



Buy now, drink later

The Spiral Cellars guide to buying wine
By Tim Atkin MW

Why lay wine down in the first place?

‘Every year or two, I send him the same letter,’ an exasperated wine merchant confessed to me recently. ‘This guy has been storing a case of Muscadet with us since the late 1980s and paying an annual charge for the privilege. Every time I write to tell him that it really is time to drink the stuff, I get the same response: “Leave it where it is”.’



Not many of us would put out our faith in the ageing powers of a 20-year-old Muscadet. Fresh light whites, even those with marked levels of acidity, rarely improve with time in bottle. But that ancient case of Loire white raises broader questions about laying down wine.

Why do it in the first place? Which wines age best? How and where should you store it? And how do you know when a wine has reached maturity?

This guide to buying and storing wine will answer those questions and more.

The first thing to bear in mind is that most wine is intended to be drunk on release. Even red Bordeaux, the ultimate cellar-worthy wine, has become much more drinkable in its youth since the early 1980s, with plusher tannins, more oak and alcohol and lower levels of acidity. Attribute it to climate change, to later picking dates or to new fangled machinery in the winery, or even to a combination of all three, but these days we really can have our cake and scoff it. In the past, many of the best red Bordeaux were undrinkable in their youth; now they are accessible within a few years of the harvest.

Well over three quarters of the wine we buy in the UK is consumed within 24 hours of purchase. I suspect that most of the remaining 25% spends a few weeks in the fridge or a wine rack at most. But a small yet increasing percentage of wine is bought to keep. More and more of us like the idea of cellaring (and I use the term loosely) our own wine. Standard Life estimates that 13.8 million Brits buy at least one bottle of wine to keep each year and that two million of us plan to buy or build some form of storage facility in the next five years.

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It's easy to see why. At a time when society seems to value immediacy (and ephemeral immediacy at that) above all else, wine is one of the few things that is capable of changing for the better over time. Great bottles can last for decades, or even centuries. There's something very moving about tasting a wine bought to commemorate an anniversary or a birthday, never mind one that was produced before the Second World War.

Sometimes wine is stored in a temperature controlled warehouse - either duty paid or under bond - and sometimes it's stored in people's houses. Yet the reasons for holding onto wine are the same in both cases: it will develop complexity in the bottle, increase in value and hopefully both.

It doesn't always work out that way - that Muscadet has almost certainly failed on both counts - but if you follow a few basic rules, you are more likely to end up with a collection that tastes better than when you bought it. If you're lucky (and canny) it might even show a half-decent profit.

Which wines benefit from cellaring?

This is not as easy to answer as you might imagine. The reason is subjectivity. 'When will this be ready to drink?' is an impossible question to answer unless you know something about the taste of the person who asked it. Your bottle of mature Bulgarian Cabernet might be my bottle of tired out plonk. The same is true of national preferences: the French regard the British love of older Champagnes as verging on the perverse, while we find some of the bubbly they drink under-ripe.

Other, less subjective factors come into play too, such as the original quality of the wine, the vintage in which it was produced (lighter years mature more rapidly than powerful ones), the temperature at which it was stored (wines develop more slowly in cool conditions) and the size of the bottle (half bottles develop faster than bottles and magnums because the ratio of oxygen to liquid is higher in the wine).

For all that, some wines are better suited to cellaring than others. Reds with plenty of tannin, such as Barolo, red Bordeaux and Port, are obvious candidates, as are top Rhône (Hermitage, Cornas, Côte Rôtie and Châteauneuf-du-Pape), Tuscan wines such as Brunello di Montalcino, Chianti Classico and the so-called Supertuscans, the best Spanish reds (from Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Priorat and Toro), really good red Burgundy,

Australian Shiraz, Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and a handful of South American and South African reds.

Most of these reds have high concentrations of tannins, phenols and colouring matter (known as anthocyanins), which help to keep the wine fresh and stable in its youth. As the liquid ages, so the colour gets paler and the tannins soften (a process known as polymerisation). The tannins fall out of the wine and, by doing so, deprive it of its first defence against gentle oxidation. Over time, the oxygen and the wine interact. As they do, the character of the fruit changes, going from what wine buffs call primary to secondary to tertiary. The mellow aromas and flavours of a mature wine are potentially much more complex than those of a young one. That's why we wait for great wines to develop.

How long should we wait? It's partly down to personal taste, but there are what are known as 'optimum drinking windows' for most wine styles. Leave it too long and the wine will become brown and maderised; drink it too early and it will seem gawky and unfinished. As the American wine writer, Benjamin Wallace, puts it in his book, 'The Billionaire's Vinegar': 'Paradoxically, wine is improving even as it is being destroyed; time will kill a wine, but is also necessary to make it great.'

White wines that age well are rarer, but those that are fortified, have high levels of sweetness or high levels of acidity can develop well in bottle. The most age-worthy grape varieties are Chardonnay (especially from top sites in the Burgundian appellations of Chablis, Meursault and Chassagne- and Puligny-Montrachet), Riesling (mainly from Germany, but also from Australia, Alsace and Austria), Chenin Blanc (particularly from the Loire Valley) and Semillon (from Australia, but also as the main grape in Sauternes). I'd also include the fortified wines of Sherry and Madeira, both of which are made from white varieties and can age for a century or more, and Champagne (generally made from one white grape, Chardonnay and two red, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier).

Some critics argue that only great wines evolve and develop in the bottle. I wouldn't be that proscriptive – can't an Albariño, a Sancerre or a Beaujolais be great? – but more often than not this is true. Great wines are wines that reveal themselves over time.



What should you buy?

The first and most important rule is to buy what you like to drink, unless you are buying solely for investment purposes. The most interesting cellars are the ones that reflect the personality and prejudices of the owner, rather than those of a given wine writer or wine merchant. For instance, you may decide to develop a collection of a certain property's wine, or to follow a certain region of country.

A good cellar should include wines for a variety of occasions, from a neighbour popping in for a quick drink to a smart dinner party. I try to have a selection of ready-to-drink wines close at hand, as well as wines that are maturing. Obviously, you want to stagger this: there's no point in having a huge collection of wines that will all be ready to drink at the same time, especially if that moment is 20 years away.

A friend of mine's father has the right idea about wine. He labels every bottle in his cellar with one of three tags to direct his children towards certain wines:

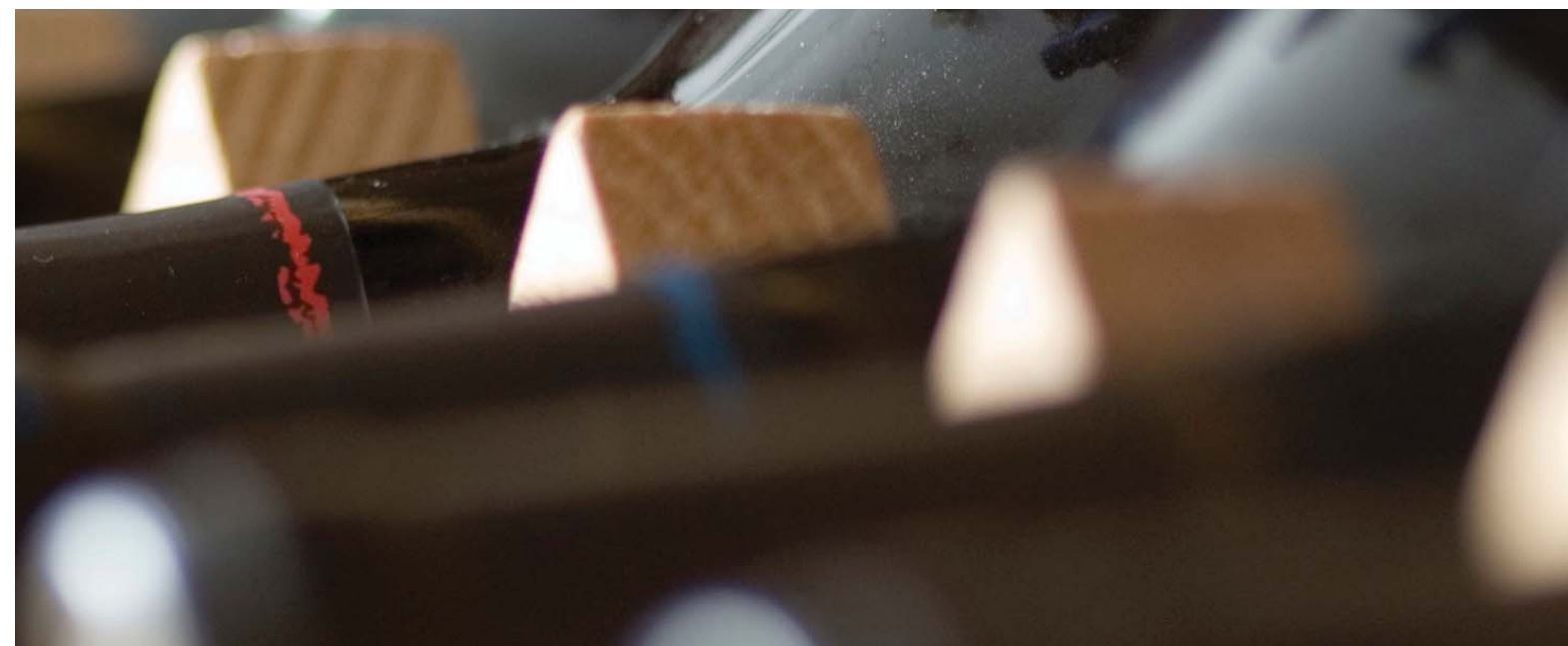
'You can drink this', 'I'd rather you didn't drink this' and 'This is your inheritance.'

In the absence of a relative like that, how do you know when a wine is at its peak? The best way to find out is to pull the cork. That's why I'd advise you to buy at least six bottles of a chosen wine, so that you can see how a wine develops (for better or worse) over time. It's then a question of trial and error – and personal taste.

Don't be too much of an anorak about this, but keep a record of what you drink and when you drink it, possibly in a bespoke cellar book. One famous American collector has installed a \$10,000 state-of-the-art computer system in his cellar. He attaches a bar code to every bottle he buys so that, at the touch of a button, he can find out where it is located underground. As he leaves the cellar, he scans the bottle and his collection is updated by the computer. You could achieve the same thing with a pen and notebook, although it might take you a bit longer to find a particular bottle if your cellar is as haphazard as mine.



"A good cellar should include wines for a variety of occasions."



Where should you buy it?

The wine market is dominated by the supermarkets in the UK, but the so-called multiple grocers don't specialise in wines to keep. That said, they are making increasingly bold forays into the fine wine market; the likes of Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose, Booths and Marks & Spencer all sell wines that wouldn't look out of place in the smartest cellar. It's especially worth looking at their on-line selections, where they tend to list small parcels.

The high street sector is having a tougher time of it at the moment because of high rents, the growing power of the supermarkets and a dwindling consumer base.

Majestic (many of whose stores have parking) is the leading name in the high street, although Oddbins, Nicolas and Thresher/Wine Rack have some good wines too. Oddbins has recently been acquired by new owners and, one hopes, will return to what it once was.

If you're serious about developing a wine collection, don't overlook the UK's splendid array of independent wine merchants. These companies aren't the cheapest places to buy a bottle of £3.99 Aussie Semillon/Chardonnay, but they often specialise in a particular region or country and can provide bespoke advice. Their

wine lists, too, are a very good (and usually free) source of information.

Most independents sell by the case, rather than the bottle, though the majority allow you to mix and match. Make sure you enquire about delivery charges and, if you're buying en primeur (see below), about duty, VAT and insurance.

What follows is a personal selection of the best independents:

Good general lists

Adnams 01502 727222
www.adnams.co.uk

Avery's 0870 066 6779
www.averys.com

Berry Brothers & Rudd
0870 900 4300 www.bbr.com

Corney & Barrow
0207 265 2400
www.corneyandbarrow.com

D Byrne & Co 01200 423152
www.dbyrnefinewines.co.uk

Handford Fine Wine
020 7221 9614
www.handford.net

H&H Bancroft
0207 232 5450
www.bancroftwines.com

John Armit Wines
0207 908 0600
www.armit.co.uk

Justerini & Brooks
0207 484 6400
www.justerinis.com

Jeroboams
0207 288 8888
www.jeroboams.co.uk

Lay & Wheeler
01473 313233
www.laywheeler.com

Lea & Sandeman
0207 288 8888
www.londonfinewine.co.uk

Philglass & Swiggot
0207 924 4494
www.philglas-swiggot.com

Raeburn Fine Wine
0131 343 1159
www.raeburnfinewines.com

Tanners
01743 234500
www.tanners-wines.co.uk

The Wine Society
01438 741177
www.thewinesociety.com

Specialists

Bordeaux Index, Fine and rare wines. 0207 269 0700
www.bordeauxindex.com

Enotria, Italy. 0208 961 441
www.enotria.co.uk

Farr Vintners, Fine and rare wines. 0207 821 2000
www.farrvintners.co.uk

Fine & Rare Wines,
0208 960 1995
www.frw.co.uk

Gauntleys of Nottingham,
Rhône, Alsace. 0115 911 0555
www.gauntley-wine.co.uk

Les Caves de Pyrène, France.
01483 538820
www.lescaves.co.uk

Haynes Hanson & Clark
Burgundy. 0207 259 0102
www.hhandc.co.uk

Howard Ripley, Burgundy and Germany.
0208 877 3065
www.howardripley.com

John E Fells, Port and Madeira.
01442 870900 www.fells.co.uk

Liberty Wines, Italy and Australia. 0207 720 5350
www.libertywine.co.uk

Montrachet Fine Wines,
Bordeaux and Burgundy.
0207 928 1990

Moreno Wines, Spain.
0207 286 0678
www.morenowinedirect.com

The New Zealand House of Wine 0800 085 6273
www.nzhouseofwine.com

Noel Young Wines, Austria and Australia. 01223 844744
www.nywines.co.uk

OW Loeb, Rhône, Germany and Burgundy. 0207 234 0385
www.owloeb.com

Oz Wines 0845 450 1261
www.ozwines.co.uk

Reid Wines, Fine and rare wines. 01761 452645

SA Wines On line, South Africa.
0845 4562365
www.sawinesonline.co.uk

Stone Vine and Sun, Rhône, Languedoc, South Africa.
08450 614604
www.stonevine.co.uk

Swig, South Africa. 08000 272 272 www.swig.co.uk

Valvona & Crolla, Italy.
0131 556 6066
www.valvonacrolla.co.uk

Vintage Roots, Organic, vegetarian and bio-dynamic.
0118 976 1999
www.vintageroots.co.uk

Vine Trail, Small French domaines. 01179 211770
www.vinetrail.co.uk

Yapp, Rhône and Loire. 01747 860423 www.yapp.co.uk

Wherever you are buying it, remember www.everywine.co.uk and www.winesearcher.com, both of which are very good price comparison websites.



How and where to store it

Temperature fluctuation is the single biggest problem for wine as it ages. Wine can cope with a certain amount of heat or cold, but not extremes of both. Be warned. A friend of mine stored his wine in an outdoor loo, which was fine until we had a freezing winter and he ended up with a lot of very expensive ice lollies.

At the opposite end of the temperature spectrum, you should avoid putting your wine in the airing cupboard, kitchen or the attic, unless you want it to age prematurely or taste like Madeira on an off day. Standard Life estimates that the equivalent of £3.5 billion of wine is being stored incorrectly in the UK, a state of affairs that could affect resale values as well as taste.

Wines like a certain amount of humidity, but not too much or the labels can turn mouldy. There's nothing wrong with this (as long as you can read them), provided you plan to drink the wines yourself, but it would definitely affect their market value. By the way, 70% humidity is ideal for wine.

If you have a cool, deep cellar, then you're very fortunate. Just don't put the central heating boiler down there. But where should you keep your wine otherwise? Sadly, too many people make the wrong choice. Standard Life says that one in six uses the garage (where exhaust fumes and cold snaps are a problem), one in ten stores them in a cupboard beside the mop and floor polish and nearly half leave their wines in the kitchen or the dining room, where temperatures fluctuate with the seasons (and whatever happens to be on the stove).

There are a number of alternatives. If you don't have a lot of wine, one option is a Eurocave (0207 935 4679; www.eurocave.co.uk), which is rather like a large fridge without the vibration (another thing that is detrimental to wine quality in the medium to long term). Capacities range from 38 to 206 bottles. You can set your Eurocave to chill wines to different temperatures in specific trays. This can be very handy if you want to store small quantities of wine and don't occupy the ground floor of your building.


However, if you do, and you're serious about wine, a Spiral Cellar (0845 241 2768; www.spiralcellars.com) works out as the best value option in the long run. These are installed on site and come in a variety of sizes. The Spiral Cellar is effectively a downwards extension. Think of it as a kind of honeycomb (without the honey) made out of pre-cast concrete modules that act as wine bins as well as part of the cellar's structure. It requires no heating or cooling and is ideal for wine storage, being cool (10-12C), humid and vibration free.

Another possibility is to store your wine with a professional bonded warehouse company such as Octavian (01225 810735; www.octavian.co.uk) or London City Bond (01375 853700; www.lcb.co.uk), although this can add up if you store a lot of wine over a long period of time. Prices at Octavian start at £90 (ex VAT)

per annum for one to five cases, although above 6 and under 31 cases you pay £14.87 (ex VAT) per case. This includes insurance at full replacement value and protects you against something called 'catastrophic loss'. At LCB, the price is a more attractive £12.24 per case (ex VAT), although the best deal I could find is that offered by Seckford Wines (a bargain £5.50 ex VAT per case, 01394 446622; www.seckfordwines.co.uk).

If you don't want to splash out on any of these options, the 'least worst' alternative is to store your wine under the stairs or at the back of a cupboard. Remember two things: watch out for nearby radiators and pipes and try not to expose your wines to direct sunlight. Otherwise, there's always the fridge...

Wherever you put them, your wines should be stored horizontally, whether in racks, trays or bins, so that the corks stay wet and non-porous. By the way, if you're buying wine racks, go for good quality one made from metal and wood. You can buy these from Majestic, Wineware Racks & Accessories (01903 723557; www.wineware.co.uk), Wine Storage Solutions (01932 348720; www.brizard.co.uk), or A&W Moore (0115 9441434; www.wineracks.co.uk).



It is certainly possible to turn a profit in the medium to long term, but only if you follow certain golden rules

Investing in wine

With the world financial system in turmoil and UK property prices in freefall, investing in wine is an increasingly popular pastime. The fine wine market has taken off on the back of a series of very good to great vintages in Bordeaux (1996, 2000, 2003 and 2005), which have taken worldwide interest to new levels. With a limited stock of the best wines, the rules of supply and demand have pushed prices for some blue chip properties to unprecedented levels. Russian, Chinese and Indian investors have added to the pool of buyers clamouring for the top names.

It is certainly possible to turn a profit in the medium to long term, but only if you follow certain golden rules. The two most important of which are: buy what the market regards as the best wines and buy them early.

The top wines, at least as far as investment are concerned, are nearly all blue chip clarets, such as Châteaux Lafite, Latour, Haut-Brion, Margaux, Mouton-Rothschild, Pétrus, Le Pin, Cheval Blanc, Ausone, Léoville-Las-Cases, Cos d'Estournel, Pichon-Baron and Pichon-Lalande, but also include the odd Burgundy, Sauternes and Champagne.

How do you know what the market is doing? A good place to start is the Liv-ex 100 Fine Wine Index (www.liv-ex.com), which tracks the prices of the top 100 wines in the wholesale fine wine market. The index, which is calculated according to size of production (and therefore scarcity) as well as value, is currently made up of 94.65% red Bordeaux, 0.83% white Bordeaux, 1.08% red Burgundy, 2.95% Champagne and 0.49% Italy, but the figures move as the market shifts.

Over the last three years, the index has shown impressive, and sometimes mind-boggling, growth but appears to be slowing down at the moment. Prices may drop in the short term, even for previously sought after wines, so be cautious. If you're serious about investing in wine, it might be worth taking membership of Liv-ex, which gives you more detailed information on what the fine wine market is doing. Otherwise speak to a top Bordeaux merchant such as Farr Vintners, Berry Brothers & Rudd, Wilkinson Vintners, Armit, Corney & Barrow, Justerini & Brooks or Bordeaux Index.

Buying wines as 'futures' or en primeur

The best and (in the long term) the cheapest way to buy red Bordeaux is en primeur. This system, known as buying 'futures' in the United States, enables you to purchase the wine before it is bottled. This helps the cash flow of the domaine, château or winery in question (not to mention that of the wine merchant who gets to bank your money for a few months), but if you buy wisely it should ensure that you end up with case of something that is rare and/or valuable.

The en primeur market is at its strongest in Bordeaux, especially in top vintages such as 2000 or 2005, but it also exists in Burgundy, Barolo, Tuscany, California, the Rhône, the Douro Valley (whenever there is a declared Port vintage) and, to a lesser extent, Germany and Washington State. Of these, Bordeaux attracts by far the most attention.

You should always buy blue chip wines if you want to make a profit. This effectively means restricting your purchases to no more than 30 or so famous names. In fact, if you really want to play the percentages just stick to Bordeaux in top years, when prices have the best chance of increasing.

Prices for the top wines from 1982, 1989, 1990, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003 and 2005 have all risen. Sometimes, the sums involved are considerable. If you'd bought the 1982 Château Pétrus when it was released it would have cost you £300 a case. Today it is worth a cool £32,000, which is not a bad return on investment. Of these vintages, 1989, 1990 and 1996 are currently under-valued, partly because investors seem to prefer to buy young wines. They are also drinking well at the moment, unlike the top 2000s and 2005s which need more time.

If you resell your wine, whether to a fine and rare merchant or through an auction house, I'd advise you to shop around for the best price. You should also keep your wine in bond, as it will be easier to sell that way. UK auction houses charge vendors anything between 10 and 15% plus VAT, plus a collection charge and insurance at 1%. If the wine is rare, you may get a better deal through a wine broker, although most of them charge 10% too. Incidentally, you do not have to pay capital gains tax on the profit, as wine is considered a perishable good by the Inland Revenue. The only exception is Port, which is considered an investment by the IR.

Do prices go down too? You bet, they do. In poor, mediocre or over-priced vintages, such as 1994, 1997, 1999, 2007 and (on Bordeaux's Left Bank, but not the Right) 1998, prices have either remained static or decreased. If you'd bought the 1997 Château Valandraud from Saint Emilion when it was released you would have paid £2000 a case. It is currently trading at £750 or less.

There is another good reason for buying wine en primeur: that is, to drink it. The key argument for buying wine in this way is that you know where it was stored from the moment it was shipped. There are numerous stories of fine wines being ferried backwards and forwards across the Atlantic as they changed hands over the years. Needless to say, this isn't good for wine.

The other argument is that in areas like Burgundy, the Right Bank of Bordeaux, Piedmont (home of Barolo and Barbaresco) and the Rhône, the wines that you like to drink or collect may well be in short supply and will not appear on the secondary market – auctions or wine merchants' lists – in due course.

Buying wine at auction

The auction houses can be a good source of bargains, but make sure you do your homework in advance. The first thing to do is get hold of a catalogue by calling Sotheby's (0207 293 5046) or Christie's (0207 930 6074), each of whom holds roughly a dozen wine auctions a year. If you're interested in a given lot, make sure you know what its market value is, where it has been stored and where it has come from.

Don't get carried away by the glamour of the salesroom, and beware of hidden charges. Both Sotheby's and Christie's charge a 15% buyer's premium (plus VAT). You will also pay VAT and duty on the hammer price if the wine is in bond (and you want to remove it). Delivery is extra, at between £15 and £30 per drop off, depending on the quantities involved. In other words, a £100 lot can easily end up costing you £150 or more.

On the subject of buying wine at auction, it really is a case of caveat emptor. If you don't like the wine, there's no comeback. So beware of the 11 bottle case, where someone has put a wine back into auction after a disappointment. You can find some delicious wines at auctions, some of them at good prices, but it's a fact that a lot of vendors regard the sales rooms as places to dump wines they want to get rid of. I'd also be very wary of buying expensive 'rare' bottles at auction unless you are sure of their provenance. As the prices of fine and rare wines have increased, so have the number of fakes.



How and when to serve it

There's no point in storing your wine correctly if you proceed to serve it at the wrong temperature, in an inappropriate glass or with a deposit. Here, too, you need to follow a few simple rules to make sure that your wine is in the best possible condition.

Opening the bottle

It's an obvious thing to say, but before you can drink your wine, first you have to open the bottle. Screwcaps have made life easier over the last five years (as well as reducing the incidence of cork taint), but most fine wine producers still use natural corks. If you pull as many of these as I do, arm yourself with a Screwpull (www.screwpull.co.uk), but a basic waiter's friend is good enough for opening the occasional bottle.

The only wine that needs to be opened with care is sparkling wine. Never point the bottle at someone else or at yourself for that matter. In fact, treat it like an unexploded bomb, where the cork has to be eased gently out of the neck. I know two people who have lost the sight in one eye because of a flying cork (and one of them was injured by a bottle of Cava rather than Vintage Champagne).

Serving temperatures

One of my favourite wine cartoons of all time shows a couple of Eskimos leaving the Baffin Island Wine Store, bottle in mittened hand. 'If we serve this at room temperature,' one of them says to the other, 'it won't come out of the bottle.' That's the problem with the old adage about serving reds unchilled. In these days of centrally heated houses, you need to be a little more precise about how warm or cold your wine is.

As a general rule, I'd say that most reds are served too warm, while most whites are served too cold. Never allow your reds to go above 20C, as they can taste stewed and

flabby. Never serve white wines below 8C, as this obscures the fruit and can make the wine taste overly acidic. The lighter the red, the more it will benefit from an hour or so in the fridge. Big, beefy reds should be served warmer – at 18C or so – but for, say, a Beaujolais, a Bardolino or most Pinot Noirs, 12C to 15C is ideal. With white wines, serve big oaky wines, such as Californian or Australian Chardonnays at 12 to 15C and crisp and/or aromatic ones at 8-12C. Sparkling wines are best served at 8-10C to emphasise their acidity and freshness.

The best way to warm up a wine that has come out of the cellar is to leave it on the kitchen table for an hour or so. Don't put it by the fire (unless you're desperate to get

the wine up to the right temperature in a hurry) and never put your bottle in a microwave. It may well explode. For whites, the fridge is better than an ice bucket; otherwise use one of those specially designed wine sleeves (www.hydropac.co.uk). It's always worth having a wine thermometer to hand so that you can check the temperature of your wine. Don't neglect this step, as it can make a bit difference to the way your wine smells and tastes.

To decant or not to decant

There are two reasons for decanting a wine. The first is to aerate it; the second is to remove any sediment that may have collected in the bottle while the wine was ageing. Most wines don't throw a huge deposit (Port and some tannic, age-worthy reds are the obvious exceptions, especially if they have been bottled without filtration), but I'd still recommend decanting as a matter of course. Unless your wine is very delicate, and likely to be harmed by the effects of a little oxygen, decanting nearly always enhances a wine's perfume and fruit. You don't need to be overly fussy about this. Just pour the wine into a decanter and give it a couple of vigorous shakes.

Glasses

Don't neglect your glassware. The worst thing you can drink wine out of (apart from a tin mug or a pint glass) is a Paris goblet. Always try to serve wine (except fizz) in a glass with a tapered bowl, as this will help to concentrate its aromas. You don't have to spend a fortune on stemware – the basic ISO tasting glass is inexpensive and widely available – but I think that a special wine deserves a special glass. Good companies include Riedel (www.riedel.com), Schott Zwiesel (www.schott-zwiesel.com) and Dartington Crystal (www.dartington.co.uk). My advice is to go for the machine produced glasses rather than the hand blown ones, as you don't want to worry about wasting £30 or more every time you break a glass on the hot tap.



11 wines to drink now...

white

2007 La Différence
 Viognier/Muscat, Vin de Pays
 d'Oc (£4.98, 13%, Asda)

One of my favourite sub-£5 brands, La Différence is new wave France at its best. This is a fragrant, spicy, unoaked blend with lots of grapey fruit flavours.

2005 Peter Lehmann
 Barossa
 Semillon (£5.90, 11.5%,
 Asda; £5.99, Booths)

Consistently one of the bargains of the Australian wine scene. A herbal, unoaked, honeysuckle-scented white that really sings on the palate. Should age for a bit too.

2007 Tesco Finest Albariño,
 Rías Baixas
 (£6.49, 12.75%, Tesco)

It's great to see Albariño being offered at affordable prices by supermarkets like Tesco and Sainsbury's. Fresh and floral with a lime and citrus fruit tang.

2007 St Mont, Plaimont
 (£6.49, 13%, Marks &
 Spencer)

A brilliant Gascon blend of Gros Manseng with a little Petit Courbu and Arrufiac, this is a zesty, grapefruity, unoaked white with bags of personality.

2008 Springfield Estate
 Special Cuvée Sauvignon
 Blanc, Robertson
 (£8.99, 12.5%, Sainsbury's)

One of South Africa's best Sauvignons, despite the fact that it comes from the warm climate of Robertson. A complex, intense, nettle and gooseberry fruity white.

2006 Château Le Chec
 Graves Blanc
 (£9.75, 12.5%, Adnams)

An unusual Semillon-based white that's miles more interesting than most Bordeaux Blanc, this is creamy and lightly oaked with notes of toast and greengages.

2007 Patrick Leseq Côtes
 du Rhône Blanc Vieilles
 Vignes
 (£10.99, 14%, Virgin Wines)

From a great vintage for Rhône whites, this judiciously oaked blend of Marsanne and Roussanne is spicy and honeyed with plenty of weight and substance.

2006 Château Saint Ferreol
 Viognier, Vin de Pays d'Oc
 (£11.95, 12.5%, Berry
 Brothers & Rudd)

A southern French Viognier that's as good as most Condrieu, this is rich and hedonistic with flavours of peaches and cream and balancing acidity.

2005 Chablis Premier Cru
 Fourchaume, La
 Chablisienne
 (£14.99, 13%, Marks &
 Spencer)

A Chablis that's more than half way to a Meursault in style, with a touch of oak and some honeyed bottle age. Stylish and complex with real depth of flavour.

2007 Sancerre La
 Moussière, Alphonse
 Mellot
 (£14.99, 13%, Sainsbury's)

A top notch Sancerre which proves that when it's good, Loire Sauvignon is unbeatable: nettley and taut with hints of aniseed and fennel and a crisp, dry finish.

red

2006 Syrah, Vin de Pays de
 l'Ardèche, Cave de Saint
 Désirat
 (£4.89, 12%, Booths)

Aromatic, woodsmoke, bacon fat and blackberry notes with masses of spicy, peppery fruit. One of the great high street bargains, this could be a Crozes-Hermitage.

2006 Balcón de la Villa,
 Toro
 (£5.99, 14.5%, Marks &
 Spencer)

Even though this is on the full-bodied side, it has none of the baked flavours that mar a lot of Toros. Ripe, succulent and sweetly oaked with real poise and balance.

2004 Château d'Argadens
 Bordeaux Supérieur
 (£7.49, 13%, Booths)

A delicious, Merlot-based claret with lots of cassis and fruitcake flavours, a nip of tannin and the acidity of the 2004 vintage. Good now, but will also keep.

2006 Castelfeder Lagrein
 Klassische Linie, Alto
 Adige
 (£7.99, 13%, Virgin Wines)

Lagrein is one of the great, unheralded grape varieties of northern Italy. This is bright and juicy with attractive black cherry fruit and smooth tannins. Good chilled.

2007 Concha y Toro
 Winemaker's Lot
 Carmenere, Cachapoal
 (£8.49, 14%, Oddbins)

Now that Carmenere has come out of Merlot's shadow in Chile – the two were often confused – it is starting to shine. Intense, plum, green pepper and chocolate flavours.

2007 Morgon, Domaine de
 la Chaponne, Laurent
 Guillet
 (£9.60, 12.5%, Tanners)

Good 'cru' Beaujolais deserves a wider audience. This is crunchy and refreshing, with perky acidity and attractive red fruits' flavours. Serve from the fridge.

2007 Cuvée Balthazar
 Syrah, Vin de Pays d'Oc
 (£9.99, 14%, Waitrose)

Not be fooled by this wine's vin de pays status: this is as serious as a top northern Rhône Syrah with deep colour, smooth tannins and masses of blackberry spice.

2006 Capoposto Rosso,
 Alberto Longo, Puglia
 (£11.75, 13.5%, Lea &
 Sandeman)

A great package and a great wine. Even though this Negroamaro comes from the boot heel of Italy, it's soft and fragrant with a finesse that will remind you of Pinot Noir.

2006 Resolute Pinot Noir,
 Winegrowers of Ara,
 Marlborough
 (£15.99 each for two, 13%,
 Majestic)

Talking of which, this is the kind of thing that will strike fear into Burgundians: complex, toasty, savoury-sweet and brilliant value for money.

sparkling

2002 Tesco Finest Vintage
 Champagne, Union
 Champagne
 (£17.98, 12%, Tesco)

A pure Chardonnay fizz from the Côte des Blancs, this is a very pure, elegant fizz with fresh, zesty acidity, small bubbles and real concentration.

wines to lay down for 5 years or more...

white

2008 Tesco Finest Tingleup Great Southern Riesling (£6.19, 12%, Tesco)

Sourced from the depths of Western Australia, this is a youthful, zesty, lime-like Aussie Riesling with lots of concentration and a refreshing, dry finish.

2006 Tahbilk Marsanne, Goulbourn Valley (£7.95, 13%, The Wine Society)

Marsanne is comparatively rare in Australia, but this example is a fragrant, light-fingered stunner with a proven track record when it comes to ageing potential.

2005 Savennières L'Enclos, Eric Morgat (£13.95, 14.5%, The Wine Society)

When is the world going to catch on to the glories of Loire Chenin Blanc? This is waxy and toasty with intense apple and vanilla notes underpinned by taut acidity.

2006 Montagny Premier Cru Bonneveaux, Olivier Leflaive (£13.99, 13%, Corney & Barrow)

The best 2006 white Burgundies are delicious now, but will keep for the medium term. This one from the Chalonaise is nutty, focused and beautifully balanced.

2007 Leitz Rudesheimer Berg Roseneck Old Vines Riesling Spätlese (£18, 8.5%, Marks & Spencer)

An award-winning wine that deserves to win more gongs, this Rheingau Riesling is sourced from very old vines. Intense and minerally with well-judged sweetness.

2006 Pouilly-Fuissé, Terroir de Vergisson, Olivier Merlin (£21.50, 13%, Berry Brothers & Rudd)

The pick of a very good crop of 2006 Mâcon whites at Berry Brothers, this is a rich, multi-faceted wine with notes of honey, citrus fruit and vanilla. Ambitious stuff.

red

2007 La Forge Cabernet Sauvignon, Paul Mas, Vin de Pays d'Oc (£7.98, 13.5%, Asda)

Paul Mas is one of the most reliable names in the Languedoc. This is a very classy, polished Cabernet with supple tannins, a touch of oak and intense cassis fruit.

2007 Taste the Difference Douro, Quinta do Crasto (£7.99, 14%, Sainsbury's)

As a source of table wines, the Douro gets better with every vintage. This unoaked blend is rich and sun-kissed with powerful plum and liquorice fruit.

2006 Mendel Malbec, Mendoza (£9.95, 14%, The Wine Society)

A comparative newcomer to the Argentinean wine scene – although its vineyards are very old – this is a stunner: violet-perfumed, seductively oaked and cellarworthy.

2004 Malvira Nebbiolo, Langhe (£10.99, 13.5%, Waitrose Wine Direct)

This won't age as long as the 2004 Barolos, but nor is it meant to. It's dry and tea leafy, but there's a sweet succulence underlying the variety's tell tale tannins.

2006 Craggy Range Te Muna Road Pinot Noir, Martinborough (£15.99, 13.8%, Waitrose)

Top notch Kiwi Pinot from one of the country's best producers. Still on the young side, but with the structure and fruit concentration to develop in bottle.

2006 Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Domaine de la Solitude (£17.99, 15%, Majestic)

A big, full-throttle, Grenache-based Châteauneuf, with rich, dense, powerful black fruits and a dusting of Provençal herbs and spices.

2004 Muga Reserva Selección Especial (£18.19, 14%, Waitrose)

The 2004 Riojas are some of the best wines the region has ever made. This modern-style, Tempranillo-dominated red is concentrated, oaky and built for ageing.

2004 Selvapiana Chianti Rufina Bucerchiale (£20, 14%, Marks & Spencer)

Damson, woodsmoke and red fruits are the dominant characters on this beautifully elegant, French oak-aged Tuscan red. A truly great Chianti.

2005 D'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz, McLaren Vale (£24.99, 14.5%, Oddbins)

Not subtle, it must be said, but this heart-on-sleeve winemaking from one of Australia's top names: rich, plummy and packed with spicy oak.

2004 Clos L'Abba, St Emilion Grand Cru (£29.99, 13%, Oddbins Fine Wine stores)

The more I taste the 2004 clarets, the more I like them. This is smooth and sensuous with quite a bit of oak, but the balance and acidity to age.

2004 Seghesio Old Vine Zinfandel, Sonoma (£24.75, 14.5%, Laithwaite's)

Seghesio is one of California's leading Zinfandel specialists. It makes more expensive bottlings, but this ripe, tobacco- and raspberry-scented red is my favourite.

sweet

2004 Vin de Constance, Klein Constantia (£25 per 50cl, 14%, Majestic)

South Africa's outstanding sweet wine, made from super-ripe Muscat grapes. Marmalade and vanilla spice give this a very distinctive set of flavours.

sparkling

Tarlant Champagne NV (£25, 12%, Marks & Spencer)

Rich, deeply coloured grower's Champagne made from equal proportions of the three local grapes. It's almost like a mini Bollinger, with oak adding a layer of complexity.

2004 Gimonnet Brut Gastronomer, Premier Cru, Blanc de Blancs (£29.95, 12%, Armit)

Displaying the elegance and ageing potential that are typical of good Blanc de Blancs, this is finely crafted fizz that's appealingly dry on the finish.

13 wines to lay down for ten years or more...

white

2000 Tyrrells Vat 1 Semillon, Hunter Valley
(£19.99, 11%, Tesco)

A wine that began life curled up in a ball, but develops new layers of complexity with every year: toast, honeysuckle and citrus fruit combine beautifully on the palate.

2006 Dönnhoff Kreuznacher Krötenpfuhl Riesling Spätlese, Nahe
(£20, 8%, Waitrose Wine Direct)

Source from one of the superstars of the German wine industry, this is a medium sweet Riesling with remarkable length, persistence and depth of flavour.

2006 Puligny-Montrachet, Premier Cru Clavoillon, Domaine Leflaive
(£60, 13%, Armit)

If you want to buy really good white Burgundy, you might as well buy the very best. This has remarkable vitality and persistence. I'd love to see it in another decade.

red

2004 Château Meyney, Saint Estèphe
(£19.99, 13%, Majestic)

A very serious young claret showing the firmness for which Saint Estèphe is famous. The oak and tannins are very polished, the fruit concentrated and modern in palate.

2004 Château Branas Grand Poujeaux, Moulis en Medoc
(£20.75, 13.5%, Laithwaite's)

A Moulis that has dramatically out-performed its comparatively modest appellation, this is what used to be called a classic luncheon claret: elegant and cedarwoody.

2003 Baigorri Rioja Reserva
(£21, 14%, Philglass & Swiggott)

Ultra-modern Rioja from an exciting new name with a stylish winery to match the finesse and quality of its wines. Lovely Tempranillo.

2005 Gevrey-Chambertin, Domaine Thierry Mortet
(£24.95, 13%, Lea & Sandeman)

Just my sort of red Burgundy, this has lovely, supple fruit, sweet oak and very fine, if concentrated tannins. This will be delicious in ten years' time.

2004 Château Grand Puy Lacoste, Pauillac
(£29.15, 12.5%, Bordeaux Index)

Quite forward for a 2004, but this still has plenty of ageing potential under its belt. A classic Pauillac claret with firm, structured blackcurrant and cigar box notes.

1998 Château Pontet-Canet, Pauillac
(£36.50, 13%, Cadman Fine Wines, 0845 121 4011)

If you want a wine that's already showing some age, but has the potential to develop for another decade or more, this is a good place to start.

2001 Eileen Hardy Shiraz, McLaren Vale
(£46, 13.6%, Waitrose Wine Direct)

Less expensive than Grange, and just as good in my view, this is smoky and complex with lovely balance and fine-grained tannins. Ripe, but not over-ripe.

2004 Brunello di Montalcino, San Giuseppe, Castelnuovo dell'Abate
(£58, 14.5%, Berry Brothers & Rudd)

Tuscany had a super vintage in 2004, and this wine really shows the quality of the harvest. This is classic Brunello: ripe, yet restrained with silky Sangiovese fruit.

sweet/fortified

Mick Morris Liqueur Muscat, Rutherglen
£6.99 per 50cl, 18%, Tesco)

OK, this is drinkable now, but the stickies of Rutherglen are more or less indestructible. Sweet and luscious, with figgy complexity.

2006 Dr Loosen Riesling Beerenauslese, Mosel
(£9.91 per 18.75cl, 7%, Laithwaite's)

You only get a tiny amount of this nectar in the 18.75cl, but it's enough to give you a glimpse of Riesling heaven. Botrytis-intense, yet refreshing.

2001 Clos Haut Peyraguey, Sauternes
(£16 per half, 14%, The Wine Society)

Honeyed and ripe with intense vanilla pod, citrus fruit and white peach notes. A lot of wine for you money, with a finish that goes on for ages.

2005 Montlouis Moelleux, Les Bournais, Domaine François Chidaine
(£16.50, 13%, Genesis Wines)

Another Chenin Blanc white that deserves a wider audience, this is still very youthful, with apple and honey fruit, subtle oak and tangy acidity.

1998 Taylor's Quinta de Vargellas
(£22 each for two bottles, 20.5%, Majestic)

This is 'only' a single quinta wine, but it's a delicious one: heady and rich, with pepper spice and dark, plum and blackberry fruit.

2006 Királyudvar Tokaji Harslevelu Lapis
(£22.50, 12.5%, Waitrose Wine Direct)

A modern Tokaj that has taken the region to another level. This shows exotic flavours of guava and mango, but is held in check by its freshness and acidity.

Hidalgo Jerez Cortado Wellington
(£23, 17.5% Tanners; Majestic)

A Palo Cortado style from one of the leading names in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. This is an almost indecently complex dry Sherry with notes of almonds and toast.

champagne

1998 Cuvée Louise Pommery Champagne

(£67.21, 12%, Justerini & Brooks,
0207 484 6400)

The grapes for this outstanding cuvee come from some of the region's finest vineyards in Avize, Cramant and Ay. Creamy, elegant and very long on the palate.

1998 Krug Champagne

(£230, 12%, Berry Brothers &
Rudd)

The price tag is high – all right, astronomical – but this is a brilliant Krug: rich and multi-faceted, with a savoury undertone and a toasty, bone dry finish.





Tim Atkin is an internationally recognised and awarded wine expert and writer. He is wine correspondent for the Observer and a regular contributor to Wine & Spirit.