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Wine is better with age – so why sell it so young?

From Rioja to the Rhône, a growing number of producers and merchants are holding back bottles until time has made its mark

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Wine is one of the few things we buy that can benefit from age, yet how many wines are sold by their makers at anything like their peak? I can understand the need for cash flow and all that, an instinct that is most evident in Bordeaux's precocious annual en primeur campaign (from which the Pinault family's first growth Ch Latour notably withdrew in 2012). But I do wish more producers would hold back a proportion, however small, of their longer-lived wines for a late release.

Of course, these older wines quite understandably cost more than those released much earlier, but I think there would be enough wine lovers prepared to pay a premium for mature and maturing bottles with perfect provenance, to make the practice more common.

Many fortified wines, such as port, sherry and madeira, are perforce long-aged, usually in wooden casks, before being released. And traditional method sparkling wine demands at least a few years' ageing on the lees of the second fermentation in bottle. But an increasing number of champagne producers have been following the example of Bollinger, whose top cuvée has been known as RD (for recently disgorged or *récemment dégorgé*) since 1967, when the 1952 vintage was released with far more bottle age than other champagnes. Dom Pérignon launched its long-aged Plénitude cuvées in 2014. Other houses offering long-aged cuvées include Bruno Paillard and Gosset.

While Breaky Bottom and Exton Park have long been notable deliberate exponents of late-released English fizz, other producers of English sparkling wine have followed suit, and thanks to the current glut, we are likely to see an increase in their wines' average bottle age. Producer of superior Catalan sparkling wine Gramona is another specialist in this style in which the wine gains extra depth from extended contact with the lees.

As for still wines, Spain and Italy have official categories for late-released wines in their Reservas and Riservas, respectively. A number of Rioja producers are noteworthy for their welcome tendency to release wines only when they are ready to drink. The youngest available vintage of Urbina's Gran Reserva Especial, for instance, is 2006, with the superb 2001 still relatively easy to find. The current vintages of sisters María José and Mercedes López de Heredia's Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva red, white and rosé are, respectively, 2004, 2005 and 2012. The wines of López de Haro are not that much younger. Roda deliberately holds back some of its riojas to offer to restaurants (a practice that is not unique to Roda, nor to Spain).

In the Ribera del Duero region, the most revered wine, Vega Sicilia's Único, is on the 2016 vintage (my colleague Ferran Centelles' suggested drinking window for this wine is until 2060). Viña Pedrosa is another late releaser. Younger bodegas there tend to offer their wines much earlier (though not as early as is customary in Bordeaux).

The great majority of serious Italian wines have a Riserva category for those released some years after the initial offering — sometimes, as in Spain, with additional oak ageing requirements. And there is a trend in the three grand Bs — Barolo, Barbaresco and Brunello — to deliberately release the wines that producers view as superior later than the rest, whether labelled Riserva or not. This particularly applies to single-vineyard wines from the best crus.

Recommended



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What wines are worth cellaring?

six vintages of its bottlings from 100-year-old vines back to the 2009 vintage, which is only £25 a bottle.

In France, it is up to individual producers, rather than regulation, to decide whether to hold back wine for a late release. Moulin Touchais of Anjou in the Loire has long specialised in holding on to its tangy sweet whites for years. The current vintage is 2007. One of the best-value collections of mature vintages available in the UK comprises the old-vine Muscadets of Comte Leloup du Château de Chasseloir. The Wine Society is offering

The thoughtful Burgundy producer Frédéric Mugnier of Domaine JF Mugnier in Chambolle-Musigny has held back his superlative grand cru Le Musigny for late release since 2013. But such a wine is far from cheap. The current vintage, 2018, is being offered at well over £1,000 a bottle in bond.

In California, producers with a serious “library release” programme include Corison, Paul Hobbs, Mayacamas, Ridge Vineyards (for members), Spring Mountain, Philip Togni and Trefethen. In Australia, they are known as “museum releases”, with the Hill-Smith family in South Australia particularly active in this respect, for their Yalumba and Pewsey Vale vineyard wines. Vadio in Bairrada, northern Portugal, and Argyros on the Greek island of Santorini also regularly release certain wines from their aged stocks.

Almost all wine producers so far mentioned are family-owned. Perhaps it helps to have decisions of this sort made by a family keen to demonstrate just how well their wines age, rather than outfits accountable to a less sympathetic range of shareholders?

Another wine family, the Chapoutiers of the northern Rhône, annually release a selection of their single-vineyard red and white Hermitages, all labelled Ermitage and described thus: “carefully cellared until the family deemed them ready to reveal their full truth”. This year's chosen wines were Le Méal, Le Pavillon and L'Ermite reds from the exceptionally late 2016 vintage, and De l'Orée, L'Ermite and Le Méal whites from the exceptionally early 2020 vintage — and very delicious they were too, still going strong.

By coincidence, Rhône was the theme of this year's aged wine tasting, which I am lucky enough to be invited to every August in the Languedoc. Each year, Graham Nutter, an investment banker turned wine producer, with a particularly well-stocked cellar under his Château St-Jacques d'Albas in the Minervois, shares some of its treasures with a dozen or so of us. This year's selection showed just how much white Rhônes also benefit from bottle age. Clos des Papes 2009 Châteauneuf-du-Pape Blanc still had many years ahead of it, while Château de Beaucastel's Roussanne-dominant 2009 was almost as good and as full of beans.

The UK-based initiative Libération Tardive, whose stated mission is to "reshape industry perspectives and elevate the global market for fine wines aged 10+ years", reports that it's not just producers who are keeping wine back for a late release, but some members of the UK wine trade as well. The Wine Society instituted a museum release programme in late 2021 whereby £20mn worth of a wide range of wines are deliberately aged in its Stevenage warehouses. Red wines are offered at least four years after release, while whites are available after two years. Importers Fells and Hallgarten & Novum are relatively recent converts to offering their trade customers late-released wines, while Simon Farr (ex Bibendum Wine and now Cru World Wine) founded Nebbia e Luce as long ago as 2016 to give the Nebbiolo-based wines of Piedmont the age he thinks they deserve before being sold.

This month he is opening a London event and tasting space at 51 Cleveland Street in Fitzrovia, where he will start selling these mature wines to the public at a minimum of a six-bottle case for delivery (but personal callers may buy smaller quantities). In a recent email, he wrote: "I'm totally a believer in selling one or a few bottles of wines [that are] ready to drink as the new zeitgeist, rather than insisting on lots of cases people don't have space for." That's the spirit!

Mature still wines

WHITES

- **Tahbilk, Museum Release Marsanne 2018 Nagambie Lakes (12.5%)**
£22 Dulwich Vintners
- **Querbach Dry Rieslings 2010, 2008 and 2002 Rheingau (11.5 to 12%)**
£20.99 to £23.99 The Winery
- **Comte Leloup du Château de Chasseloir, Cuvée des Ceps Centenaires 2010 (12%)**
£25 The Wine Society
- **Pewsey Vale, The Contours Riesling Museum Reserve 2017 Eden Valley (12.5%)**
£30 Nickolls & Perks, £31.70 Vinatis UK
- **Moulin Touchais 2005 Coteaux du Layon (13.5%)**
£49.75 Oxford Wine Co, £51 Wright Wine Co
- **Dr Loosen, Ürziger Würzgarten Grosses Gewächs Dry Riesling 2019 Mosel (12.5%)**
£53.84 Lay & Wheeler
- **Domaine William Fèvre, Vaulorent Premier Cru 2017 Chablis (13%)**
£60 The Wine Society
- **M Chapoutier, Ermitage De L'Orée Blanc 2020 Hermitage (14%)**
£140 London End, £165.95 Perfect Cellar

REDS

- **Ch Belle-Vue 2016 Haut-Médoc (13.31%)**
£25 Tanners
- **Ch Mauvesin-Barton 2018 Moulis (13.5%)**
£25 Haynes, Hanson & Clark
- **Ch Fourcas-Borie 2016 Lustrac-Médoc (14%)**
£27.95 Lea & Sandeman
- **Urbina, Especial Gran Reserva 2001 Rioja (13.5%)**
£37.95 Frazier Jones, £39.75 Mumbles Fine Wines
- **Querbach Pinot Noir 2007 Rheingau (13.0%)**
£37.99 The Winery
- **Hacienda López de Haro, Classica Gran Reserva 2005 Rioja (14.2%)**
£39 The Wine Society, £49 The Stroud Wine Co, £52.89 Evertons
- **Trefethen Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 Oak Knoll District (14.2%)**
£44 Chilled and Tannin, £56 Cheers Wine Merchants and others
- **Pérez Pascuas, Viña Pedrosa Reserva 2019 Ribera del Duero (14.5%)**
£47.95 Wine Republic UK
- **Coudoulet de Beaucastel 2016 Côtes du Rhône (14.5%, a big hit in the Nutter tasting)**
£50 Nemo Wine Cellars

What happens as wine ages

This is an under-researched topic, not least because it is young wine that is of most commercial interest to the wine trade. Young red wines contain a host of components, many of them phenolics, including chewy tannins and the anthocyanins responsible for colour, as well as flavour precursors. With time, all these react with each other and form larger and larger particles that are eventually precipitated as sediment. Concurrently, thanks to all these interactions, the wine's colour changes, typically from deep crimson to a paler, more orange hue, and the wine becomes less astringent with a more complex flavour.

Even less is known about how white wines age but it is observable that they, unlike reds, deepen in colour with age and eventually go brown as their phenolics (lower levels than in reds but sometimes sufficient to make young whites a bit chewy too) eventually oxidise. In very general terms, whites with fewer phenolics and higher acidity age best. Riesling is a prime example; Chardonnay not so much.

Tasting notes, scores and suggested drink dates on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](https://www.jancisrobinson.com). International stockists on [Wine-searcher.com](https://www.wine-searcher.com)