner with a nearly legendary Australian shiraz (syrah, with a dash of cabernet), **Padthaway Parson's Flat** from **2003**. The wine proved rich and complex, still carrying loads of dark-berry fruit, some pepper, the tannins all smoothed out, delish with tenderloins of beef.

First, though, we finished an opened bottle of **Ch. Musar 2012 (Red) Jeune** (hoary wine wisdom: drink young before old), discovering that even a wine made to be glugged young had improved with a day's exposure to air. Although the Musar was pleasant, the Padthaway blew it away.

If consumers insist on drinking wines young, then smart businesspeople will respond by giving the buyers what they want — and they have. Lately, vintners have tuned their skills to making good wines that can be bought and enjoyed while young. Smart move, but critical response has varied. Case in point might be the recent (Jan. 7) column by *The New York Times*' influential Eric Asimov, praising stellar vintages (esp. 2013) of Oregon pinot noirs, most born in the hills around Dundee.

Asimov and colleagues blind tasted 20 beauties; their top-10 best wine was **Maysara Three Degrees** (\$25, McMinnville). But like many experienced tasters, Asimov and friends relied on their preferences, rejecting consumers' inclinations toward big, bold fruit flavors, looking instead toward pinots more "tightly wound" with "tension" (whatever that might be).

The respected *Wine Spectator* recently released its annual feature, "The Top 100 Wines of 2015." Oregon placed five wines (all pinot noirs) on the list. At #3, **Evening Land 2012 Pinot Noir** (\$70), from the Seven Springs vineyard near Salem, garnered 98 points (out of 100), a higher score than the first- or second-place wines, still high praise. But watch for the newest issue of that publication where senior editor Harvey Steinam inks "Winning Big in the Willamette Valley." Lotsa love there.

Meanwhile, enjoy a young, affordable quaff from the Rogue Valley, **Swallow 2012 Pinot Noir** (\$10), simple, clean, easy to drink, even quite young.

Time races by us all. We wish you and your love(s) good times and good wines, young or old. ■



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