

Cellaring Wine



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Managing Your Wine Collection ... to Perfection

Whimsical illustrations by William Bramhall

JEFF COX



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To the vineyard workers, who toil so that we may drink wine.



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Preface

In *From Vines to Wines*, the companion book to this volume, I detailed the process of choosing the site of a vineyard, selecting grape varieties for the site, growing the grapes, and making wine from them. In this book, I describe the journey of the finished bottle of young wine — whether made from your grapes or a bottle you have purchased — to its ultimate destination on your table as a perfectly aged wine, faceted not only with layers of fruit but with the accoutrements of age: silken smoothness, generosity of flavor, and the fragrances of bouquet that only arise with sufficient time in the bottle.

If, as I said in *From Vines to Wines*, wine is the child of the marriage of a human being and grapevine, then to know that wine in the fullness of its maturity is to know the child grown to the full power of its adulthood. Well-aged wine is as different from the product that first went into the bottle as an adult is from a child. Its youthful appeal may be diminished, but its complexity and depth can be infinitely greater.

Wine can achieve these heights only if it is handled properly during its years of maturation. That takes a wine cellar. Although I loved fine wine as a young man, I never thought about having a wine cellar of my own until one November nearly 30 years ago when I visited friends in France.

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A more volatile couple can hardly be imagined — he a reserved, upper-class Englishman, she a fiery, libidinous Frenchwoman. After a few days of listening to them bicker in the confines of their Paris apartment, I was thankful that they offered to drive us all down to her mother's château near the city of Angoulême so we could spend some time in the countryside. Her mother, who must have had considerable wealth, was in Paris at her own apartment for a few weeks, and so the château was available for us.

Angoulême is in the department of Charante, where Cognac is made, about 300 miles southwest of Paris. To the south of Charante are the departments of Dordogne and Gironde, which hold the culinary and vinous treasures of Périgord and Bordeaux and offer plenty of opportunity for day excursions. We left Paris early and made a noontime stop in Saumur, where we visited a winemaker. After we sampled his very good white (but astringent red) wine, he led us to one of his *chais*, where a staircase descended into caves carved three levels down into the underlying chalk. The air in the caves was close, and the bottles of wine stored in the lowest level covered with the dust of decades. “During the war,” he said, referring to World War II, “we hid all our wine and valuables down here, to keep them from the Nazis.” The Nazis never did discover the entrance to the caves, he said, because it was then hidden under the manure-encrusted floorboards of a horse stable.

We arrived in Angoulême at night, exhausted. The next morning, I rose early to look around. The château was a grand house dating from the early eighteenth century. Behind the house was a copse of trees that turned out to be, on close inspection, overgrown filberts, and a *clos* with a vegetable garden and a gate in its wall. Through the gate, a path led through a pasture of ripe-smelling grasses and dried weeds to a nearby dairy farm. Later that morning, and every morning for the two weeks we stayed there, one of us would take a silver pail and walk the quarter mile path to the farm, where rich whole milk still warm from the cow would be poured foaming into the pail.

I reveled in the niceties of rural France. The estate's caretakers collected our dirty clothes and laundered them outside, scrubbing them on a washboard in a tub of soapy water kept hot with boiling water from a cauldron hung over a wood fire. We purchased meat and eggs from a truck that pulled up

every day about noon. The butcher let down a long flap on the side of the truck and climbed into the enclosure, the flap becoming a counter on which he set a basket of fresh eggs, ham, steaks, and chops for us to choose from.

The house itself was intriguing — two stories with long hallways that ran the length of the building, opening onto rooms filled with antique French furniture. Although the kitchen was updated with a refrigerator, gas stove, and oven, it was easy to see its original appearance in the ancient tiled walls and flagstone flooring.

On my second afternoon there, I wandered into the clos to see what was growing and discovered a set of steps leading down to a cellar-level room under the château. An ironwork gate barred the entranceway to the cellar. A large padlock secured the gate to an iron rod cemented into the masonry. Inside I could dimly see a table, some shelving, lots of cobwebs, and a number of dusty wine bottles lying on their sides.

Excited by my find, I ran back up into the house to see if Corrine had a key. “Somewhere here,” she said in her thick French accent. “When we were kids, my cousins and I would always try to break into the cellar to steal the wine, so my father put up that gate to keep us out. I’m sure the key is here somewhere.” And though she looked high and low as I waited impatiently, she couldn’t find it.

Several times before I left the château for good, I went back to the iron gate to see if I could dislodge it from its hinges or pick the lock. The dusty bottles inside seemed like treasures beyond measure, lying undisturbed for years in the cool, dark cellar. I imagined the wine inside softened and smoothed by time, ripened into what surely must be the finest sip of ambrosia on the planet. I saw them there in the dark, inscrutable vessels of promise, tantalizing and taunting me, but locked beyond my reach. Corrine’s father had done his work well. Although he was many years deceased, his gate stood proof against looters like me. That’s when I became determined to someday have my own wine cellar.

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Now I do have my own wine cellar, although one with perhaps less ambience than Corrine’s father’s. It’s darn near a social necessity here in Sonoma County, where wine is the local industry and subject of much talk, discussion, debate, argument, inquiry, and even gossip. Almost immediately after moving here 15 years ago from eastern Pennsylvania, I joined a group of three amateur winemakers and found myself elbow deep in fermenting must before the moving truck even arrived with my furniture. I became acquainted with, and then friends with, many professional winemakers. On the not-so-infrequent occasions when they invited friends over for a meal and to share some wine, those friends brought treasures from their wine cellars: One night Penny opened a bottle of 1935 Simi Zinfandel, which she inherited from somewhere when she was still in her thirties. Another night John brought a 1964 Beaulieu Vineyard’s Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, one of André Tchelistcheff’s masterpieces. Tom opened a bottle of 1985 Dehlinger Merlot, with a rich bouquet of age. Rod brought a 1970 Swan Vineyards Gamay, with a distinct blueberry flavor; we later discovered it wasn’t Gamay at all, but a variety called Valdiguié. And then more truly spectacular bottles, all French: Mike’s 1918 Haut-Brion that opened beautifully but lasted no more than 15 minutes before fading away in the glass. Peter’s 1929 Bouchard Père et Fils Chablis (69 years old at the drinking and still fresh as a March breeze). And David’s 1919 Musigny, 79 years old and like a bouquet of lovely pressed flowers, delicately scented, sweet, and beautiful. And then the ultimate bottles: the 1928 Château Latour, finally reaching maturity after 70 years, its depth and richness intact but silkened by time. And the 1947 Château d’Yquem Sauternes, whose sweet golden liquid smelled

like the faintly perfumed gown of a sleeping Venus — and if you think that elaborate description overstates the case, I suggest you try a 50-year-old Yquem and come up with a more accurate one.

None of these exquisitely sensual experiences would be possible without a wine cellar. The cellar is not just a repository for wine. It is a school — no, a university — where young wine learns how great it can become. Properly operated, the wine cellar becomes a mechanism whereby today's modestly priced bottles become tomorrow's valuable, historic treasures. Each well-aged bottle is a window into the past, a visit to a time gone by, a reminder of a specific summer, an evoker of memories, a delicious peak experience for the palate, a glass of cheer in a world too often sad and somber, and a comfort to us as we, too, age into fruitful full maturity.

Acknowledgments

I've been seriously interested in wine for over 30 years now, and the list of people who've helped me understand the subject would be long indeed. Special thanks, however, go to Bob Thompson, the writer who has believed in me and helped me along. Dan Berger has been a friend and unwitting teacher, as I've listened closely to his opinions. Richard Arrowood has never failed to be generous with his insights and time when I've asked for his help. Peter Hardell allowed me space in his wine cellar before I had one of my own. Rod and Lynn Berglund have been friends who've generously invited me to many dinners where old and well-cellared wines were opened. Leo McCloskey has given me deep insights into the biochemistry of wine. Mike Rubin shared his ideas about how wines age. I could not have written the chapter on building the wine cellar without the expert help of Anthony Micheli of Micheli Construction in St. Helena, who has built many wine cellars in the Napa Valley, and John Cottrell of Petaluma, Sonoma County, whose expertise in building is incorporated in that chapter. I'm delighted with Bill Bramhall's witty drawings and give him my heartfelt thanks.

Very special thanks go to Dianne Cutillo, Marie Salter, and the folks at Storey Publishing, who believed in this book and encouraged me. My visit to North Adams was heartwarming as I saw their camaraderie and enthusiasm, and it reminded me of a fondly remembered time when I also worked for a book publisher that helped authors realize their dreams in print.

PART ONE

Why Collect and Cellar Wine?

*A properly aged glass of fine
wine is one of the few peak
experiences we can enjoy on a daily basis.*

*We provide the cellar
with the wine, and the cellar
returns it to us glorified.*

Why Collect Wine?

People usually delve deeper into wine because they like it. It tastes good, and it makes a fine accompaniment to food. A glass or two is relaxing after a hard day's work and may even be good for the health. Once you begin to enjoy wine on a regular basis, it's also more convenient to select a bottle from a stash of your favorites than to run down to the store before dinner and take potluck from the store shelves. And so the first reason — and still one of the best reasons — for collecting a few bottles of wine is so you don't run out.

Wine is one of those subjects, like cooking or gardening, that continues to open up before you as you explore it. The more you learn, the more there is to learn, until, a long time into it, you realize that you'll never exhaust the subject. No one can taste all the wine there is. No one has yet mapped out exactly how a grapevine transforms rainwater and sunshine into the complexities of sweet grape juice or how yeast, the simplest of God's creatures, changes this juice into even more complex wine. No one can possibly fathom all the variations of climate and soil from vineyard to vineyard that create wines with the unique taste of the place where their grapes were grown.

Because of this complexity and the many levels of quality found in wine, a fascination with wine can quickly grow from a few bottles in the kitchen cabinet into a number of cases in the bedroom closet. From there, it's a short step to many cases on shelving in the basement, and then to a well-stocked, fully operational wine cellar. I know; I've made this journey. As one's interest in wine intensifies and one's knowledge grows, so does the collection of wine in the cellar.



Part of cellaring wine is the collector's mania. I've felt the mania most of my life. It started when I was about eight or nine years old and got interested in baseball. Living in Manhasset, Long Island, we were natural Yankee fans (the Mets weren't born yet). The more I knew about the Yanks and the other major league teams, the more baseball cards I collected. I just had to have Mickey Mantle's card when he came up in 1951. Yogi Berra was a favorite of mine, so I bought packs and packs of bubble gum (the ostensible reason for buying these packs was the bubble gum, the baseball cards were a bonus; in fact, of course, it was the other way around) until I got Yogi's card. This mania ended about six or seven years later, when I was finishing up high school. The tragic ending of this story is not atypical. Returning home from college, I looked for my cards — a collection of perhaps 200 dating from 1948 to 1957 — but couldn't find them. I asked my mom if she had seen them. "Yes, Dear," she said sweetly. "The little neighbor boy was over visiting and found your cards, so I gave them to him. Did you want to keep them?" The little neighbor boy has probably built his dream house in Hawaii with the proceeds of those cards. And yes, my mom burned all my comics, too. When I get to heaven, I'm going to have a stern talk with her.

The collecting mania can strike the wine lover, too. As my interest in wine grew, I saw there was a great hullabaloo about certain wines — the Merlots of Château Pétrus, 'La Tache' from Domaine de Romanée-Conti, *Trockenbeerenauslesen* from Schloss Vollrads in the Rheingau, and so on. I wanted to taste them, to discover for myself what all the shouting was about. At one time, I was also in love with certain automobiles: the 1958 BMW 507 Touring Sport, for instance, and the 1955 Mercedes Benz 300SL convertible. Whereas these cars were well out of my financial reach, the wines weren't. It occurred to me then that there weren't many luxury experiences within the reach of folks with modest means but that good wine was one of them.

Toward the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, you could find a bottle of Château Margaux for under \$20 — and that was considered very expensive. I picked up the 1970 Château Lafite for \$25. I remember buying a bottle of 1926 Château Pichon-Lalande for something like \$28 from Sherry-Lehmann wine purveyors in New York City in the early 1970s. As my collection of little vinous treasures grew, so did my need for a wine cellar to keep the choice bottles safe. If my own mother could give away my baseball cards and burn my comic books, no telling what friends could do to my wine.

TO LEARN AND TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE

Friends I know from other parts of the country who aren't very sophisticated about wine often drop by. Sometimes they want recommendations for wineries to visit, wines to try, and bottles to look for, and I'm happy to give them suggestions and even call a winery for them to arrange a visit. I figure this is their opportunity to learn about good wine, and by seeking my advice, they show me they want to learn. Other folks come with preconceived ideas: "I like Sutter Home White Zinfandel. How do I get to Sutter Home?" I personally don't mind if they like white Zinfandel, which is a characterless, sweet, fruity wine one step up from Sprite. That's their business. But I'm not going to try to convince them that there are treasures far beyond white Zinfandel. It would be presumptuous of me. Besides, I have a soft spot in my heart for white Zinfandel. Here's why.

• • •

The soft spot developed when I moved to California's Wine Country in 1985. The most beautiful vineyards were the old, head-trained field blends planted by Italian settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were mostly Zinfandel, usually with some other varieties like

Carignane, Alicante Bouschet, Mataro (the old-timers' name for Mourvèdre), and even a few vines of white grapes like Golden Chasselas mixed into the vineyard, hence the term *field blend*. Many winemakers in the early 1980s made rich, red, intense, luscious, fruity, concentrated, massive, inky, explosively flavored wines from Zinfandel and Zin field blends. Some Zinfandel made by winemakers with a more restrained approach reached heights of quality that belied their low price. These were not widely known or popular around the United States, although within the Wine Country, wine lovers enjoyed them.

During the mid-1980s, the French varieties of Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon were queen and king, respectively. Top-quality Cabernet was bringing up to \$1,000 a ton (it's many times that now), and Chardonnay was not far behind. Field blends of Zinfandel and vineyards that were 100 percent Zinfandel, on the other hand, brought half that amount of money. Vineyard owners were tearing out the ancient vines and replanting with the higher priced varieties. Also, new outbreaks of phylloxera, a vine root louse that was devastating vineyards first in Sonoma County and then in Napa County, necessitated wholesale replantings of sick and threatened vineyards. However, those century-old field blends and old Zin vineyards had never succumbed to phylloxera, most likely because the Italian settlers had planted them on phylloxera-resistant rootstocks.

Just as these treasured, gnarled, ancient Zinfandel vineyards were being torn out, along came the Trinchero family, which owned Sutter Home and introduced white Zinfandel, a wine made by lightly pressing the juice from Zinfandel fruit without rupturing many of the cells in the skins that hold color compounds. The juice is then fermented off the skins, this red grape being treated like a white wine. The end result was the pinkish, sweet quaff that immediately found a huge market. Sutter Home turned from a small family winery into a wine giant, buying up all the Zinfandel it could find. Suddenly vineyard owners had a new opinion of their old Zin vineyards — these things could make money! And so, although some old field-blend vineyards were lost, many were saved by the marketing magic of white Zinfandel.

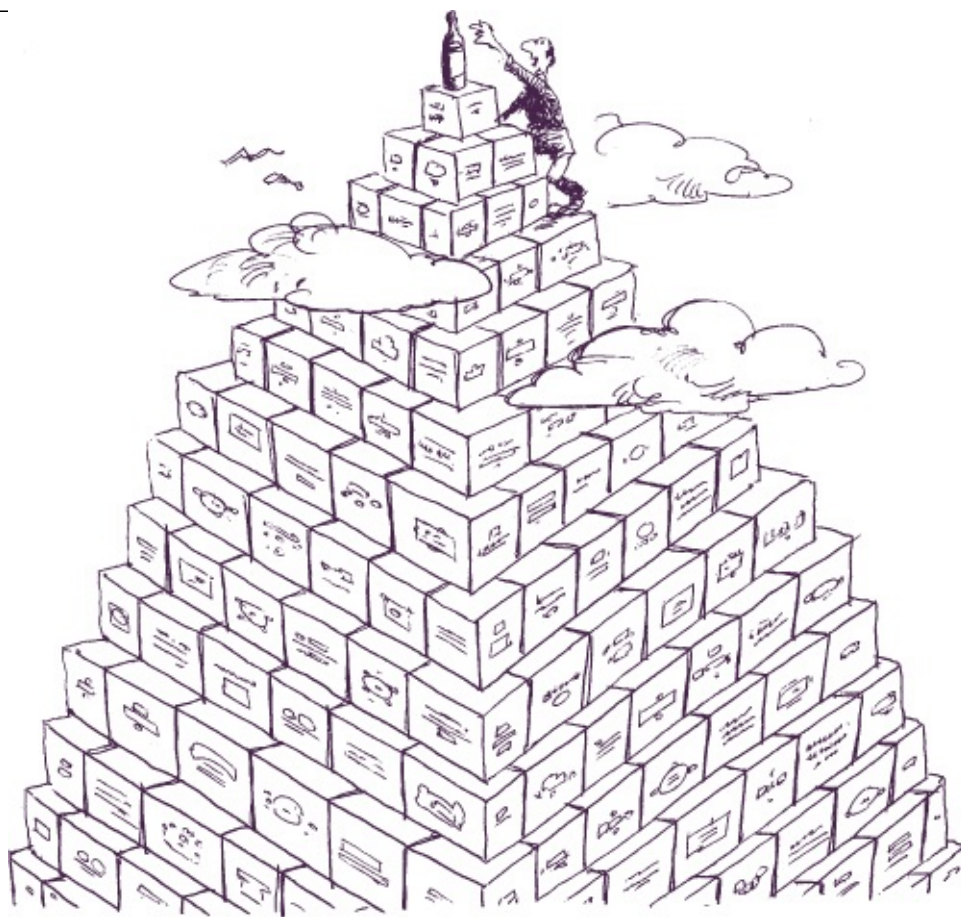
It got to be that around the country, people knew Zinfandel as a white wine. I remember going to a rather upscale watering hole in eastern Pennsylvania around 1990 and hearing a woman at our table ordering “Zinfandel, please.” The waitress looked up from her order book and said, “You want that up or on the rocks?” And of course, when the wine came (up, thank goodness) it was white Zinfandel. The praenomen “white” had gotten lost out there in America, and the nation had come to think of Zinfandel as a white or blush wine. Fetzer Vineyards even felt impelled to label a wine “Red Zinfandel,” which caused an immediate reaction among wine buffs here in California — they would have laughed if they weren't so horrified.

Real red Zinfandel slowly came to be appreciated through the 1990s, and by 2000, top-quality Zins were selling in the \$20 to \$30 range, both a mark of how little top-quality Zin there is and an indication of its inherent value.

TO PURSUE QUALITY

Another reason for collecting wine is to nab some of the good stuff before it gets away. There's a saying here in Sonoma County that the really, really good wines never leave the county. This phenomenon reflects the quality pyramid: The higher the quality of the wine, the less of it there's going to be. That's because winemakers tend to select out the really excellent wines and keep them on separate lots. They may blend them into one of their premium blends, such as a Meritage of Bordeaux varieties (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, or Petit Verdot). Or they may bottle them separately and release them as reserve wines. If a particular vineyard produces exceptional quality year after year, its wine may be released as a vineyard-designated wine. But in all these cases

wines of top quality are selected out and kept separate from the run-of-the-press wines.



The more astoundingly good the wine, the more chance it's going to be selected out, and thus increase in rarity. One example is the 1999 Archery Summit Estate Bottled Pinot Noir, which was selling for a rich \$82.99 a bottle at one market I found. Such a wine may well be worth the money if you can afford it. Its aroma of spice, roses, and black cherry leads to a hugely concentrated flavor that reveals layers of chocolate, cherry, plum, and licorice. If you like it, you'd better jump on it, because only 215 cases were made. That's a miniscule amount of wine in a world where the big boys and girls produce wine by the megaton; those 215 cases can be snapped up in a week or two. So, it's not that the really good stuff never leaves the county, but rather that locals hear about the good stuff first and take their cut before the rest of the world learns that it exists. You can get in on the fun no matter where you live, however, if you know the inner workings of acquiring wine; you'll find that information in [chapter 2](#).

THE "FUTURES" MARKET

In recent years, more and more wineries sell wine on "futures." The deal is that you pay now for a wine that may not be delivered for one or even two years. In return for having your money to play with before they have to deliver any wine, wineries usually set an attractive price on their futures wines. My first venture into this game occurred in summer 1982 when I plunked down \$125 for a case of 1982 Calon Ségur, a fine Bordeaux that wouldn't arrive on these shores for two years, owing to the two years it would spend in barrel. No one knew it at the time, but 1982 turned out to be a fabulous year in Bordeaux, so fabulous that when 1983 rolled around, the wine merchant sent me a letter saying that the 1983s were going to be even better than the 1982s, and that I should swap my 1982 Calon Ségur for a case of the 1983, straight up, no money changes hands. I did a little checking, and while 1983 seemed like it was going to be a good year in Bordeaux, no one

thought it would approach the quality of 1982. The wine merchant was trying to get that 1982 back so he could resell it at high prices now that people knew how good it was. Naturally I refused, and it wasn't too many years before I began seeing 1982 Calon Ségur being sold for \$125 a bottle, which was what I had originally paid for twelve bottles on futures.

TO PRESERVE OR ENHANCE QUALITY

Once nabbed, good wine needs proper storage or it will lose quality through exposure to light and heat. The answer, of course, is to have a wine cellar for your big scores.

When wine is first released, it's usually at its least expensive. As wine ages and acquires the character of bottle age, it may become more expensive because it may become better wine. But not all wines become better with age. We will discuss how wine ages in [chapter 3](#), but right now suffice it to say that wine is usually — *usually* — least expensive when it's first released. Having a wine cellar of your own allows you to buy wine at good prices and age it yourself.

Since there are few absolutes about wine, it may not always be cheapest when it's released. If the wine doesn't sell well and there's a glut, you may find it discounted a year or more after its release, the same way that last year's automobile prices drop when the new models arrive. And be aware that buying direct from the winery doesn't necessarily mean getting the lowest price. Wineries sell at the equivalent of the “manufacturer's suggested retail price.” Big wine shops and supermarkets are usually the ones doing the deep discounting.

IT'S AN INVESTMENT

Which is another reason for collecting wine. It can act as an investment: Wine can increase in value, and you may be able to sell it down the road for a great deal more than you paid for it. But this will happen only with certain bottles of very sought-after wine. Most *vin ordinaire* will decrease in value with age, even if the wine has improved by its time in the cellar, simply because people want the big names. But not every wine you lay down in the cellar will become a treasured bottle, dusty with age, its contents transformed from youthful pungency to smooth, luscious wine at its peak of quality. You have to know what you're doing if you plan to age wine for resale later on. [Chapter 3](#) will give you good insights into what you have to know if you're going to cash in, rather than take a financial (and gustatory) bath.



EXTRAVAGANCE!

There's a related reason for collecting wine that has less to do with the price of the bottle than the amount of cash in one's bank account: the snob appeal of owning wines that are difficult to get. Distasteful as the thought may be, that snob appeal plays a big part in who gets the high-priced bottle of wine, and why. I recently attended a wine auction here in California where high rollers paid outrageous sums for fine wine. It's all for a good cause, of course — the proceeds go to help the farmworkers, mostly Mexican, who do the heavy lifting in the production of these fine wines. I was watching the bids go up for California's cult wines. These trophy bottles are made in small amounts by celebrity winemakers. If you can even get a bottle, most run between \$400 and \$500 or so for one 750 mL bottle. If you look for them on the Internet wine-shopping sites, you'll find prices reaching \$1,000. Who can afford such extravagance?

Plenty of people. I talked to one well-heeled man from Colorado at the wine auction who said, "What would you do if you had \$240 million in your bank account? Okay, you buy the big house, the big car, you invest, you contribute to charities and to political parties, but you still have hundreds of millions in the bank and more coming in all the time. Do you think I think twice about buying a case of wine for \$10,000, flying in a planeload of my friends, and pouring the wine for them?"

Well, that's a nice altruistic thought, but I suspect the thrill is less about giving your friends a wonderful wine experience and more about, "Look at me. I can pour you a glass of wine that's worth more than your car. Ha!" Still, if that's what thrills you, who am I to naysay it? I will say that with cult wines at those elevated prices, you probably don't get what you pay for. The same holds true for the famous garage wines of Bordeaux. These are small production wineries that tend to make big, intensely expressed wines. Like their California cult counterparts, the wines made by the *garagistes*, as they're called, may be good, but not necessarily a heck of a lot better than many other wines sold at far lower prices.

This all came home to me at a recent tasting of a dozen and a half California cult wines, set up by Napa Valley winery. The tasting was given for wine writers and winemakers. We tasted the wines blind: That is, they were wrapped up in paper bags so we didn't know which was which and wouldn't be influenced by the wine's reputation. One wine in particular was thoroughly execrable — almost undrinkable — we all agreed, and scored it last. Another was exceptionally delicious, balanced, full of

concentrated fruit from the entrance on the palate to the long lingering finish, and the group scored it first. ~~When the paper bags came off, the execrable wine retailed at \$450 a bottle, while the winner was \$40 a bottle.~~ As I said, you don't always get what you pay for when the wine is sought after more for its limited availability than for its intrinsic quality as a wine.

TO CULTIVATE YOUR TASTE

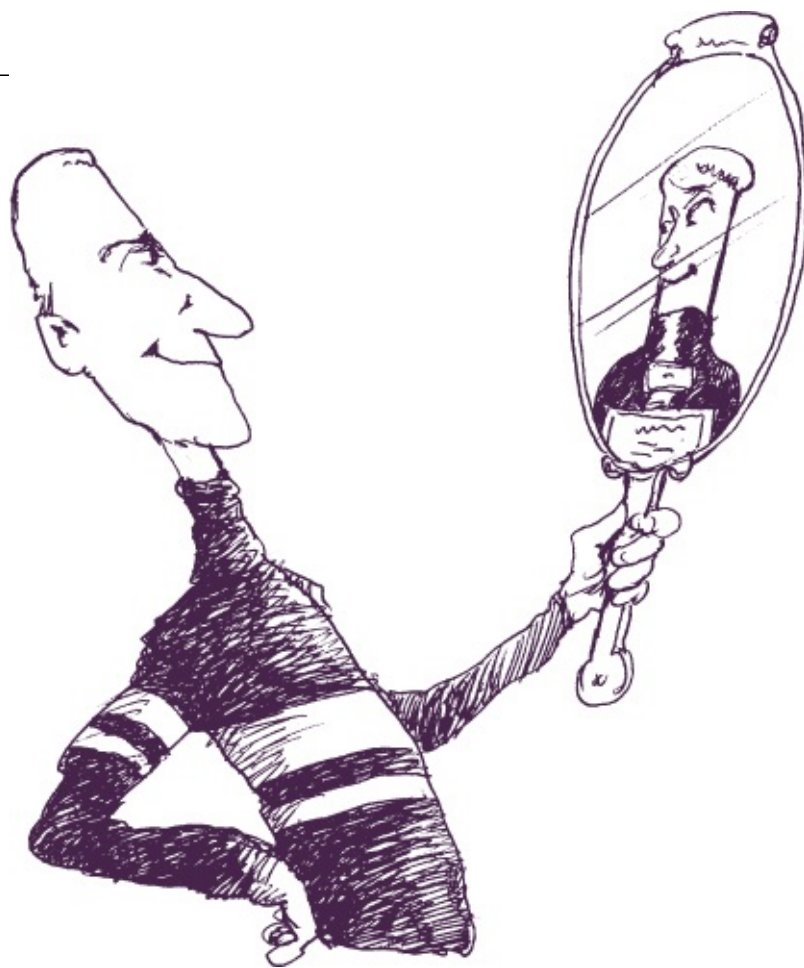
Another reason for collecting wine is to learn about wine. As you select certain bottles for your cellar you begin to define your taste. After a number of years, your cellar will accurately reflect your own preferences and will become in a sense your personal description of what constitutes good wine. But this matter of taste is a dicey business. I've learned through many, many hours of tasting with people who are well educated in wine that from time to time, someone will like a wine that I find undrinkable, and that conversely, someone will hate a wine that I find to be a grand expression of its fruit. As the Romans said, "*De gustibus non disputandum est*" — loosely translated, "There's no arguing with taste."

A problem may arise when you really love a particular wine and serve it forth with great enthusiasm and predictions of pleasure to your guests, only to have them smile thinly and nod in half-hearted agreement, probably to be polite. When you give your opinion first, guests are put in the position of having to decide whether to agree or disagree with you — and that can be uncomfortable. D. H. Lawrence hit the nail on the head when he said, "I cannot cure myself of that most woeful of youth's follies — thinking that those who care about us will care for the things that mean much to us. Best to serve a wine without much comment and let the guests discover its qualities for themselves. Then their praise for it will be unconstrained by your opinion and may even include praise for the host who has such good taste. And that can be a not inconsiderable pleasure.

As Samuel Butler said, "People care more about being thought to have taste than about being thought either good, clever, or amiable." Having taste means that you are educated to the relative merits of things and appreciate what's good. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journals that "[a] man is known by the books he reads, by the company he keeps, by the praise he gives, by his dress, by his tastes, by his distastes, by the stories he tells, by his gait, by the notion of his eye, by the look of his house, of his chamber; for nothing on earth is solitary but every thing hath affinities infinite." The wine cellar stocked with wines you've come to love is a reflection of your personality, another way to tell friends, coworkers, and all those you care about who you are.

At this point, I offer a strong warning about simply collecting wine regardless of its merit or simply because it's expensive. That's just acquisitiveness. Always avoid wines you don't appreciate.

That doesn't mean that your taste must follow fashion or the list of "100 Best Wines" from *The Wine Spectator* or anyone else's list of favorites, for that matter. Cultivating taste means discovering what you like, regardless of what the rest of the world thinks. If you like Mogen David, then drink it. Just don't expect me to like it. I'll respect someone who likes a solid \$8 bottle of wine far more than the fool who buys a \$500 bottle of wine because it shows what a big spender he is and how he can have the wine that you can't.



The more wine you taste, the more you learn about wine, and that learning process is facilitated by having a well-stocked wine cellar. Not only will you become familiar with wines from different regions, countries, and parts of the world, but you'll be able to define the differences in flavor of the various grape varieties. As you age wine, you'll be able to know the flavors of these varieties when they're youthful, and how these flavors and aromas change over time. It's no more astonishing for a well-educated wine lover to taste a wine and say, "I believe this is a good Burgundy, perhaps a Nuits-St-Georges, with a good bit of age on it, maybe a 1989," and be correct, than for a well-educated antique dealer to say, "That is an English candlestick with the English lion rampant theme, produced in Bristol between 1850 and 1858," and be correct. When you know what something is, it's easy. But it takes time and the ability to taste a lot of wine without swallowing it all.

TO HAVE GIFTS AT THE READY

Having favored bottles laid down means you always have gifts at the ready, although when giving wine from your cellar to family, friends, and acquaintances, you will find yourself on the horns of a dilemma: Some bottles are just too prized to be given away (translation: you want to drink them yourself), but others aren't quite good enough for a gift. It comes down to how much pain you're willing to endure. The more it hurts to give a bottle away, the more that bottle means to you, and the more it might be appreciated by the recipient. However, the Bible admonishes us not to cast our pearls before swine, and so it makes little sense to give a \$120 bottle of Caymus 'Special Selection' Cabern Sauvignon to the neophyte or casual wine drinker. They would probably be just as happy with a fruit-driven, easy-drinking, modest member of the fighting varietal clan — that is, bottles in the \$8 to \$12 range.



SELECTING A BIRTH-YEAR WINE

Fortunately for future generations, California rarely has a bad vintage of the longest-lasting wines like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, or Meritage blends of Bordeaux varieties. Okay, 1982 wasn't very good, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a really bad year since then. Received wisdom had it that 1989 wasn't a good year in California. Well, it did rain just before the harvest period for white wine, and a lot of Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay rotted on the vine, but the tough-skinned red varieties were fine. In fact, 1989 Cabernet Sauvignons are drinking really well right now when they're 12 years old, and I expect them to improve some more.

Similarly, many people thought 1998 was a difficult year — and it was, with rain late in the spring and early in the fall. But winemaking has come a long way from the era when all a winemaker could do about bad weather was wring his hands and pray to the weather gods. The 1998 vintage may not be one for long cellaring, but you need to drink something while you're waiting for the good vintages to age into sumptuous maturity.

French wine has more definite good and bad years. Even with first growth wines, good years can be absolutely superb, and bad years can be not worth drinking. Be aware of this if you're going to lay down a birth-year wine for an infant who won't drink it for 21 years. If it's a great year for French wine, like 2000, go ahead and cellar French for the kid. If it's not such a good year in France, you're usually safe going with the California wine. Italian and Australian wines tend to be more even in their quality, much like California, although Italy has its odd cold and rainy summer, and 2002 was a disaster because of hail in Tuscany. Remember that reds will usually be more age-worthy than whites, although that isn't always the case (see [chapter 3](#)). Check vintage charts before making your final decision.

Because good wines will age for years, even decades, a wine cellar is a place to store wines to be given as presents on special birthdays. I have a friend whose daughter was born in 1985, which happened to be a very good year for Cabernet Sauvignon in Sonoma County. I purchased a magnum of 1985 B. R. Cohn 'Olive Hill' Cabernet when it was released in 1987, created a "happy 21st birthday"

label and pasted it on the back of the bottle, and sent the wine to my friend. When his daughter reached 21, in 2006 — just three years from this writing — he's going to present her with the wine, 21 years old, one hopes as beautifully blossomed into maturity as the young woman herself.

In fact, it's traditional here in the Wine Country to lay down a bottle, magnum, jeroboam, or even case of a birth-year wine for a newborn. That's great if your birth year happens to be a very good vintage, less great if the year is less than stellar. Who wants to wait 21 years for a wine that went over the hill after year eight?

AESTHETICS

Aesthetics is a driving force for many wine collectors. A great wine can be a work of art. But its evanescent nature makes it more like music or dance — here for the moment and then gone with the wind (or the roast beef) — than like a painting or sculpture. Still, there's a strong connection between wine and art. Hess Collection winery on Mount Veeder in Napa County, California, is a bona fide fine art gallery as well as a winery. Château Mouton-Rothschild in Bordeaux has been putting reproductions of paintings by famous artists on its labels for years. Kenwood Vineyards in California has been doing the same thing, and now Imagery, a small but highly regarded winery in Glen Ellen, California, not only puts reproductions of paintings on its labels but also hangs the original paintings in its tasting room. Imagery wines are available only at the tasting room (and a few lucky restaurants that the winery owners favor).



Even without artwork, labels themselves can be classy-looking works of art. The typographer's art is on display on many French wine labels, and the calligrapher's art can be seen on many in France and the United States. Some have a modern look; others have the look of an old engraving. Labels, in fact, provide one of the aesthetic pleasures of collecting wine, and those who cellar their wines should give attention to storage systems that don't scuff or tear the labels, or worse, subject them to conditions where labels become moldy.

COPIA

The connection between wine and the arts became stronger with the opening of COPIA — The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts in Napa, California (see Resources, [page 237](#)). This multimillion-dollar facility includes artwork, display gardens of organic produce, and events centered around wine's place at the table and in the well-lived life. Visitors to the Napa Valley should be sure to stop at COPIA to see what events are happening there.

The Mystery

COPIA offers more proof, if more were needed, that there's something exquisite about a bottle of really fine wine. First of all, there's the pleasure that the wine inside the bottle promises — and it is only promise, because one never knows just how pleasurable it will be until the cork is drawn and the wine poured and tasted. That enticement and excitement is part of the wine's cachet. Inside its dark green or dead-leaf green bottle, the wine is black, mysterious, hidden, waiting — perhaps for years and years — for its moment to arrive. In fact, a bottle dusty with accumulated years in a wine cellar is especially treasured.

I remember buying a bottle of fairly well-aged (maybe 15 years) Port in a New York City liquor store and noticing that the bottle was dusty, as though it had lain in a cobwebbed cellar for ages. But a little rub with my thumb didn't wipe the glass clean. I mentioned this to the store owner, who said, "Oh, they spray that stuff on the bottles. It's a mixture of dust and glue. Makes the bottles look ancient, doesn't it?" So not every dusty bottle has acquired its dust honestly.

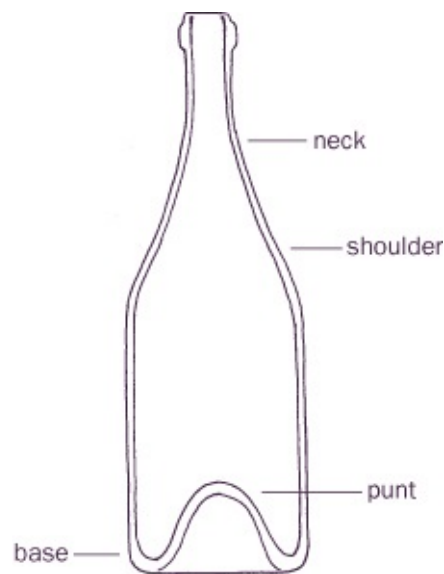
The Bottle

The glass bottle itself can be a beautiful thing. High-priced red wines are usually put into high-priced bottles. The marks of quality include a shape that tapers slightly from the shoulders of the bottle to its base, becoming smaller at the base. Feel the bottom of the bottle for the indentation called a *punt*. Less expensive wine bottles have a flat bottom with no indentation. If the glass is thick and the punt deep, and especially if the slight bulge in the center of the bottom of the punt has a fractured edge, you are looking at quality.

The heavier the bottle, the thicker the glass and the more expensive it is. Some wineries go for extra tall bottles, which makes their product stand out on the market shelf, but makes life difficult for folks like us who cellar our own wine and have to deal with these odd-sized bottles that stick out too far, making their perch on the wine rack precarious, or, if they're stored in cardboard cases, project out so it's impossible to close the case.

Sometimes wineries will have bottles, especially the larger sizes, etched and hand painted with their labels or designs that make the bottle really special. There are businesses devoted to doing that here in the Wine Country, including California Etching and Bergin Glass Impressions, both in Napa. I spoke with Jill Spragio, art director at Bergin, and she said that the big etched bottles are used to

solicit high bids at charity wine auctions, for wine distributor incentives, and as marketing tools for wineries — hence, the big, etched bottles you see sitting on counters and back bars throughout California. They can also be used for wedding presents or any special occasion. The designs are etched into the glass using a small sandblasting tool, leaving raised and sunken areas. These are then painted with enamel paints and dried.



Anatomy of a wine bottle

THE ORIGIN OF THE PUNT

I've heard many explanations for the punt, including these:

- It's there to collect sediment that falls to the bottom when an old wine is stood upright.
- The punt enables the waiter to hold the bottle with one hand, thumb inserted into the punt, while he pours wine into the glass he's holding with the other hand.
- The bottom of the bottle is indented so that when bottles are laid end to end, the neck of the following bottle can rest in the punt of the forward bottle.
- Even the usually accurate *Oxford Companion to Wine* says, "Most champagne and sparkling wine bottles have a particularly deep indentation because of the need to stack inverted bottles one on top of the other during the traditional method of sparkling wine-making. Punts are obviously less useful for still wines — although they can make 75 cL capacity bottles look bigger and more impressive — and deep punts can provide useful purchase for the thumb when serving wine from a bottle."

I think all of this is nonsense. It's silly to think that punts are there to make the bottles look more impressive.

The punt is an artifact of the glassmaker's art. It's there because when thick glass is formed into wine bottles, the punt is where the molten glass is perched during its formation. When wine bottles were handblown by artisans, they would be cracked off the molten chunk of glass from which they were formed, leaving a slightly fractured edge in the center of the punt. If you have such a bottle, it

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