

How To Make Wines Show Their Best Flavors

In 2021 Beth and I took a two week wine tasting trip to Spain and in 2022 a week long wine tasting trip to Bordeaux. On both of those trips we had many opportunities to talk to the winemakers over a glass of wine and sometimes a meal. They uniformly confirmed what I have been hearing for a while, Americans drink their white wine way too cold and their red wine too warm. We take a bottle of red wine from the rack, pull the cork and pour it. We take a bottle of white wine from the refrigerator, pull the cork, and pour it. How many times have you taken a final sip of the wine. especially if the meal has run long with lots of conversation, and found that it tasted so much better than it did when you first tasted it?

Two things can materially improve the taste of the wine that you drink:

- Letting the wine "open up" by letting it breathe. It has been sitting locked up in a bottle, often times for years. Given a chance to open up, it will have much more flavor to enjoy.
- Serving the wine at the temperature that the winemaker built the wine to be served at, most often the temperature of the cellar where he or she created, blended, and aged the wine.

Aeration

Most of our wine tastings were early afternoon through the dinner hour. I asked at multiple wine tastings when they opened the wines we were tasting. For the afternoon wine tastings I was told it was when they came in and opened the winery that morning. For the dinner tastings it was between Noon and "just after lunch". Most of the wines had been decanted.

Pulling the cork and letting the wine stand up opened is letting it breathe. Four to six hours is a good time to let red wines breathe. At least an hour or two is a good time to let white wines breathe. They can stand up open in your wine fridge or kitchen refrigerator to get to the right temperature as discussed below.

The wine is being given much more access to oxygen than it had with the cork in the bottle. This lets the oxygen oxidize the tannins and some of the other elements in the wine. When we age the wine for years that oxidation takes place very slowly and rounds and softens the tannins, adding to the flavor. If the wine has only been aged for a few years, letting it breathe for 4-6 hours speeds up that process. The long slow aging is best but the more rapid breathing with an open bottle is a very good alternative with younger wines.

Decanting the wine brings significantly more oxygen into play. The pouring into the decanter starts that and the much larger surface area when it is in the decanter continues the aging process at an accelerated rate. If you put an aerator at the top of the decanter so

as the wine is poured in, it runs in multiple streams down the side of the decanter, that accelerates the oxidation process even more. The younger the wine, the more it benefits from being aerated and decanted. If I have a red wine that is at its flavor peak after 20-40 years of cellaring, I would only decant it to remove the sediment. But I have that pleasure VERY seldom. So I decant all my red wines, and some of my very good chardonnay, every time.

At a restaurant I ask them if they can decant the red wine I order. Most of the time they can, and I think I often get better service when I ask as it sets me apart from most of the other diners.

For my dinner wines I try to open them at 1:00 PM and leave them standing up in my wine fridge at 55° for about 5 hours. I then decant them with an aerator that has a small wire basket that catches any sediment or pieces of cork an hour before serving. That lets the red wine get up to 60°-63°.

Temperature

Most good red wine is made in cellars at 15°C or about 59°F. After the fermentation the wine is aged in different vessels, most often stainless steel tanks or oak barrels in a cellar kept at that temperature. The winemaker blends the wine from different tanks or barrels into the finished product and the wine he is tasting to do that blending is at the cellar temperature. Even if it is a single varietal wine like Pinot Noir or Cabernet Sauvignon, the wine is typically a blend of different plots of that grape to get the specific flavor the winemaker is looking for. If the winemaker is tasting wines at 60° to make his blend, he is creating a wine that will taste the best at that same temperature. If you go to the winery web site and they have a data sheet on the wine, sometimes that will have a suggested serving temperature for that wine.

60° is not cold wine. It is cool to the taste. If I have had the wine in the wine fridge at 55° I take it out and give it 45-60 minutes on the counter to get up to 60-62°. If I have a red wine that has been in the wine rack and not in the wine fridge. I will put the decanter in my kitchen fridge at 39° for about 40 minutes to bring it down from room temp to 60°.

Most white wine is made to be consumed at 50°. If I had that wine in my wine fridge, I put the open bottle standing up in my kitchen fridge for about 30 minutes to bring it down to 50°. If it was in my kitchen fridge for some reason, I take it out 40-50 minutes before serving to warm up to 50°. In a restaurant I have no control over what temperature they bring the wine to me. But I ask them to leave the bottle on the table and not put it in an ice bucket.

If these suggestions do not sit well with you, I propose a simple test. Take two bottles of a decent wine, not a super special wine. For a red wine follow my suggestion above for one of them and take the second off the rack at room temperature and open it and pour it with your dinner meal. For a white wine pull one bottle out of the kitchen fridge 45 minutes before serving and leave it open on the counter. Take the other one fridge, open it and pour it. Whichever one tastes better to you, then serve your wine that way. At least do the experiment before totally dismissing my suggestions.

If you like the wine better the way I suggested, you can have some fun with it with company. Tell them you want to do a wine tasting for them of two different wines and see which one they like better. They will recognize the label of the second wine so you put it in a decanter so it would be a surprise. The two wines are the same, but they will taste different and your guests will be very surprised that the wine they liked the best was the same as the other one, just served differently.