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LIFESTYLE • WINE

Why right now is the time to start aging your wine collection

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October 4, 2020 2:00 PM GMT+2

Between social distancing and more time spent at home these days in the coronavirus age, many people are turning to new hobbies as well as organizing multiple facets of their personal belongings.

For wine novices and self-described oenophiles alike, there could be no better time to start, grow, and improve one's wine collection. Here is a helpful starter guide with tips from wine distributors, wine directors, sommeliers, and other industry experts on how to nurture your own collection and ensure your bottles age safely well beyond 2020.



"A wine fridge will also have racks that are sized for bottles to lay on their side, which is better than standing upright in order to keep the cork in contact with the wine to stop it from drying out," says Andrea Morris, wine director at New York's Union Square Café.

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Ideally, for long-term wine storage, wine should be kept at around 55 degrees Fahrenheit with 50% to 80% humidity, and in a dark space.

It all depends on the storage horizon of the wine, says Lauren McPhate director of sales at [Tribeca Wine Merchants](#) in New York City."

If you'll be drinking it within the next few months, a regular refrigerator is just fine," says McPhate. "The key thing with any wine storage is a consistent temperature. You want to avoid fluctuations, both hot or cold, and too much movement in the wine. So, if you're planning on storing wines for a year or more, it's best to put them in a designated location with consistent temperature, such as a deep basement or wine fridge, where they're out of the way."

While aging in a cellar is best, for most that is unattainable. Storing wines in a refrigerator specifically designed for wine works just as well. Sara Maule, a specialist in Italian fine wines with wine wholesaler and importer [Frederick Wildman](#), explains a wine fridge is best because it keeps the temperature constant, keeps the bottles out of direct light, and keeps them horizontal.

If a wine fridge is not an option, keep the wines in as cool and as dark of a place as possible. Sometimes that means the back of a closet or pantry. Humidity is not as critical as light; heat (including from window exposure) can "cook," or [maderize](#) wine, muting the fruit aromas.

For white and sparkling wines, a regular home refrigerator often works well. But for reds—and bottles you want to preserve in general—you need to be cautious about storing these in a regular fridge.

"A wine fridge and a regular household fridge are two very different devices made to serve their own purpose only," says Jean Frederic Hugel the 13th-generation owner of [Famille Hugel](#), a winery in France's Alsace region. "A fridge is supposed to keep perishables; even the mildest setting is way too cold for wine aging or even wine servicing, except for whites, of course. In a fridge, your wine will simply not age.

Regular household fridges are designed for general storage purposes, says [Valentina Abbona, owner of the Marchesi di Barolo winery in Piedmont, Italy](#), and the typical working temperature is around 39 degrees Fahrenheit, or four degrees Celsius, which is quite low for wine storage. Specific wine fridges usually have a working temperature that can be set at 57 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit, or 14 to 16 degrees Celsius, which is very close to that of underground cellars.

Another reason to invest in the wine fridge is the issue of vibration, says Hak Soo Kim, assistant wine director at Chef Thomas Keller's [Per Se](#) restaurant in midtown Manhattan. "Household refrigerators use the motor to cool the unit. As for wine, you definitely do not want the motor to constantly stir up the wine. I believe this is why wine fridges tend to be expensive." Kim suggests looking at the secondary market for a starter wine fridge, adding he bought a used one a few years ago to hold part of his home collection encompassing more than 60 bottles.

"Specific wine fridges normally have cooling engines generating very little vibrations, which is not always the case when referring to multi-purpose fridges," Abbona explains. "Moreover, dedicated fridges have a large glass door which can be chosen as UV-proof, to better preserve your wines from the outside lighting."

The absolute worst places to store your wine at home: Near the oven, the stove, the fireplace, or near a window. "Wines don't like the light or temperatures shocks—never keep the wines next to where you are cooking," Maule stresses.

Maule says she has approximately 80 bottles of wine within her home, storing part of them in a wine fridge, and others in a cabinet in the living room. "And I currently have a bottle of [Hofstatter Pinot Bianco Bartenhau](#) in my fridge as I'm planning to drink it soon at a dinner with my dearest friends."

Abbona's personal cellar is located in her basement, where the temperature is constant all year round between 60 and 68 degrees Fahrenheit, or 16 and 20 degrees Celsius. She notes the humidity is constantly around 50%, not very high, which is why she keeps the bottles lying down.

If you're really short on space, or you want to keep your wine somewhere else for safe keeping, there are local services available around the country that will store and organize your wine collection off-site and then deliver them to when you would like a particular bottle.



Which wines should you age?

The simplest way to tell if the wine is a [good candidate for long aging is price](#). For example, if you are buying a \$100 bottle of red wine from Burgundy, more likely than not, it will have more ageability than a random \$25 bottle.

The second attribute to consider is the [quality level](#). The higher the classification of the wine is, the greater the aging potential.

Look for top vintages to age and put them away for many years. For example, French winemaker Pol Roger only releases their vintage Champagne in the best years for harvest in the eponymous region. You can put those away and age them even longer, and the bubbles will become finer and aromas more complex.

Next, there are the four qualities that help in aging a wine successfully: residual sugar, alcohol, acidity, and high tannin levels—all four of which are natural preservatives. Vintage Port, for example, is high in all four, which is why it is so long lived.

'All of them must be balanced in a wine. This is the most important thing to know,' Maule notes. 'None of them should prevail on the other to create the perfect palate mix.'

Acidity is important to keep an older wine tasting fresh, says Andrea Morris, wine director of Union Square Café in New York City. But alcohol can be a double-edged sword when it comes to aging.

'As the fruit flavors fall back as a wine ages, high alcohol can start to taste sharp and out of balance,' Morris explains. A wine with residual sugar (sugar that's still present after fermentation has stopped) ages. The sugar doesn't decrease, but the sweetness becomes less obvious, especially as the fruit flavors that magnify sweetness fade with age. This is why older Kabinett and Spatlese Rieslings don't taste as sweet as their younger counterparts, she adds.

Tannin softens with age, meaning that the texture and finish of the wine feels less grippy and more silky. 'The more tannic the wine is when young, the longer this process takes, which is why Barolo and Bordeaux can age for so long,' Morris says. 'As the tannins soften the wine will feel lighter in body, so a 20-year-old Barolo will feel less intense than one that's five years old. This is why it is traditional to drink an older wine before a younger one if you're enjoying a progression of wines.'

Residual sugar is found mainly in sweet young wines (such as Moscato d'Asti DOCG) or [passito wines](#) (wines made from raisins), which usually can be stored at a lower temperature (12 degrees Celsius) to better preserve their fruity aromas.

High-tannin levels, often matched by a higher ABV, are more typical of aged red wines, such as a Barolo. In this case, a slightly higher storage temperature (16 degrees Celsius) could better match the characteristics of the wine.

'High tannins, high acid, and high residual sugar wines have to be aged for a long time because you want to soften these edges,' Hugel says. 'Acidity and tannins will soften up, and sugar will integrate in the end bring more drinkability to the wine.'

Hugel suggests there is one more critical aspect to determining which wines to age: how concentrated the wine is. 'This generally means wines that show all of the above: high tannins in the case of reds, high alcohol, and/or high residual sugar and high acidity. High concentration wines are generally grown with low yields (the quantity of wine produced from a single vine) and longer hanging time on the vine, which means the juice will be more concentrated.'

Finally, when in doubt, ask the purveyor at your local wine shop or refer to the producer's website on ageability.

'Wine is subject to a constant and steady evolution,' says Martin Foradori, owner of [Hofstätter](#), a producer of Pinot Noir and Gewürztraminer wines in northern Italy. 'Proper wine storage and the chance to develop an idea of the right time frame to open is the squaring of the circle. It is true that the four factors mentioned above play an important role in the chemistry of wine and its aging potential. But be aware: there is far more to consider than just trusting numbers. Talk to the grower about the terroir and microclimate of his vineyards and about the special attributes of the specific vintage.'