

Tasting Wine

Sensory Evaluation

You've probably seen "professional" wine tasters swirl, taste, and spit. Some wave their hands above their wine glass to push aromas toward their noses. Some experts say to put the wine in your mouth and suck air like reverse whistling to bubble the air through the wine (that always makes me cough). Some tasters will sit with a glass of wine for an hour, looking at it from every angle, sniffing it both close in and from a distance, and describing all the various aromas and flavors in great detail. They do train and certify wine judges and wine tasters to follow specific procedures at competitions, but for you and me, there are no rules for tasting and evaluating wine. However, I can give you some general guidelines to enhance your sensory experience.

You evaluate (or enjoy) wine using four of your five basic senses: sight, smell, taste, and touch. Some would argue that you use hearing for the pop of a cork. When the tasting room associate hands you the glass with wine, first look at it. Unless you are looking at wine that you know has not been fined or filtered, the wine should be brilliantly clear with no particles or cloudiness. The best way to see a wine's true color is to tilt your glass and look at the thin edge of the liquid surface. If you know the grape varietal, the color and its intensity will give you some idea of the style (light or full bodied) and the amount of color extraction from the grape skins. You can also get an idea of a wine's age or at least how much oxygen it has seen. Red wine starts out purplish-red and will turn red then slightly brown over time (years) as it's exposed to microoxygenation. White wine that has been barrel aged, like a Chardonnay, will turn darker yellow over time. One interesting phenomenon is "wine tears." Capillary action makes the liquid climb up the inside of the glass. Alcohol evaporates faster than water, which increases surface tension of the thin layer of liquid and pushes it farther up the inside of the glass. When the alcohol completely evaporates, gravity makes the liquid fall back down along the glass, forming what looks like tears. People call this a wine's "legs." You see this mostly in higher alcohol wines, but it is *not* a measure of the wine's alcohol. The surface condition of the glass has a lot to do with how high up the tears will form. It's just an interesting thing to watch.

Aroma is probably the most important part of wine tasting. Virtually all of what you think of as the "taste" of a food or wine comes from your nose. Aroma is where you get all the fruit, vegetable, earthy, spicy, and oak aromas from a wine. It is also where you can find most of the wine faults. If you want to really delve into wines, you should learn how to describe things that you smell in wines using standardized terms. You can start with the UC Davis Aroma Wheel (right) developed by Dr Ann Noble, which gives standardized terms for describing wine aromas.



If you want to further refine your wine tasting ability, you can order a wine aroma training kit, which contains vials with standard aromas and instructions for training your nose and brain to recognize them. These kits can be quite pricey (hundreds of dollars). Wine Spectator and Wine Folly web sites tell you how to make your own for much less. Regularly cooking with spices, and tasting and eating a lot of different fruit also helps build wine aroma identification skills. You may hear people talk about “bouquet” when describing smells. Technically, aroma is what comes from the grapes (fruit, spice, vegetable, earthy), and bouquet is what comes from the winery processes (yeast, oak, leather). Don’t worry. It’s all aroma to me.

In your mouth, you experience one of five tastes: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and savory or “umami.” With wine, we are mostly concerned with sweetness (fruitiness, residual sugar, and flavorings from the oak), sourness (from the fruit), and bitterness (from the tannins). This sensation is called the “mid palate” of a wine. Hopefully, you won’t get salt or fat tastes from a wine. The “aftertaste” you experience is a combination of the sensation (sweet, sour, or bitter) and the aromas that your nose picks up from its connection to the back of your throat (called “retronasal” smell).

It may sound strange, but the sensation of touch is important to experiencing wine. A term we often use in wine tasting is “astringency.” Astringency is the drying, roughing, and sometimes puckering sensation you experience with most red wines. This “pucker factor” is caused by the tannins that the wine extracts from the skins and seeds during fermentation and maceration. You might think this has to do with taste, because it happens in your mouth, but it’s actually a touch sensation. The tannins in the wine interact with proteins in your saliva and interfere with saliva’s normal lubricating action. This “dries out” your mouth. Also, when your lips touch the wine, they can tell you how viscous (thick) it is. Sometimes, viscosity is an issue if, for example, the wine is contaminated by a bacterial bloom. Some white wines take on an “oily” texture either due to a problem or just as a characteristic of the varietal. If the wine contains residual sugar, you will *feel* the sugary stickiness on your lips.

Tasting Order

If you are tasting several wines, the order in which you taste them is very important. Generally, you want to taste wines in order of increasing “intensity.” What does that mean?

- For dry white wines, increasing acidity (use the titratable acidity numbers, if available)
- For dry red wines, increasing astringency (“pucker factor”)
- For dry white and red wines together, increasing alcohol content
- For sweet wines, increasing sugar

Remember that “dry” means no residual sugar. You may perceive a dry wine as slightly sweet because of the fruit, but it’s not actually sweet. The main thing is to not taste a sweet wine before a dry wine. Coating your mouth with sugar will make a dry wine taste much more bitter than it actually is. Save the ports for the end. The reverse is also true. Be sure to cleanse your mouth with water and allow a few minutes when transitioning from dry to sweet wines.

Wine Faults

Things do go wrong in winemaking. Wineries go to great lengths to make sure that when you open a bottle of wine, it looks, smells, and tastes like they intended it to. Wine faults are so rare that you may never open a bottle that has one. Personally, I've experienced all of these faults, but never in a commercial Lodi wine. However, you should know them when you see (or smell) them:

- *Fizzy, almost carbonated, white wine.* The wine did not go through malolactic fermentation, and the winemaker either didn't completely kill off the lactic acid bacteria or the winery crew didn't properly run the sterile filtering. MLF occurred in the sealed bottle.
- *Moldy smell like a wet newspaper or a wet dog.* This wine has cork taint (called "corked"). About 1% of wines experience this. The fungi present in natural cork can interact with cleaning products in the winery, particularly bleaches, to form trichloroanisole (TCA). Some people are more sensitive to TCA than others, being able to detect concentrations of a couple parts per *trillion*. When drinking a bottle that is corked, you might see one person in the group wrinkle her nose at the wine while everyone else thinks it's great.
- *Horsey, sweaty, barnyard smell.* This indicates *Brettanomyces* contamination. "Brett" is a yeast that can get established in a winery and contaminate barrel aged wines. Some winemakers, especially in Australia, like a little bit of "Brett" in their wines. I personally think it's nasty.
- *Fingernail polish remover smell.* The wine has detectable amounts of ethyl acetate, which indicates that the wine has too much acetic acid and will likely turn to vinegar.
- *Vinegar smell and a sharp bitter taste.* Acetic acid bacteria bloomed and spoiled the wine.
- *Rotten egg smell.* The wine produced too much hydrogen sulfide. Hydrogen sulfide is volatile, so if the smell is faint, it may go away after the wine is decanted.
- *Thick powdery surface, sometimes with mucus like consistency.* The wine has experienced a bacterial bloom, probably caused by native yeasts not being killed off during fermentation.
- *Clear crystals on the inside surface of the cork.* These crystals, which look like broken glass, form on the cork and may show up in your glass. They are caused by tartaric acid instability and form when the wine is chilled. They are odorless, tasteless, and harmless. If the wine tastes good, it's OK to drink

You should never experience these faults in a tasting room. Most associates are trained to spot them when they open a bottle of wine. However, if you experience any of these wine faults and show the tasting room associate, he or she will gladly give you another bottle or a refund. If you experience these at home with an expensive bottle of wine (more than, say \$50), you should take the wine back where you bought it, if possible. A common sight that upsets new wine drinkers is floating pieces of cork. This is not a wine fault. Particularly with very old bottles, inferior quality corks, or just when the corkscrew goes in too far, small pieces may break off the cork and fall into the wine. Just run the wine through an extra fine stainless steel mesh strainer or pick the pieces out with a spoon. If you accidentally drink them, they won't hurt you.

Choosing the Wineries

Now that you know how to taste wine, where do you start your Lodi tasting adventure? There are more than ninety tasting rooms in Lodi. Which one do you try first? Second? There are several ways to choose wineries for a tasting tour. You can meticulously research all Lodi wineries and find those with the top awards or Yelp ratings. You can download a wine trail map from the Lodi Winegrape Commission. You can take a personalized, customized wine tour from me or a few other people in town who do that sort of thing. You can book a day on the SIP Shuttle, which takes you to some excellent wineries and gives you great discounts on purchases. However, most visitors to Lodi seem to have no plan and just stop by the first tasting room they see and go from there, which also works. They usually start on one of the four main east-west wine tasting corridors, three of which correspond to the Lodi exits from Interstate 5: Kettleman Lane (Highway 12), Turner Road, and Peltier Road. The fourth corridor is Harney Lane, which you can get to from Highway 99. Accordingly, tasting rooms along these east-west corridors are the busiest ones, especially on weekends.

Almost every time I'm in a tasting room, I hear the associate ask, "So, which other wineries have you been to?" I often hear visitors ask for recommendations on where to go next. The Lodi wine industry is a tight-knit community where everyone pretty much knows everyone, and everyone works together. Tasting room associates and winery owners are happy to help you plan the rest of your day (or weekend). They will give you expert recommendations for other tasting rooms based on your interests. Don't be shy about asking any tasting room associate for ideas. Whatever you do, be sure not to ignore the wineries on the north-south cross roads that are off of or away from the four main east-west corridors. Your most memorable wine country experiences will likely be at the smaller, lesser-known wineries found on the back roads around Lodi.

Planning Your Day

There are several things you can do to improve your wine tasting experience. First, if possible, have a designated driver or at least one person who tastes very little. Wine tasting is always more fun if you don't have to worry about how much you drink. We don't have much of a taxi service to speak of in Lodi, but we do have a company called SIP Shuttle. Taylor Kininmonth studied wine tasting shuttle services as a senior project in business class and turned her project into a thriving company. She and her employees drive small and large groups around to her partner wineries. We also have a couple of local limousine companies. Eric and Stephanie at Vintage Limousine Service can arrange a customized wine tour for you. You will notice that a growing number of wineries in Napa, Sonoma, and Amador County prohibit limousines and buses. Not so in Lodi. However, if you are taking a large group in a limousine or bus, it will make everyone's lives easier by calling ahead so the tasting room can make sure they have adequate staff to handle the extra people.

Don't be too ambitious. There are over eighty-five tasting rooms in Lodi, so you may be tempted to try them all on your first day. Realistically, you should plan to visit no more than three wineries in one day. Have one or two alternates in case you have some time left at the end of the day. Especially on weekends, a busy tasting room associate can only pour so many samples in an hour. In the old days, a typical Lodi winery only made two, maybe three wines. Today, most tasting menus have 5 to 15 wines. You want to allow time for the associate to tell you about each wine and answer any questions you may have. About half of our tasting rooms have seating areas with attractive and sometimes spectacular scenery where you can bring your own food and have a wine country lunch. Allow at least an hour for that.

Bring cold bottled water. Whenever I take people wine tasting, I pack a couple of bottles for each person in a cooler with blue ice. Staying hydrated is key to not being overwhelmed by the effects of the alcohol. Finally, NO PERFUMES OR COLOGNES. Ninety percent of wine tasting is aromas. There's nothing worse than someone walking into the tasting room wreaking of perfume and destroying everyone's tasting experience. It's like walking into a dark room full of people and shining a tactical flashlight in everyone's eyes. Just yesterday, I had to leave a tasting room because a woman walked in loaded with perfume. I liked the scent of the perfume but trying to discern any other aromas became impossible.

Tasting Rooms

Tasting rooms in Lodi are normally open 11 am to 5 pm. Some open at noon. Some may have longer hours in the summer and shorter hours in the winter. Because so many of our small and medium-sized wineries are operated by family members and staff who have more than one job, only about ten percent of our tasting rooms are open Monday through Thursday. However, that number is growing fast, and many of the smaller wineries are willing to accommodate you during the week if you call ahead and make an appointment. Before you go, be sure to check the days and hours for the wineries you want to visit to make sure they will be open.

While a single tasting "flight" (a specified number of tastes) in Napa runs \$25 to \$125, Lodi wineries charge \$5 to \$10. In the old days, you went to the winery's tasting room to pick up wine, and you tasted whatever they had open while you were there. Being a local, I still do that. However, these days, most people are just there to taste, so wineries need to get something for the service they provide. Their goal is to sell wine, so any Lodi tasting room will waive the tasting fee if you buy a bottle. Some say that they will waive one tasting fee per bottle purchased, but if it's just two of you, and you buy one bottle, don't mention the second fee unless the tasting room associate asks for it. You pay the tasting fee *after* you have tasted and when you are ready to leave. Tasting room associates do appreciate tips. An appropriate tip is \$5 to \$20, depending on how many wines they pour for you, how long you are there, and how many people are with you.

Tasting rooms are expensive and require a lot of care and feeding, so a current trend in Lodi is cooperative tasting rooms that represent several small wineries. These match you up with many exceptional small batch, hand crafted wines that you would not otherwise ever know about just by driving around from one tasting room to the next. Some offer all their wines for tasting or by the glass and others rotate wines on their tasting menus every week or every month. As of today, Lodi has five cooperative tasting rooms: Woodbridge Uncorked (located in downtown Woodbridge), Lodi Wine and Visitor Center (located at the Northwest corner of town), Estate Crush, Wine Social, and Brix and Hops (all located in downtown Lodi).

Wine Clubs

“Are you a member of our wine club?” Just about every tasting room associate will ask you this question. If you’re new to Lodi wine tasting, you’ll love the wines and will want to join the club at the first winery you visit. Then, the second, third, and so forth. Are wine clubs a good deal or just a way to get your credit card number? Well, both. The main business goal of every winery is to get your credit card information, not to sell you something you don’t want, but to give the winery a predictable number of virtually guaranteed bottle sales every 3 or 4 months. One of the hardest parts of making wine is that a winery must invest all the money up front, years before the first bottle is sold. If a winery has, say, a hundred wine club members, each receiving a case a year, they can confidently make 200 cases knowing that they will all be sold. In fact, some Lodi wineries now sell all their wine in tasting rooms and to wine club members.

What’s in it for you? Wineries offer wine club members a 15% to 30% discount off the list price. Most will give you a 10% discount if you buy a case. Many wineries host special quarterly or annual “pick up” events for their wine club members, ranging from special pick-up days with snacks to elaborate dinners with live music and all the wine you can drink. A few wineries host instructional events, where you get to see some aspect of the grape growing or winemaking process and do some tasting at the end. There’s always wine. For me, personally, the main advantage of wine club membership is exclusive access to limited production and library wines. “Library” wines are leftovers from previous vintages that the owners stopped selling and have stored or “cellared” to later sell to people who appreciate aged wines.

How do you decide which wine club to join? First, look at the numbers. A typical wine club will require you to purchase a minimum of four bottles, four times per year, at an average bottle price of \$20, for a total annual cost of \$320. Allow \$120 to \$200 for shipping if you can’t always pick up the wine in person. Joining four wine clubs will cost you \$1,200 to \$2,000 a year. So, the first decision is how much you want to spend on wine each year. That tells you how many clubs you can join. Second, visit at least five to ten wineries before you settle on a particular wine club. Decide which styles and which varietals you like best, then find a winery that specializes in those. For example, Bokisch specializes in Spanish varietals. If you like Italian wines, you may want to join Sorelle’s club instead. Third, find out what you can get as a wine club member that you cannot get as a regular customer.

If the only thing you get is a 15% discount, there are more than 90 tasting rooms in Lodi, all selling great wine at competitive prices. Costco in Lodi sells a lot of great local wines at 40% off the tasting room price. Make sure you get something of value to you, like exclusive access to rare or higher quality wines, invitations to interesting events (dinner with the winemaker, barrel tastings, etc.), or spectacular settings where you can bring your friends for wine country lunches and free tasting. Finally, if you do a lot of tasting around Lodi, you will likely get to know a winery owner or employee who you enjoy visiting with. Consider joining their club just to give you more chances to visit.

One last word about wine clubs. Don't be afraid to quit a wine club that you are not happy with or if you simply don't drink all the wines they ship you. It's not like cancelling one of those special introductory offers where they don't answer their phone or make you talk to one manager after another before reluctantly approving your cancellation then mistakenly charging your card again. Wine club managers will cancel your membership without a problem. In fact, some Lodi wine clubs even have a waiting list to join. The most they will do is ask you why you are canceling, but only so they can provide better service.

Shipping Wine

You would think that Prohibition ended in 1933 with the twenty-first amendment. However, if you read it carefully, the second section of the amendment actually says:

“The transportation or importation into any State, Territory, or possession of the United States for delivery or use therein of intoxicating liquors, in violation of the laws thereof, is hereby prohibited.”

The concession that Prohibition opponents had to make in return for support for repeal was to turn control of alcohol over to the states. Today, shipping wine to individuals is a huge business. Over 60% of American wine sales are Direct to Consumer (DTC), where the wineries ship wine directly to someone's house. However, it's no surprise that many of the ten states that refused to ratify the twenty-first amendment prohibit wine to be shipped to their residents. Even some that ratified the amendment prohibit DTC shipments. Forty-two states allow DTC wine shipping with little or no issues. If you live in one of the other eight, you may not be able to receive your wine club shipments. This list is changing all the time, so check the latest information at The Wine Institute compliance website before you join a wine club that must ship wine to you.

One problem for very small wineries is the cost of individual state permits. While a permit to ship to Florida is only \$15 per year, it costs several hundred dollars a year for the same permits in many other states. So, while a winery may legally be able to ship wine to you, they may not want to pay for a state permit just for one or two customers. Don't be surprised if you live in a DTC-legal state but the tasting room associate tells you they cannot ship to you.

Wine Appreciation Organizations

If you really love wine and want to spend time with other wine lovers, you may want to join what I refer to as a “wine appreciation organization.” Two of the main ones in Lodi are Knights of the Vine (KOV) and Lodi Amateur Vintner’s Association (LAVA). The Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vine is a national fraternal organization created to promote and defend wines. KOV has several formal and informal events throughout the year, including a “Grand Assemblage” dinner and a national meeting. Most of the money they raise is given to various charities and as scholarships to students interested in wine-related fields. The Lodi Chapter of KOV is unique for its monthly “wine club” meetings. Created by Master Commander Ken Levy, the chapter meets every month at a different Lodi winery for a social half-hour of appetizers and one glass of wine. For the next hour, the winemaker talks about his or her wines, the history of the winery, and any other topics of interest. At the conclusion of the meeting, the winery extends wine club discounts to KOV members for that night.

Ken is also the past president of Lodi Amateur Vintner’s Association (LAVA). While KOV is focused on drinking wine, LAVA is focused on making wine. They have monthly meetings where each member brings an appetizer and a bottle of amateur wine. You can taste commercial wine anywhere, but only at LAVA events can you taste the best amateur wines coming out of Lodi. Each meeting concludes with a talk from a local winemaker about a technical subject. LAVA owns all the equipment necessary to make small batches of wine, which members can borrow at no cost. Several members are vineyard owners themselves or know vineyard owners, so LAVA is also a great place to find grapes for your wine if you don’t have your own vineyard.

Ordering Wine in a Restaurant

It seems pretty easy. Red wine with steak and white wine with fish. Most restaurants only have a handful wines by the glass, which makes it even easier. You can always ask the waiter or waitress for a recommendation. Some menus even tell you which wine to order with each dish. However, if you want to order a whole bottle, your choices will usually expand as dramatically as the check. The worst thing you can probably do is spend all that money on a bottle of wine that no one likes or that clashes with someone’s food. You can ask the sommelier for a recommendation, but there never seems to be a sommelier around when you need one. What do you do?

Before you order the wine, find out what everyone plans to eat. Make a mental note of each person’s order, or if you can’t remember, just ask the waiter or waitress to review the orders for the table. Knowing what everyone plans to eat, use the general rules in the “Pairing Food and Wine” section of this book (page 26) to choose a suitable wine. You don’t have to be exact here, because there will probably be many different dishes at the table. Just don’t order a wine that will clash with someone’s meal. For example, don’t order a crisp white acidic wine if some people are eating steak. If the dishes at the table are very different from each other, you may want to consider ordering two different bottles or ordering by the glass.

Next, look at the price per bottle. You can't miss it. Why are restaurant wine prices so much higher than in the supermarket? It's because they have to buy the wine from a distributor or winery at above wholesale price, then store it, then eventually dispose of the wine that no one orders as new vintages come in. Wine by the glass prices seem astronomical at first, but consider that on a slow night, you may be the only one who orders a glass from that bottle. The bottom line: if you want to order wine in a restaurant, you will pay a lot for it, but if you order the right wine, it will greatly enhance your dining experience.

Serving you wine in a restaurant involves several seemingly routine and unimportant actions, but they each have a purpose, and you should make sure the server does them all properly. First, the server should show you the label. This allows you to verify that you received the wine you ordered. It seems obvious, but maybe you ordered a 2014 that won a best of class medal, and they brought you a 2015. Second, the server will hand you the cork. It's not so you can have a souvenir of your wonderful meal. You should inspect the cork to make sure there are no crystals on the inside surface where the stain is and that there are no stain lines running the length of the cork, which indicate that the cork failed and allowed excessive oxygen in. The server should then pour a one- or two-ounce taste in the glass of the person who ordered the wine. This is not so you can describe the wine's aromas to your friends or determine if the wine suits your taste. You are simply checking for any wine faults that indicate spoilage or contamination (mold, rotten eggs, fingernail polish, feces, etc.). Before pouring any more wine, the server should ask you who's having wine and who's not. You don't want to waste a glass or force someone to pour their wine in someone else's glass. Finally, the server should fill each glass no more than a third of the way from the bottom (half way up, if they use very small glasses).

When I say to make sure the server does all these things properly, I know that you don't want to tell him or her how to do the job, but you're paying a lot of money for the experience. If the server does something wrong, gently correct without embarrassment. For example, if the server puts the cork in his or her pocket, ask, "can I see the cork first?" If the server doesn't give you the first taste, ask, "can I try a little before you pour?" I've done this a couple of times. One time, in an unnamed high-end French-style café in an unnamed city in Nevada, I gently corrected a server who poured me a two-ounce taste from a new bottle. Rather than be offended, she said, "If you like that, I've got another one over here." Two-ounce tastes at this bistro were \$20 to \$30, so I told her one taste would be enough for my lunch budget. "Don't worry about it" She brought over three or four other great French wines and poured them for me, happy that I appreciated them so much.

Can you get around the high price of wine at a restaurant? In Lodi, you can. In most states, you can bring your own bottle of wine to just about any restaurant, and they will charge you a "corkage" fee. The fee is usually about the same amount as their markup, so you don't really save much money, but you get the wine you really want. However, if you dine at a restaurant in downtown Lodi, and buy the wine at one of the downtown tasting rooms, tell the server where you bought it, and he or she should not charge you a corkage fee.

One thing about corkage: if you are going to an unfamiliar restaurant, I recommend calling ahead and asking about their corkage policy to avoid any embarrassment or having to leave your wine in a hot car. A final word about ordering wine in a restaurant. If the wine you want by the bottle is also sold by the glass, don't be afraid to ask for a taste of it. If they already have it open, most bartenders, especially in Lodi, will be glad to give you a taste before ordering. Just don't ask to taste every wine they have open. If you really don't like the wine, you can ask if they have something better, but that will only work once or maybe twice.

Serving Wine at Home

The main issue with serving wine at home is storing it at the right temperature. Above a certain temperature (about 80 degrees) some bottles will spoil. Below 80 degrees, higher temperatures make the wine age faster—usually faster than you would like it to. Ideally, you want to store your wine just below 62 or 63 degrees (55 degrees being perfect). Don't store expensive red wine in a refrigerator below 40 degrees. As you join wine clubs and collect bottles of wine, you will need to store them somewhere. A small wine refrigerator is a great investment. Unless you want a small, 12-bottle unit, try to steer clear of the thermoelectric cooler models. They are very inefficient and use a lot of energy for what you get. I collect and store more wine than most people, but I have a simple, single zone, 36 bottle wine refrigerator with a compressor that cost about \$200.

For each wine in this book, I recommend a serving temperature. Why is it so important to serve wine at the right temperature? Wine is a living, changing organism. Combine that with your nose and mouth, which are also part of a living organism, and a wine's aromas, flavors, and mouth feel will change dramatically with temperature. Below 50 degrees, you will perceive almost no aroma or flavor from most full-bodied wines. Most light, acidic white wines don't have a lot of aroma or flavor to begin with so they can stand 45 degrees, but no colder. A warm red wine (above 65 degrees) will lose most of its aromas (fruit, floral, and herb) and give you mostly water, oak, and alcohol. You probably haven't noticed it, but most restaurants and party hosts serve red wine at room temperature. If you've never tasted an exceptional wine at a restaurant or at someone's house, it's probably not because of the wine. Most wine tasting rooms are kept at around 65 degrees to give you the best tasting experience. If the room is warm, and they serve you warm red wine, you may want to go somewhere else.

Generally, you should serve red wines between 60 and 65 degrees and white wines between 45 and 50 degrees, but there are exceptions. You should serve a lighter red wine like a Pinot noir at 55 to 60 degrees. Serve full bodied white wines like Chardonnay and Viognier at 50 degrees. Serve sparkling wines cold--45 degrees. Starting at room temperature (about 75 degrees), placing a bottle of wine in the refrigerator will cool it to 60 to 65 degrees after 10 to 15 minutes, 50 degrees after 30 minutes, and 45 degrees after 30 to 40 minutes. The serving temperature does not have to be exact but try to get as close as you can to give your guests the best tasting experience possible. A lot of servers put white wine bottles on ice. That's OK, but taste the wine every 10 minutes or so and pull it out for a while if it is noticeably cold on your tongue.

Another issue with serving wine is removing the cork. There are hundreds if not thousands of variations of the ancient cork screw. Today, you can buy fancy hypodermic needles with gas cartridges that literally blow the cork off a bottle. Wine bottle opening kits can cost up to a hundred dollars or more. Yikes! All you need is a \$10 sommelier corkscrew (see photo to the left). It has a tiny knife to cut the foil, corkscrew, and a two-step lever to lift the cork. There is a reason why they call it a sommelier corkscrew: virtually all professional wine servers use one. It's simple, cheap (some wineries give them away as promos), and portable. After you're done, the knife, lever and corkscrew fold up on the handle, and you can slip it in your pocket. Keep a spare in your traveling cooler in case you need it while serving lunch at a wine tasting outing. There is a definite technique to using one, but it's not hard to learn.



1) Cut the foil all the way around just below the top of the bottle. Every wine bottle has a lip that you can use as a cutting guide either above or below the lip.



2) Extend the screw and twist it into the cork until it is embedded all the way.



3) Hook the lip of the upper lever on the top of the bottle and rotate the handle up, raising the cork about half way.



4) Hook the lip of the lower lever on the top of the bottle and rotate the handle up, removing the cork.

When serving wine at home you often need to preserve open bottles. Not everyone drinks a whole bottle of wine at a single sitting. You can spend tens or even hundreds of dollars on a fancy wine bottle preservation system. Oxygen is the enemy of wine, and wine will start to degrade as soon as it is opened. How fast? Not that fast. If you plan to empty the bottle that same day, just stuff the cork back in about a quarter inch. This will even work overnight for most red wines. If your bottle has a screw cap, even better. Just put the cap back on and stick it in the wine refrigerator to slow down the oxidation reactions. If you want to keep an open bottle longer than overnight, consider buying a gadget that removes oxygen from the headspace (the air above the wine in the bottle).



Probably the most economical way to preserve an open bottle of wine is with a Vacu Vin (about \$13 for a pump and two stoppers). The system has a rubber stopper with a one-way valve on the top that keeps air from going back in when you pull it out. The Wine Saver vacuum pump sets on top of the rubber stopper and pulls most of the air out of the bottle. I've preserved the original aromas and flavors for up to a week with one of these. Just set the pump on the stopper and give the handle a few pulls every day or two to make sure the stopper is still holding. You only need fancy, expensive inert gas systems if you are trying to preserve bottles that cost hundreds of dollars each or when pouring for competition judges or the most demanding connoisseurs.



A final word about serving wine: quantities. A bottle of wine holds 750 milliliters--just over 3 cups (for cooking) or 25 ounces (for drinking). A standard serving of wine is 5 ounces, so you can theoretically get five glasses of wine from a bottle. However, outside of a restaurant or bar, most people pour about 6 ounces, so count on a bottle of wine serving four people, one full glass each. In terms of alcohol content, one standard 5-ounce glass of wine is equivalent to one 12-ounce beer, 4 ounces of fortified wine (like port), 3 ounces of a liqueur (like Irish cream), or 1-1/2 ounces (1 shot) of distilled spirits (like brandy, rum or whiskey).

Glassware

Glass matters! I sat with a renowned Lodi winemaker one day talking about my Riedel (pronounced REE-dull) varietal-specific wine glass demonstration on a recent cruise. He had the same experience on a cruise ship. He said, "when I go out to dinner, I don't take my own wine, but I do take my own glass." Sure, you can *drink* wine out of a plastic cup, but you won't *experience* the full range of aromas unless you use a glass designed for the specific wine you're drinking. Riedel finely tunes the shape, size, and rim diameter of the bowls on their glass stemware to each wine varietal in order to get the most out of each wine.

Without going into a lot of detail, I'll just say that if you ever have the opportunity to participate in a Riedel wine glass seminar, do it. You will be amazed how much the glass contributes to the overall wine experience. Personally, I keep five Riedel Vinum glasses on hand: Riesling/Zinfandel, Sauvignon blanc, Bordeaux (Cabernet sauvignon), Burgundy Red (Pinot noir) and Montrachet (Chardonnay). If you are new to wine, you will probably think Riedel's glass prices are outrageous (about \$25 per glass for the Vinum series). However, the general rule for glassware is that you should spend the same amount of money on a glass that you spend on a bottle of wine.



Riedel Varietal-Specific Glasses Set Up for Demonstration: 1) Zinfandel/Riesling, 2) Montrachet (Chardonnay), 3) Bordeaux (Cabernet sauvignon), and 4) Burgundy Red (Pinot noir)

Bottle Aging

You will see a lot of wines, particularly red wines, advertised for their ability to age well in the bottle. “This wine can be put down for 5 to 7 years.” You may even hear this about some white wines. If you really get into wine, you may want to create your own wine cellar and age five, ten, or maybe hundreds of bottles, depending on your interest, space available, and budget. Will the investment be worth it? How do you know that a wine will age well? What does “well” mean? First, note that about 98% of all wine sold in the U.S. gets consumed within 24 hours of purchase, so only a tiny percentage of American wine is actually made with bottle aging in mind. The purpose of bottle aging is to let microscopic amounts of oxygen through the cork into the wine over a long period of time to *very slowly* oxidize the wine’s phenols and anthocyanins (flavor and color compounds). This process takes a rather harsh, tannic, vegetal wine (like a Cabernet sauvignon) and “softens” it into a smooth, drinkable beverage that presents the grape’s original fruit flavors, which are made more complex by oak. Bottle aging will bring out more of the toasted oak flavors from the caramelized sugars of the wood, deepening or “rounding out” the wine’s flavor profile. These things indicate that a wine that has aged “well.”

Some red wines can age successfully for 50 to 100 years. I opened a bottle of 1983 Amador Foothills Winery Fiddletown Zinfandel in 2002. It was unbelievable! However, the vast majority of red wines are not specifically made for bottle aging and will usually peak in flavor and fruit intensity about five to seven years after harvest, then become flat and unappealing or too smoky, depending on their oak. Some bottles just go bad by having a cork that allows too much oxygen, which eventually turns the wine to vinegar. No one can absolutely predict which wines will age well, but there are some general guidelines to selecting a wine for your cellar. If it's not stated on the label or on the wine's specification sheet, try to determine the wine's titratable acidity and pH. Any winemaker will give you these numbers. Generally, wines with high titratable acidity (above 6 grams/liter) and low pH (below 3.6) will age well in the bottle. You need to drink low-acid, high-pH wines within three or four years of harvest. Wines that taste great when they are released will generally not age well in the bottle. Remember that the purpose of aging wine is to make it taste better.

Once you find an age-worthy bottle of wine, temperature becomes the most important factor. The rate of micro-oxidation is directly related to temperature. Higher temperatures will speed up the reactions. The ideal temperature to age wine is 55 degrees. Wines stored above 65 degrees will age faster and may not develop the desired flavor profiles. The difference between 55 degrees and 75 degrees is years versus months. The other important aging parameter is light, which is the enemy of wine. Red wine bottles are tinted to keep most of the light out, but a dark wine cellar is critical to successfully aging wines.



The Estate Crush cooperative-style tasting room in downtown Lodi. Many of the wines on the wall are made from small lots that vineyard owners harvested themselves to make wine for their families and friends.