

Title: ' The Pleasures of Age '

1/19/2004

**Publication** Wines and Vines

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Over the holidays I had the chance to taste several older vintages of wine. There was no particular plan, just the way things happened. Looking back at the experience, I realized (and not for the first time) that most of us drink our wine far too young. Despite the trend toward international, fruit-forward drink-me-now vintages, there are still wines meant to be aged before the cork is pulled.

One was a 1988 Chianti Classico from Lilliano, which was poured from a five-liter bottle at Thanksgiving. We were all a little nervous about the wine and several backup bottles stood ready. Turns out it was beautiful, fresh and lively with dark cherry fruit balanced by good tannic structure. We opened the bottle only minutes before dinner, knowing that with older wines, the 'breathing' process can lead to a loss of aromas. The wine was poured into two decanters---one for either end of the table---and proper homage was paid. For the second round, we poured the wine directly from the bottle into the glass and the difference was amazing. The wine from the bottle had an elevated, bright quality, with deeper fruit and an even longer finish. Something to think about the next time you decant an older wine. (Might add that the bottle had been standing upright for a week before we opened it.)

After about an hour, we noticed that the wine was losing some freshness and beginning to flatten out. Older wines are fragile. Treat them with respect.

A few weeks later, we opened a magnum bottle of 1982 Muga Gran Reserva Rioja. The wine didn't match the '88 Chianti. It was somewhat faded, yet there was a delicate floral aroma and a hint of violets and faded roses on the palate. I'm not sure how well the wine was stored, as the '82 vintage in Rioja was superb and Muga's traditional winemaking methods should have given the wine a longer life span. Still, it was a wine to ponder over.

The youngest of our aging trio was a 1994 Conde de Valdemar Gran Reserva Rioja. At not quite ten years old (counting by vintages) the wine showed its youth. There was fresh black cheery and black plum fruit played out against a rich tannic structure. I wish I had another bottle to try in ten years. But, alas, it was the last of the case.

And it isn't just reds that have aging potential. Kermit Lynch Wine Merchants has a 2002 Château D'epire, from Savennières, that Lynch says will age over the next 10-12 years. It's a dry white Loire from a great vintage, and if Kermit says it will age, I believe him. He also recommends 2001 Château La Roque Mourvèdre for aging over the next 6-8 years. Both wines sell at under \$15.

Putting aside a few bottles of wine is my favorite way to time travel.