

Yarrow Park



WINE APPRECIATION

AGED WINES

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Want your wines to taste better? Wondering which wines you should decant and how you should decant them? Here are some tips on how and why it should be done?

In years gone by, before wines were methodically filtered and fined to ensure the reduction of sediment, decanting was a practical and necessary way of trying to negate the solid matter that could find its way into a bottle of wine.

When it comes to drinking older wines, this is still very much an issue and nobody would question the importance of a decanter. With newer wines though, the debate over decanting continues on, with some sceptics writing off the process as an ostentatious and outdated custom. However, the fact remains- many top sommeliers and winemakers do advocate the decanting of many newer wines, for a variety of reasons.

THE BASICS

Decanting is the movement of wine from its original container to a fresh glass/crystal/stainless steel receptacle, leaving the sediment behind. It is supposed to allow the wine to breathe and improve the bouquet.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT THAT SEDIMENT IS IN OLDER WINES?

Do you know if it's safe to drink? Why don't we see sediment in white wines?

Put simply, sediment can form naturally in the winemaking process and also whilst maturing in bottle. Wine sediment is not harmful, in fact some people see it as a sign of quality. However wine sediment can often taste bitter and it is best to decant the wine (separate the clean wine from the sediment) before serving and drinking.

The initial sediment that forms during the winemaking process is called the "lees" and first forms at the end of alcoholic fermentation. The lees consist of dead yeast cells, proteins, stems, pips, bits of skin and other solid matter that settles to the bottom of the tank after a vigorous fermentation has been completed. Winemakers remove the lees by a process called "racking", whereby the clean wine is pumped from the top of the tank, sometimes through a filter, to another tank, leaving the lees at the bottom.

In this modern age of winemaking, it is highly unlikely that any lees will be left in the wine prior to bottling. The sediment that forms in the bottle is a mix of tartrates, tannins and other products of the complex chemical changes that have taken place.

Tartrates are the most common form of sediment in bottled wine. Tartrates are a product of the naturally occurring tartaric acid that is found in grapes. Tartaric acid does not remain dissolved in alcohol as easily as it does in grape juice. As such it binds to potassium (also naturally occurring in grapes) after fermentation and forms potassium acid tartrates – the crystalline salt that creates the sediment in your bottle. In red wines, they are stained black and in white wines, the tartrates look like tiny diamonds.

All wines form tartrates naturally in the cellar. Modern winemaking has introduced cold stabilisation and fine filtration to remove the tartrate from the wine prior to bottling. However, when it comes to red wines, it becomes the preference of the winemaker as to whether to remove these tartrates prior to bottling. When the tartrates are not removed, they naturally deposit over time into the bottle.

So, the next time you choose that older red for that special occasion, don't be concerned about the appearance of sediment. Instead, stand the bottle upright for several hours before opening it. This will ensure the sediment settles to the bottom of the bottle. Decant the wine into another container, by pouring in one smooth motion and stopping when you see the appearance of the sediment. Then simply enjoy the pleasure of sharing that good bottle of wine with the company you are in.

SO WHEN TO DECANT?

Firstly older red wines can throw off sediment as they age. Decanting your wine separates the wine from this sediment. Secondly, to decant is to aerate the wine. Aged wines can have a musty reductive character that will blow off with aeration. Many young wines (both red and white) are bottled with relatively high levels of dissolved gasses like nitrogen or carbon dioxide; this can render them tight or closed on the nose or palate. The splashing effect that comes from pouring the wine from the bottle to the decanter removes these gasses and takes in oxygen, which helps open up the aromas and flavours within the wine and softens youthful tannins. Eventually however the continued exposure to oxygen

will have the negative effect of oxidising the wine. And herein can lie the confusion; how long do you let your wine "breathe"?

Trial and error is the only real way to learn. Highly extracted, heavily wooded youthful reds will benefit the most, whilst the more delicate aged whites (after the initial aeration effect) the least.

Red or white, young or old, all serious wines deserve and benefit from the decanting process - even if it is only that it forces you to pause, slow down and prepare to concentrate on what you are about to taste.

STAND THE BOTTLE UPRIGHT

It is customary to stand the bottle upright for up to two days before decanting, to let the sediment settle. Remove the cork or screwcap. Hold the bottle over a light or candle so that you can watch for the sediment as you pour the wine slowly into the decanter. Watch carefully and stop before the sediment leaves the bottle.

CLEAN THE BOTTLE FIRST

Clean around the top of the bottle immediately after removing the cork. A slightly mouldy or old cork can affect the wine as it is poured. Remember to cut the capsule below the last rim of the bottle top, so not to taint the wine.

SEDIMENT WILL AFFECT THE TASTE

It's usual to decant fine older red wines and some vintage ports. Older Semillons and Rieslings will also benefit from decanting. Having spent most of their lives maturing in bottle, they can throw a deposit or crust into the glass, sullyng the appearance and affecting the taste.

LETTING A YOUNG WINE DEVELOP

Exposure to air is said to improve the aromas and bouquet of younger wines and can give the wine a chance to bloom and attain a stage of development that normally requires years of ageing. By decanting the younger wines we are encouraging rapid oxidation, which is beneficial at the early stages, if not in the long term.

BOTTLE BY BOTTLE

It can be difficult to establish clear cut guidelines to decanting. There are no hard and fast rules, the decision to decant is a wine by wine one. Some really young and/or tannic wines can benefit from the aeration. Older wines often look better with a careful decant to remove the sediment.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT DECANTER

A wider necked decanter will let in more air and should be used with wines that are to be drunk that day. Thinner necked decanters would be better if you intended to keep the wine or port overnight. The material used needs to be inert of flavour or taint to ensure the right flavours are tasted in the wine. Glass, Crystal, Stainless Steel are all able to be used. There are a wide range of options, in various shapes, materials and prices.

AN HOUR EVERY TEN YEARS

When it comes to figuring out how long a wine should remain untouched after being decanted, a good rule of thumb is to leave it for an hour for every ten years it has been alive. If this is too demanding, try and leave it untouched for at least two hours!

OTHER DECANTING TECHNIQUES

There are a variety of other things to consider. Aerating pourers are increasingly popular and seek to aerate the wine as you pour directly in to your glass, removing the need for prolonged decanting. Using a blender to aerate your wine has also been proposed as a valid alternative to decanting, though many of the more conservative wine experts are hesitant to embrace its radical nature!

Double decanting is the process by which wine is poured into a decanter for the appropriate time, then poured back in to the original bottle when ready to serve. This is a popular technique at many wine dinners, where the original label and bottle are an important part of the experience!

THE EXPERT'S OPINION

If you are still in some confusion, you could follow the advice of Bordeaux expert Christian Moueix:

'I prefer to decant wines, both young and old. It is a sign of respect for old wines and a sign of confidence in young wines.'