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Ask a Wine Expert

101 THINGS WE ALL WANT TO KNOW

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Do sulphites cause headaches? Are you supposed to sniff the cork in a restaurant? What's the difference between cava and Champagne?

Devotees of fine drink are as curious as they are opinionated. And it keeps a wine critic on his toes.

Mostly people want to know about sulphites, compounds usually added to, but which also occur naturally in, wine. In my view, sulphites are not nearly as dangerous as is generally assumed (unless you happen to belong to a small subset of asthma sufferers).

If sulphites are Provocative Wine Topic No. 2 (after Canada's provincial-monopoly liquor system, always firmly at No. 1), then restaurant etiquette must be No. 3. People are curious about tipping customs, become easily angered by pretentious service and detest high markups. My inbox is a constant and sobering reminder that the source of one person's pleasure – a fine fermented or distilled beverage – can be a source of another's pain and fear.

Can I safely consume bottles submerged in my flooded basement? What are those glass-like shards stuck to bottom of the cork?

The answers await.

Beppi Crosariol
The Globe and Mail

Ask a Wine Expert: 101 things we all want to know

Ask me anything

Why is our great Canadian wine so underappreciated and relatively unknown around the world?

Good question. There are at least two reasons. The first has to do with supply. We produce little wine by international standards, just 56 million litres in 2010, according to the California-based Wine Institute. That accounts for a mere 0.2 per cent of world production – less than such countries as Algeria, Macedonia and Uruguay. Also, most of our best wines are produced in minuscule quantities, which rarely get shipped outside of their home provinces, let alone beyond Canadian borders. So, good Canadian wine, with the exception of icewine, is not exactly on the global radar.

The other reason may involve stigma. Outside our borders, Canada is strongly associated with snow, hockey, Niagara Falls and Mounties. I'm sorry to say that, but it's true. This is an image people find inconsistent with the sensual seduction of wine. It's no surprise that the one Canadian wine that's found traction on international markets has the prefix "ice" in it: icewine. If you need frigid temperatures and ice to make something, well, Canadians must be good at it.

Wine vines are a tender crop, and it's hard for people to believe that vines can grow well in Canada. Often, when you insist that this is indeed the case, they will cringe in disbelief, as one of my Italian cousins recently did while I was vacationing in Italy.

This, I'm afraid, creates a prejudice. To some extent, people drink the label as much as the wine. When an outsider sees "made in Canada" on a bottle, bias can enter the equation, and bias can play a strong role where wine is concerned. (One would have to hide the label of a Californian or Australian wine to get many French drinkers to give it a fair, unbiased assessment, for that matter.)

Besides, if stores around the world are filled with fine selections from France, Italy, California and other higher-profile wine regions, why would someone bother trying his or her luck on a great white (or red) from the North? Have you spent any money exploring Macedonian wine lately?

What impact does price have on the review? Is a 90-point wine costing $35 as good as the 90 costing $20?

"Good" is the operative word here, and the short answer is yes. But it comes with an important qualification.

When critics score wines, they generally do so in relation to wines of the same style or grape variety. A consumer should take the wine style into account along with the score when making a buying decision. In terms of craftsmanship, a 90-point barbera, for example, may be just as "good" as a 90-point cabernet sauvignon. But the wines will not taste the same. Barbera tends to be lighter in body and contain higher acidity than a full-bodied cabernet sauvignon. That's just the nature of the two grapes. In a blind tasting, most consumers may prefer the cabernet sauvignon because full-bodied, soft-acid reds enjoy wider appeal.

Think of this car analogy. A Honda Accord is a superb automobile, with great durability and five-passenger comfort. It might rate a 95-point score from an auto critic if car reviewers were encouraged to assign scores (wouldn't that be interesting?). A two-seater Porsche 911 might merit the same high score because it's a fabulous piece of metal that accelerates more quickly and handles better at high speed than an Accord. (It also will turn more heads as you pull up to a restaurant for dinner.) But obviously there's a big price difference between the two. That price differential doesn't mean the Porsche represents poor value relative to the Honda. Each car is at the top of its respective class. The Porsche simply is designed for different requirements and desires. If speed is your need, you'll dream of the Porsche, not the Accord. For ample trunk space and lower maintenance charges come tune-up time, get the Honda, by all means.

So, if you're not a fan of high-acid red wines (most people sadly are not), then you may prefer a 90-point cabernet sauvignon to a 90-point barbera. Personally, I'd be more inclined to go with the barbera if I were dining on grilled sausages. It's better than an 88-point barbera, assuming the critic has done his or her job correctly. But it won't taste like a cabernet sauvignon and won't pair as well with prime rib.

You've used "flavours of cigar box" more than once, and I would like to know how you established what the flavour of a cigar box really is. Did you lick the cigar box? Boil it then sip the broth? Burn it then put ashes in your drink? Colour me curious.

I gather some cigar aficionados lick the full Montecristo before lighting up to help prevent a potentially dry wrapper from unravelling, but I grant that cigar boxes are another matter.

In short, no, I have not licked, boiled, burned, sautéed or otherwise cooked or consumed a humidor. It's a great question. My justification is this: One need not taste something on the tongue to arrive at its flavour. Though many people equate taste with flavour, the two are not synonymous. The tongue in fact can detect only five tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and the savoury essence known as umami. (Though I should point out that a team of U.S. scientists recently postulated that there is a sixth taste, and it happens to be my favourite – fat.)

What we commonly refer to as flavours are the result of taste buds working in tandem with other receptors sensitive to such things as smell, texture and heat. There are, for example, no rosemary or lemon or chocolate receptors on the tongue; we sense those ingredients mainly through the nose. That's why when you resort to that old trick of plugging your nose while eating, you don't get much flavour from the food. I used that trick a lot as a kid while forcing down dreaded vegetables.

I have, obviously, smelled a cigar box, which is commonly made of Spanish cedar. The combination of aromatic wood with heady tobacco is what I'm talking about. It's a classic aroma (and, yes, flavour) found in certain red wines, such as cabernet sauvignon. The sometimes bewildering flavour associations don't stop at cigar box. I and other wine critics have in fact used descriptors for many other inedible objects, including asphalt and manure. For the record, I've not consumed either of those substances, though in a schoolyard once I was implored to eat the latter.

I was wondering whether European wines have come down in price since the euro weakened against the Canadian dollar. I don't have a clear idea of this, though it seems as if prices are still quite high.

Ah, high wine prices - the great Canadian bugbear. Your perception is shared by many consumers, and it's a justifiable one. The factual answer is that some prices have indeed dropped, though many have not. At the Liquor Control Board of Ontario's Vintages fine-wine and spirits division, for example, prices were adjusted downward on between 15 and 20 per cent of products in recent months as a direct result of our robust loonie. This pertains to products initially quoted for sale in foreign currencies, notably the euro. Many months usually pass between the time a price is quoted and the day the product - and invoice - is delivered. If there's a significant gain in the loonie's buying power in the meantime, according to the LCBO, the savings are passed on to the consumer. (Take that statement with whatever grain of salt, or shot of tequila, you think it deserves.)

Why not all products? Most are quoted to Canadian liquor boards in Canadian dollars, so the currency swing, if there is one, becomes an issue for the producer back in Europe. In many cases, the savings do not get passed down to the consumer. That's because producers like to maintain stable prices. They're afraid that constantly see-sawing prices will confound or annoy consumers. We all love it when prices come down, not so much when they go up, even if the producers are not directly to blame.

So, yes, we're seeing some deals, but probably nowhere near as many as we should.

How come you never say that a wine tastes like grapes? That's what the stuff is made from.

Your question reminds me of a line from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The great Cambridge mind said (and I'm paraphrasing) that philosophy begins when language goes on holiday. His point was that philosophical problems are in fact largely phantoms of language usage rather than rooted in external truths – word games, in essence. Or at least that's what I remember from graduate school so many years ago.

Some wine-column readers think similarly about wine criticism – that it begins when wine writers start tossing around fanciful descriptors that have no bearing on what's in the bottle. But I would beg to differ. Wine is not merely produced from grapes, after all. The fruit undergoes

fermentation, a complex reaction involving yeast. Yeasts change everything and leave behind all sorts of subtle flavours. Some cultivated yeast strains are even isolated to accentuate specific flavours, such as passion fruit or pineapple.

Think of the cheese analogy before you dismiss wine writers. Cheese, too, is fermented. Does it always taste merely of cream, its basic ingredient? Hardly. One often describes cheddar or gruyère as "nutty." Époisses tastes like a dirty gym locker to me – in a good way, of course. Those flavours develop as the cheese ages. Besides, if one were to describe cheddar as "cheesy," which, of course, it is, I'm not sure it helps to convey what cheddar is like compared with other cheeses. Similarly, if an automotive journalist were to describe a new Porsche as "car-like," what's the point? He or she would be out of a job faster than a Carrera can accelerate from zero to 60.

Some wines do taste literally like grapes compared with, say, citrus or berries or leather. One good example is muscat (or moscato), which strongly suggests white table grapes. But these wines are exceptions. I think shiraz tastes much more like plum jam and black pepper than it does a fresh shiraz grape. I think even Wittgenstein would have agreed.

Why do critics use a 100-point scoring system if most scores fall in the 80- to 100-point range? Shouldn't we see a lot of 75s, even a few 40s and 50s?

Fair logic. I suppose that, by academic standards, wine critics sound like pushovers.

Robert Parker, the American who popularized the 100-point system for wine, has argued that it is based on university scoring and that people can easily make sense of it for that reason. Teachers, though, don't get to choose their students, even if they may want to. They've got to mark everybody who comes to class – the brainiacs as well as the academic failures who squeaked into Michigan State solely by the grace of a basketball scholarship.

Wine critics may taste thousands of wines a year, but there's limited space in newspapers and electronic newsletters, so they tend to focus on wines that meet a certain basic quality level (that 80-plus score). Otherwise they'd be filling pages with dreck, and readers have little patience for learning about wines they shouldn't buy.

In my case, I tend not to waste much ink skewering an $8 dud that may only be available in three stores in Nunavut. That said, I do occasionally write negatively about certain wines, but generally only those that have an overhyped reputation

that I feel needs to be rectified. And I do criticize winemaking practices, such as the excessive reliance on heavy oak in far too many California chardonnays, citing examples to illustrate the point.

I should add that wine scores are – contrary to Mr. Parker's academic analogy – not to be compared with university scores. A 75 may be a good grade at UBC and Dalhousie, but it denotes a ho-hum bottle. I didn't invent the 100-point system, but if I were to use a different metric and start giving scores of 55 or 60 for mediocre wines and 75s for pretty good ones, few people would find them useful because they're not consistent with an accepted standard.

To be more specific, my 55 (a lousy grade in university) might be equivalent to a (lousy) 75 in Mr. Parker's newsletter or Wine Spectator magazine, but people who read those publications would assume that I found the wine much worse than they did, when in fact that was not the case.

Readers don't just read one publication. Many follow a variety of critics and find utility in comparing reviews to see if there's consensus, which generally is more reliable than a single opinion. In short, readers assume we're all roughly using the same metric even if specific scores differ based on individual judgment. Otherwise, it would be sort of like a malfunctioning car speedometer, where my 55 kilometres an hour is someone else's 75. Not a sensible way to share the road.

I find some wine terms confusing, and I'm not just talking about truly weird stuff like "wet stone" and "boiled beef." What do you mean by "integrated oak?"

Thank you for not asking whether they actually put wet stones and boiled beef in wine (they don't!).

Wine critics often take liberties with language, leaving sane readers scratching their heads. One of my favourites (though I don't believe I personally have ever used it) is "melted licorice." I've not had the pleasure of sampling melted licorice, but I suppose that would be the flavour of licorice that's been sitting out in the sun.

"Integrated oak" is a little more technical. Oak-barrel maturation imparts a variety of flavours to wine, notably vanilla. Wood also can be astringent, prompting a dry sensation in the mouth. When well-integrated into the wine, the wood's flavours are subtler. You can sense vanilla, but in a way that complements the underlying fruit and never seems dominant or cloying.

Often an overtly oaked wine appears to lack sufficient fruitiness to support the lumber. It's sort of the oenological equivalent of a visible bra strap. It might work for Lady Gaga, but it's not the mark of a well-dressed wine.

Vintner or vineyard – which matters more?

It's an abiding question among wine enthusiasts. What's more important: the reputation of the vineyard or the talents of the vintner? Truth is, they both matter, of course. But if you ask good winemakers, chances are they'll stress land more than hand, enthusing about their ideal soils, hospitable microclimates and precious old vines rather than rattling off details of their CVs.

And yet some CVs can draw our attention to wines we might otherwise overlook. That seems to be the case with many fans of Château d'Anglès in France's southern Languedoc region. You may not have heard of d'Anglès, but you certainly will be familiar with where its owner, Eric Fabre, used to punch the clock. Rare is the article or blog on Château d'Anglès that does not reference Fabre's tenure as chief winemaker (or, more formally, "technical director") of Lafite Rothschild, the great Bordeaux chateau that makes one of the world's most expensive wines.

A star to Bordeaux collectors, Fabre long harboured a dream to buy a vineyard on the sunny Mediterranean coast (don't we all?); in 2001, he bought the farm, so to speak.

It's a very nice farm, apparently, in a region that has only recently begun to

re-establish its credibility as a significant source of marvellous wines. Those of Château d'Anglès are just that and I must believe that Fabre's talent, which obviously includes a keen eye for good land, is the chief reason.

Two of Fabre's reds were released recently in Ontario Vintages stores – at less than $20, a far cry from the $1,000-plus trophies he crafted at Lafite. The Grand Vin 2007 in particular is superb, a classic southern blend of spicy syrah, tannic mourvèdre and supple-fruity grenache. Complex and aromatic, it's as satisfying to sniff as to sip.

You might swear you were standing amid the wild herbs that carpet so much of the Mediterranean shore. Yes, that's the land talking, but Fabre made it speak.

What's the oldest wine in the world?

A restaurant once served me a stale muscadet that could almost qualify, but I digress.

I assume you mean the oldest unopened bottle of wine. The answer to that appears to rest in a museum in Germany. The Pfalz Historical Museum in Speyer boasts a bottle that was buried in a grave some time around 350 AD, which makes it roughly 1,660 years old. You can glimpse a picture at museum.speyer.de. It looks ghastly, with a coagulated, cloudy residue that could be mistaken for a submerged sourdough-yeast starter. Or a horror-movie blob that threatens to grow up and devour Saskatoon. A dash of protective olive oil and a wax seal protected the liquid from evaporating out of the neck. The wine is white and, by expert accounts, likely not something you'd want to enjoy with tonight's chicken fingers and Tater Tots. Though I do hear 350 AD was a good year.

If the wine is hard to pronounce, is it worth more?

What value do you place on a winery's name? How about two bucks?

In a recent psychological study, researchers at Brock University in Niagara found that people were willing to pay an average of $2 more for a wine based purely on the sound of its name. Specifically, they tended to favour a tongue-twisting brand versus one they could more easily pronounce. The findings suggest that unfamiliar or exotic sounds imply scarcity, and that's an attribute frequently associated with quality in the highly impressionable minds of wine shoppers.

"Names that seem unique or harder to understand or wrap your mind around are that way because they're rare," said Antonia Mantonakis, the Brock associate professor of marketing who led the study. "Things that are rare are more valuable."

The research was based on a sort of wine analogue to the placebo effect, in which patients are deceptively treated with a dummy drug to test mind over matter. In this case, three groups of 41 to 48 participants each were dispensed the same wine, a Niagara chardonnay produced at Brock University's oenology institute. But they were told different tales.

One group was led to believe that the white had been produced by a fictional winery named Titakis. Though Greek-sounding, it was deemed through linguistic testing to be easy to pronounce by English speakers. They were shown the wine's name on paper, rather than a fancy label. Another group was told that it came from the harder-to-pronounce Tselepou winery. And a control group was given no name but asked to judge the sample on its own merits. This provided an objective gauge of the wine's perceived quality.

After the participants tasted the wine, they were asked three questions: How much do you like the wine? How keen would you be to buy it? How much would you be willing to pay? The first two were rated on a scale of one to seven.

The winner, with a half-point advantage for perceived quality and purchase intent, was Tselepou. The convoluted name also was valued at $16, on average, while Titakis sounded like a good buy at $14. The control group was less smitten with its no-name sample, with participants generally falling in the $12-to-$13 range.

Those spreads might not seem like much, but Dr. Mantonakis says they're statistically significant, not least regarding price. "In the marketplace, a $2 difference is a substantial, meaningful difference," she said. It's a Grand Canyon span for many consumers, especially in the

price-sensitive under-$20 universe.

The choice of Greek-sounding names was essentially arbitrary. Dr. Mantonakis and student researcher Bryan Galiffi tested several other pairs for "linguistic fluency," including German examples, but eventually ruled them out for other factors. In at least one case, a name was found to be too similar to an actual winery.

Of course, this is just one test, with one specific set of names. Whether we'd see the same results with other name pairs is an open question. Also, consumer choices are based not only on estate names but also on grape varieties and regional designations, such as Burgundy and "grand crus," which come with their own cachet and may undermine the influence of the mere winery name. In fact, that's the subject of follow-up studies on which Dr. Mantonakis is already working.

The study's findings offer up a jab at wine snobs' expense. The tasters, all English speakers drawn from a broad base of Niagara residents, were tested for their wine knowledge, as well. Some knew little, unable to cite basic traits associate with popular grape varieties, while others, including some from the wine industry, knew lots. Care to guess which were disposed to paying more for the tongue-twisting Tselepou? Drum roll, please: the wine geeks.

"You'd think they'd rely less on external factors and more on the taste," Dr. Mantonakis said. "You'd think they'd have the knowledge to be able to judge based on taste rather than the sound of the winery name."

I'm not too surprised, frankly. Wine aficionados often cut plenty of slack to inferior wines simply because they are rare, just as they often harbour disdain for fine stuff that is popular or produced in huge quantity. Smaller is better, the wine-nerd saying goes, and big is bad. Yet blind tastings often prove instinctive preferences to be misplaced.

Meanwhile, neophytes often will literally overlook the label and confidently judge with their own taste buds, unfazed by price or reputation (though often a cute critter on the label might seal the deal at the cash register, no question).

Curiously, Dr. Mantonakis says her results contrast with parallel studies on other commodities. In one fascinating example, two Princeton University psychologists, Adam Alter and Danny Oppenheimer, found that companies with easy-to-say stock-ticker symbols (those three- or four-letter abbreviations that scroll across TV screens on business reports) performed better on the markets than those with symbols that could not be pronounced as a word. Think RAD (Rite Aid Corp.), for example, versus the

more awkward RDA (for Reader's Digest Association Inc.). In one subsequently famous case, Harley-Davidson shares shot up 16 per cent in the weeks after it changed its ticker from HDI to HOG, the biker-slang term for its motorcycles.

"For a stock, you want something that seems less risky," Dr. Mantonakis says, whereas, with wine, there's cachet in the unfamiliar.

It's unlikely that the study will prompt wineries to start twisting our tongues in a bid for higher prices. But there's a lesson for the rest of us. "It is useful for consumers to know that something as simple as the sound of a word could influence their judgment about things," Dr. Mantonakis said.

How good does that wine in front of you taste? In some cases, not nearly as good as it sounds.

Wine basics

Choosing It

Is there really a big difference in taste between cheap and expensive wine?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It's foolish to assume that spending more on a bottle will always mean greater pleasure.

The fact that you feel compelled to ask suggests to me that you are skeptical about the correlation between price and quality, and I salute you for it. To some extent, very fine wines do cost more to produce. They tend to be made from vines that are laboriously pruned to yield fewer but more concentrated grapes. Less fruit per acre means higher cost per bottle. And those grapes are often hand-sorted to ensure that only the best berries make it into the fermenting vat. They may also spend extended time in oak barrels, which adds considerably to production costs.

But supply and demand can figure heavily into the equation, too. The rarer the wine, the more expensive it tends to be – regardless of quality, which can be very subjective. Is a $100 bottle 10 times "better" than one that sells for $10? It's a judgment call, and I think most people would be hard-pressed to answer yes.

Often, trained tasters will in fact prefer a less expensive wine to a trophy label, especially when they taste "blind" (without the advantage of peeking at the label or sticker price). I recently sampled a $115 California cabernet sauvignon in the company of several veteran wine writers, all of whom, including me, expressed shock at the price. Many awarded a higher score at the same tasting to a lovely $22 red Bordeaux, also made primarily with cabernet sauvignon.

And style preferences can play heavily into one's personal assessment, which is all that counts in the end. Grand cru Burgundies can easily exceed the $100 mark, not because they're always sublime but mainly because they come from storied vineyards and are produced in tiny quantities. But if your tastes run more toward full-bodied reds, such as Australian shiraz, chances are you will find more bang for your buck at $15 or $20. My advice? Drink the wine, not the label.

Where are the best wine bargains coming from today?

Well, I know a discount warehouse in Fort Lauderdale. (Sorry, I couldn't resist.)

Chile remains a champion, especially with cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc. Nowhere have I found the quality to be so consistent. The southern Languedoc-Roussillon region of France is coming on strong, as is southern Italy, specifically the regions of Puglia (with the negroamaro and primitivo grapes) and Sicily (nero d'Avola and syrah). Also in Italy, the central Abruzzo region makes remarkable medium-bodied reds from the montepulciano grape for less than $10. It's probably my go-to choice for reds in the single-digit price range.

Argentine malbec does the trick for many consumers who enjoy chunky, mouth-filling reds, though I find the wines to be hit and miss.

Spain is undervalued, provided you look beyond the famous regions of Rioja and Ribera del Duero. I'd suggest the much-improved offerings of such regions as Carinena, Montsant, Navarra, Rueda and Toro. New Zealand sauvignon blanc, though rarely dirt cheap, overdelivers with zesty, grassy flavours, as does South African sauvignon blanc.

For dry bubbly, consider Spanish cava or French wines labelled crémant, as in crémant d'Alsace and crémant de Bourgogne.

Are some types of wines less likely to have oak than others?

Yes, and I hope you like white wine.

There's no consistent way to tell from a label. Often the small print on the back will refer to how the wine was fermented or aged, whether in stainless-steel tanks or oak barrels. Generally, light, fresh and fruity whites are your best bet. These include most sauvignon blancs, pinot grigios and virtually all rieslings (riesling and oak get along like New Democrats and Conservatives). But the list is long and tends also to include such wines as lean Rias Baixas from Spain, fruity muscat or moscato, and spicy gewurztraminer. Oak softens texture and adds flavours of its own, which can obscure the freshness of delicate whites. Most chardonnays, in contrast, are aged in oak, though there are exceptions, such as many Chablis and New World chardonnays that explicitly boast of their "unwooded" character on the front label.

The vast majority of reds spend time in barrel. But oakiness comes in degrees, both in terms of time maturation time as well as type of wood used. Many wines from the southern Rhône Valley, for example, are cellared in large, old (as

opposed to new) vats, which impart very little, if any, discernible oak character. Côtes du Rhône is a good example.

What does the term "reserve" mean on a wine label?

It usually means an inflated price. Beyond that, it's hard to be definitive.

There's no international standard for the designation. Historically it referred to a wine deemed of higher quality by its producer. When a parcel of land yielded exceptionally concentrated grapes because of location and weather, the winemaker would hold the wine aside – "reserve" it – and lavish it with extended barrel time. These wines tended not only to taste richer but to cellar better as well.

That's the case with some reserve wines today, but certainly not all. Some regions, notably in Europe, regulate the term. A Chianti Riserva, for example, must spend a prolonged period maturing before release to meet the requirement, and usually producers only set aside their best juice for such treatment. In many other regions, they're free to use the term merely as a marketing tool. Kendall-Jackson in California, for example, calls its flagship chardonnay Vintner's Reserve – but there's no non-reserve counterpart.

Do reserve wines – whether genuinely held back for quality's sake or not

– always taste better? No. I often prefer regular Chiantis to the same producer's riserva bottling. It may lack the riserva's concentration and cellar-worthiness, but often there's a more cheerfully bright profile to regular Chianti that is, I think, masked by the vanilla overtones of long-term barrel aging. And it invariably costs less. When it comes to wine, a higher price is no guarantee of superior pleasure.

My friend was at a fine restaurant having dinner the other night. He ordered a Barbaresco, which, according to the label on the bottle, was a 2003 vintage. Surprisingly, the date on the cork was stamped 2005. I am wondering if the date on the label represents the year the grapes were harvested while the date on the cork was a mistake, or vice versa. I'd be curious to know your thoughts on the matter.

Mostly likely, the wine came from the 2003 vintage, not 2005, but that's a guess.

There is no way to tell without contacting the winery in question, and it may not have a reliable answer either. It's possible the winery was in the midst of bottling wines from several vintages during the same week. In the Italian region of Piedmont, Barbaresco wines can spend years maturing in wood (at least one year but often more), and these may be bottled around the same time as the same winery's barberas or dolcettos from a more recent vintage. That's because barberas and dolcettos, both commonly made by Barbaresco producers, tend not to demand long cellaring before release. A 2005 barbera or dolcetto may be bottled just as the 2003 Barbarescos have finished their maturation phase and are due for bottling.

Igor Ryjenkov, a master of wine with the Liquor Control Board of Ontario and one of Canada's top experts, guesses that the 2005 cork in this case likely was intended for a youthful barbera or dolcetto but somehow got mixed up with the cork supply stamped 2003 intended for the older Barbaresco. (Again, he's just guessing here in the absence of more information.) For this reason, it seems more likely that your friend's Barbaresco was indeed a 2003, which simply received the wrongly stamped cork. Wineries scrutinize labels more vigilantly than the stamp on a cork, after all, because labels are more visible while corks remain obscured under the foil seal until they reach your dining table.

Why do some labels say that a wine is unfiltered? Is that a boast or a warning?

It's a boast. And, no, it doesn't necessarily mean you'll find unsightly sediment in the bottle.

Many producers feel – quite rightly, I believe – that filtering can strip wine of subtle flavours. You generally want to filter for one reason, to remove haze and make the wine sparkle. Wine can contain many insoluble ingredients, such as proteins, tartrates, tannins and yeast cells. Over time, these will precipitate out of solution to form sediment.

That's why you may wish to decant a very old bottle, separating the liquid from the particles. Be careful to keep the bottle upright for a few hours (preferably eight or more) prior to uncorking an old wine so that the sediment has a chance to fall to the bottom. Then pour slowly and leave the last ounce or so in the bottle, which you can discard. Sediment is harmless, by the way, but it can render the drinking experience unpleasant. I know a sommelier who actually likes to collect sediment from old bottles of port and spread it on toast with blue cheese. It's a testament to the fact that there's flavour in the solids.

With a young wine, though, chances are you won't notice the particles because they'll be suspended evenly in the liquid.

The word "unfiltered" on a label is just a way for a winery to telegraph its commitment to minimal intervention, a hallmark of many great wines.

Cellaring it

When there is a recommendation to cellar a wine for a certain number of years, is that from the date on the bottle or when it was bottled? Those two dates can be quite far apart.

In a critic's review, usually the cellaring stopwatch starts from the time of publication.

On the other hand, some wines carry cellaring-time recommendations on the back label. In this case, the wine's release date is your start time. That's usually at least a few months (sometimes longer) before the wine reaches its various markets, so there may be some discrepancy between what you read on the label and in a critical review – even then a reviewer may disagree with what's on the label, so you'll have to make your own call about whom to trust. You're correct about the often big gap between the time grapes were harvested (the vintage date on the bottle) and the wine released. Brunello di Montalcino wines, for example, are released at least four years after the harvest date because they must, according to local law, undergo extended aging in barrel and bottle.

Generally speaking, you should start counting from the time the bottle was released or reviewed rather than the vintage date on the label. But keep this in mind if you're ever in doubt: It's always better to open a wine too soon than too late. An immature, cellar-worthy wine should still taste impressive, if not as complex or seductive as a fully mature one; an over-the-hill bottle, on the other hand, will make you regret your patience.

I'm planning a renovation that will include a wine cellar or storage area. What's the prevailing wisdom on storing wines – horizontal or vertical? Seems to me I've heard both lately.

Horizontal is still the way to go for wines sealed under cork.

If you've sensed some confusion about the horizontal-versus-vertical issue, I suspect it's because of screw caps. Bottles sealed with screw caps can be stored either way. The synthetic liner under the cap retains the same seal regardless of the bottle's position. Cork, on the other hand, is an elastic substance and will dry out over time unless kept in contact with the liquid, ensuring a plump, tight seal. If stored upright, you'll not only risk excess

evaporation through the (dry) cork's porous fibres, you may also find that the cork will split or disintegrate when you attempt to remove it years down the road.

As my enthusiasm for wine grows, so does the number of bottles I store and so does my anxiousness over proper storage. All I have now is a wine rack in a closet – sub-optimal, I know. Short of building a wine cellar, are things like wine refrigerators or high-end products like Eurocave the way to go? If so, any recommendations?

It's time for all good wine to come out of the closet.

It's a timely question, at least in some parts of the country. Room temperature cripples wine, not only over the long term but even for short periods during the summer. July and August can be brutal. Fluid expands more quickly than glass. A hot room will sometimes cause the liquid to push up through the neck where the glass meets the cork, a sure sign your wine was overheated to the point of damage. (Feel for sticky residue on the outside of the bottle below the plastic or metal

capsule that wraps over the neck.) Those fancy wine fridges are a good way to go, assuming you can afford one. Eurocave and Sub-Zero are respected brands. But your first plan of action should be to lug that wine down to a basement if you have one. Heat rises, so the lower you go, the better. But keep the bottles at least half a metre away from an exposed-brick wall or you may soon find snow-like mould growing on the labels and corks because of the high relative humidity.

I'm building a wine room and am looking for plans to build the racking myself. I need to store 1,000 bottles. Do you have any suggestions?

The best source I can recommend is Richard M. Gold's paperback called How and Why to Build a Wine Cellar. It's quite technical and the prose doesn't exactly sing, but it's packed with hard-core, relevant scientific information. It focuses on how to build a so-called passive cellar, one that uses ambient temperature and humidity rather than a costly plug-in air-conditioning system.

Prof. Gold's discourse on humidity is particularly enlightening, showing you how to humidify a dry space using a makeshift system involving a towel and bucket of water. But the book also deals with shelving and how to build your own bins to accommodate different bottle shapes, notably the classic Bordeaux and Burgundy contours. Depending on the style of bin you prefer - a long, horizontal bookcase-style compartment that contains 17 or 18 bottles or a square-shaped style that contains 11 or 12 - you can easily calculate how many bins you'll need to build and stack and how much overall space you'll need for storage.

The book is useful even for less ambitious people with much smaller collections. It suggests, for example, how best to stack a bunch of empty milk crates together (raising them on insulating blocks to retard heat transfer and securing the crates together with hose clamps). It also suggests using original wooden wine shipping crates, used by many high-end wineries in lieu of cardboard boxes (ask your liquor-store manager to hold some aside instead of throwing them away).

The book has been reprinted by Sandhill Publishing several times over the years. It can still be found on the Internet through Amazon and in some specialty bookstores that deal with wine and food. I purchased my copy many years ago at The Cookbook Store in Toronto.

Since optimum temperatures vary according to the type of wine, how do temperature-controlled wine cabinets work? Does one need to have several wine storers? (I can't think of what they are called.)

Though they may resemble refrigerators, most wine cabinets are designed to replicate cellar conditions rather than to chill wines to optimal serving temperature.

It's a good question, because many units are now designed as under-counter display cases for kitchens, perhaps leading some people to assume they function to provide easy access to the perfectly chilled bottle. Generally, that's not what you're paying for when you pony up anywhere from $800 to $5,000 for models with a capacity of 40 to 160 bottles, respectively. Good cabinets, from such producers as EuroCave, Liebherr and Sub-Zero, tend to operate within a range of 4 C to 18 C in temperature and also maintain correct humidity to ensure that corks don't dry out and lose their seal over time. Four degrees is typical fridge temperature, but generally you'd want to set a wine-storage cabinet slightly warmer than that - roughly 10 C to 15 C. For extremely modest "collectors," there are cute little countertop units costing less than $200 with a capacity of six to 12 bottles. Some high-end refrigeration brands, notably Sub-Zero, make models designed with multiple temperature compartments, a cool section for long-term cellaring and a colder section that acts as a fridge, the latter for storing white wines (or, yes, beer!) destined for enjoying over the next few weeks or, at most, months. For longer-term cellaring, the regular compartment, or a cool and humid (between 60 and 80 per cent relative humidity) basement is critical.

What do you recommend for storage of screw-capped bottles? Should they be stored horizontally or are they better stood up to keep the wine and plastic separate? Is there a guideline for how long they should be stored either way?

There's no advantage to storing them horizontally - as you should do with bottles sealed under cork. I would recommend storing them vertically, for a couple of reasons. Many fine wines designed for cellaring are now sealed with screw caps. The point is to avoid the modern scourge of cork taint, a foul-smelling defect caused by a fungus that randomly attacks cork bark.

Wines sealed with cork, if they're going to be cellared for an extended time, must be placed in a horizontal position to keep the cork moist so that it maintains a tight seal against the bottle neck. That's not

the case with screw caps, which contain a synthetic liner that grips tightly around the rim of the bottle. Synthetic liners don't need moisture to maintain their seal.

One reason I like to store screw-cap bottles upright is to save precious bin space in my cellar. I even have some standing on the floor. The other reason is that the jury is still out on whether synthetic liners, over the course of decades, will impact the flavour of the wine. But I don't want to sound alarmist; it's probably not an issue to lose sleep over. Today's screw-cap liners generally are made of highly inert, medical-grade synthetics, similar to the plastic used for hospital intravenous drip bags.

The other good reason to store screw-cap wines upright has to do with serving convenience. After many years in the cellar, fine wines, which tend to be only lightly filtered if filtered at all, will throw a deposit. Horizontal bottles should be turned upright roughly eight hours before they're uncorked (24 hours is better). This will ensure that the sandy deposit sinks to the bottom. If the screw-cap wines are stored upright in the first place, there's no wait time.

Do bottles sealed with plastic corks have to be stored horizontally in my cellar?

No. But you might have a hard time discerning which are sealed with synthetic versus natural cork.

Unlike screw caps, synthetic corks fit into the bottle neck and look like traditional cylindrical corks. (Some are coloured neon purple or green, but increasingly they're disguised in the beige hue of traditional cork.)

In contrast to the natural stuff, they need not be kept moist to stay resilient and maintain their seal. At least that's the conclusion of Nomacorc, the world's largest producer, which turns out 2.4 billion closures a year.

According to Jeff Slater, Nomacorc's director of global marketing, the company has measured the so-called oxygen-transmission rate, or OTR, of sample bottles over 10 years using a Mocon permeation-testing device. He says there is no difference between bottles stored horizontally or vertically.

Nomacorcs simply do not dry out. And I suspect that's the case for all other synthetic closures.

Drinking It

What's the best way to chill wine quickly?

A bucket of ice water and salt.

Contact with cold water draws away heat many times faster than mere cold air. And adding salt brings down water's freezing point, so the solution will be considerably colder than standard zero-degree ice water. (That's why we sprinkle salt on roads and sidewalks in winter – to melt ice at below-zero temperatures.)

Plant the bottle in a bucket, surround it with ice cubes and a few tablespoons of salt, then fill with water. A bottle of lukewarm red will taste fresher in summer in five to seven minutes; a white will be ready in 12 to 15 minutes.

There's another advantage to the bucket method compared with sticking the bottle in the freezer. You're less likely to forget about it when it's out in the open, as I've learned the hard way many times.

How do I pack booze for a five-minute summer walk or a day at the beach?

Permit me to recraft your question before I answer it.

As we know, consuming alcohol in public is a capital crime in most parts of this country (or something close to a capital crime). Aside from a couple of traffic tickets I didn't deserve, I enjoy a clean judicial record with Her Majesty and have a job to keep, so I refuse to be an accessory to unlawfulness of any sort.

The question I will answer is this, then: How do I pack a good, wholesome carton of fruit juice for a summer walk or picnic? A Thermos bottle, preferably glass-lined, is your best bet. This being summer, you're probably considering white grape juice rather than red, which tastes better cold than red does. I would go so far as to drop two ice cubes (gently) into the Thermos. You'd be surprised at how the juice will not taste significantly worse as a result of the melted water.

If you don't own a Thermos, wrap the carton in several plastic bags, which will create insulating layers of air. A thick, sealable freezer bag is a good first layer if you want to throw a few ice cubes in, assuming you trust the seal and want to

stuff the bottle in your purse.

Plastic cups are a must. Better still, try plastic wine tumblers from govino (govinowine.com), which are shaped like those trendy stemless wine glasses from Riedel, but with a finger indentation that will secure your grip should slippery water condense on the side of the glass. Yes, I did say "wine" glasses, but these tumblers work just as well for non-alcoholic juice. There's even a new sparkling-wine model from govino that features the long bowl of a Champagne flute. These work nicely for sparkling non-alcoholic cider.

The rubber or rubber-plastic amalgam corks being used in some lovely wines from Spain are driving me crazy: Two good corkscrews have broken. Is there a corkscrew that works better?

Sounds like you detest those corks as much as I do. There is, indeed, a preferred corkscrew.

Synthetic corks arrived in a big way in the 1990s, though I'm happy to report they're in retreat, in part because of the reason you cite. They were, and in some cases still are, seen as an aesthetically attractive solution to the scourge of cork taint. Natural corks are easily contaminated by a fungus that can lead to a foul odour and taste. Screw-caps, now far more prevalent than synthetic corks, have proven to be a far better solution, if less elegant.

The nice thing about natural cork is that it's extremely elastic, forming a tight seal in the bottleneck but also yielding easily to the poke and pull of a corkscrew. Synthetic corks, which have the same cylindrical dimensions as their tree-bark cousins, are much more rigid and less forgiving. (That's why they're often impossible to cram back into a neck of a half-finished bottle.) Piercing with a corkscrew forces the cylindrical exterior to compress tightly against the inner wall of the bottleneck, creating strong friction as you try to extract the blasted thing.

This squeeze play compromises the effectiveness of several types of corkscrew, most notably those fancy lever-pull models based on the original brand called Screwpull. The reason: Lever-pull models, by necessity, have a narrow-diameter coil. (Imagine a bed spring, then imagine that spring pulled at both ends in opposite directions; the diameter of the coil shrinks as the spring gets longer.) The purpose of that design is to make it easier for the coil to penetrate the cork with an easy swing of the lever. But it comes with a drawback. There's less grip in the other direction when you swing the lever the other way to extract the cork. It works well with natural cork, but often that grip

is not strong enough to dislodge a tightly fitted synthetic cork.

The same issue applies to most of those old-school corkscrews with the twin levers, or arms, that you operate simultaneously with two hands. The screws can be very narrow, more like a drill bit with a solid centre post than a true coil.

The best weapon in this frustrating wrestling match is a so-called waiter's friend. That's the corkscrew that looks a little bit like a Swiss army knife. The coil folds out from the handle to form a 90-degree angle with the handle, and it has a wide coil for solid grip. There's also an arm that swings out from one end of the handle to rest against the top of the bottle neck, providing leverage as you pull up on the handle to yank out the cork. If that sounds confusing, Google "waiter's friend" and you'll see what it looks like. It's my favourite corkscrew and the choice of most sommeliers, which explains the name. The operation can take some practice, but it's worth the effort if you're keen to keep enjoying those lovely Spanish wines – until Spanish (and other) producers come to their senses and move away from synthetic corks.

Which wine aerator provides the best bang for your buck? They all seem to do the same thing and even the Vinturi has a specific white-wine and red-wine aerator. What's the difference?

Aerators are all the rage in the wine-accessories world. I've tried out countless versions. Aerators are designed to improve flavour by accelerating wine's exposure to oxygen. In measured doses, oxygen can soften texture and enhance fruitiness and complexity. The traditional aeration tool is the familiar decanter, a snazzy crystal pitcher that few pretentious connoisseur would be caught without (yes, I've got several). The simple act of pouring a bottle into a decanter agitates the liquid, bringing more molecules into contact with air. Most decanters feature a wide bowl that continues the process as the wine sits around. More surface above the liquid exposes the wine to more air.

The aerators you're asking about are fancy funnels that enable you to do the sloshing one glass at a time, so you can preserve the rest of the bottle for another day. (Air contact tends to improve wine in the short term, but if you leave most wines exposed to lots of air for, say, more than a few hours, they will turn sour or flat.) The Vinturi - and some models like it - automatically draws in extra air through a side hole as the liquid flows downward into the glass. It works well for young wines as well as old, most notably for red wines, which, in my opinion, have a greater tendency to improve with aeration. It's a subtle effect, to be sure. Unless you're paying close attention and care about such things, you may not notice much difference. That said, I've presented wine novices with aerated and non-aerated samples of the same wine and, without knowing which was which, they generally preferred the aerated wines.

You get a much more pronounced effect with an aerator than by simply swirling wine in your glass - the poor man's way of aerating. It's analogous to beating cream or eggs with a whisk compared with a spoon - the whisk works better. Vinturi's white-wine aerator (priced at about $50, just like the red-wine counterpart) pulls in more air using a wider-diameter side hole and is designed to render the effect more noticeable in the case of white wines. I remain unconvinced. In fact, I've found some white wines taste slightly better with the red-wine model. And with the white-wine version, some whites seemed to lose a bit of their vigour, though, again, the effect was subtle. In some cases, the wine tasted better using the white Vinturi. I'm guessing it depends heavily on which style of white wine you're pouring, though it would take me

a lot more testing to say with confidence which styles of white might benefit more from the white-wine aerator compared with the red. My advice: Stick with the red-wine model even if you enjoy whites. Well, wasn't that a long-winded answer? When did drinking wine get to be so complicated?

Recently I either read or heard you on the radio recommending a wine glass by Riedel that you liked to use for all wine, including champagne. What's the name of the glass?

Several people have written with the same query. The name of the glass is Riedel Ouverture. Wine-glass purveyors today are creating shapes designed to bring out the best aromas and flavours from various styles of wine. If you've got the money, space and nerdy inclination, by all means stock up. But some shapes cover the waterfront nicely.

The elegant Ouverture red-wine glass, with a large, deep bowl, is all that a minimalist wine lover needs. It's made by the wine-glass pioneer, Riedel in Austria, looks just pretentious enough and sells for about $10 to $15 across the country in fine housewares stores.

What's the best way to remove the capsule around the top of a wine bottle?

A question close to my heart. Sometimes feel I spend half my life tearing at capsules. The best way is …

Just strip the whole thing right off. Don't bother cutting it the fancy, laborious way with a tidy circular slice near the top. I don't know who came up with that tradition, but it serves no good purpose. In restaurants, waiters like to preserve as much of the bottle's original look as possible, leaving most of the capsule on the neck for presentation purposes. At home, one need not be so artful.

I simply take the little knife-like blade on a classic "waiter's friend" corkscrew (those contraptions that look like a Swiss Army knife), insert the sharp point under the base of the capsule, where it meets the glass on the neck, and flick outward to start a tear. Then I strip the torn end upward in a circular motion to remove the whole shebang. Flick and strip – it's faster than cutting a perfectly round cylinder off the top and, for what it's worth, I think it makes the bottle look cleaner.

Am I supposed to drink the gunk at the bottom of a wine bottle? How do I do so gracefully at a dinner party if I've landed the end of the bottle?

Supposed to? Not exactly, though it will do you no harm.

Good-quality wines, which tend to receive little if any filtering, will throw a natural deposit over time. The sediment is best left in the bottle because it does nothing for flavour and may in fact impede your enjoyment with all that dry grittiness. Should too much sediment end up in your glass, let it rest for a few minutes and sip until the solids get in the way. If it's an expensive cuvée, you might want to take the trouble of decanting the wine into another glass through a fine sieve or coffee filter to rescue as much liquid as possible.

When serving an old bottle from the cellar, stand it upright for at least eight hours to enable the sediment to settle at the bottom. Then slowly pour the bottle into a decanter or a glass, being careful to stop when the sediment reaches the bottle neck. It helps if you do this against

a brightly lit background. No host should be pouring the last dregs into a guest's glass. Wine is meant for sipping, not eating.

From time to time I hear people talking about tasting a drip of fat of some animal, or the flavour of a particular fruit and even the silkiness of a milk product in a wine and I begin to wonder. Is it true that any of these or other extraneous products are added and made part of the wine-making process or are they merely metaphors? Am I being totally naive or a quintessential optimist in believing a bottle of wine contains nothing more than the carefully fermented grape?

Rest assured, those terms are indeed simply metaphors.

But you're not alone in wondering – and worrying. I get similar questions, and it's understandable given the way some of us wine geeks prattle on about wet stones, melted licorice and, yes, even bacon drippings. (What can I say? We're enthusiasts.) That's one of the intriguing things about wine; most of the time it doesn't taste like grapes, certainly not the way unfermented grape juice does. Fermentation, a complex transformation whereby yeast converts fruit sugar to alcohol and carbon dioxide, generates all sorts of wondrous nuances.

Virtually all quality wines are made purely from grapes and yeast. Usually, a tiny amount of sulphur is used in the winemaking process to sanitize barrels and prevent juice from oxidizing in the presence of air, which spoils wine. But the sulphur tends to blow off with a few swirls in the glass, if it's noticeable at all.

Flavour descriptors, such as animal fat, are figments of our (sometimes wild) imagination, not ingredients in the winemaking arsenal. In the case of animal fat, the nuance is especially prevalent in syrah, notably the fine examples from France's Rhône Valley. Stone-like flavour is a hallmark of Loire Valley sauvignon blanc, champagne and Chablis. And you'll find a suggestion of licorice in many southern French reds. German riesling often can faintly smell of gasoline – in a good way.

Think of food analogies. Often a well-ripened cheese can smell or taste nutty, vegetal or even pungently of dirty socks (choose your own metaphor). It sounds revolting to those who don't enjoy, say, a gloriously stinky Époisses from France, but these analogies make sense to those who are passionate about quality cheese.

One exception to the analogy rule is "toastiness." Most red wines are aged in oak barrels, and these vessels are almost

always charred on the inside (using actual fire), which lends a toasty flavour to the wine. Oak also can impart vanilla accents, but, again, it's not the result of vanilla bean, just the oak. It would be a stretch to call oak an additive because everyone assumes most red wines are aged in barrels and inevitably acquire flavours from the wood.

Another, more glaring, exception is the Greek wine retsina, which does in fact contain an additive, pine resin, in keeping with an ancient tradition. But it's a niche product.

I hope you'll smell bacon in your next syrah; it will mean you've landed a good one.

Is It Still Good?

What kind of wine holds better after it's opened, white or red?

Generally speaking, red will last longer. Red wine contains tannins, dusty compounds derived from skins and seeds that help shield juice from oxygen. Contact with air eventually kills the wine, robbing it of fruity flavour and imparting a cooked or bruised quality. Unlike reds, the vast majority of whites are separated from skins prior to fermentation, so their tannin content is negligible.

Flavour loss depends on the wine style, though. Lighter reds, such as gamay and pinot noir, tend to contain lower tannin levels, so they spoil faster than fuller-bodied reds, such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

There are other variables. Cold curbs the pace of spoilage. So if you're in the habit of storing opened whites in the fridge and reds on the counter – the common practices – you may notice that your whites survive better than, say, gamay or pinot noir but perhaps not as well as cabernet. I'd suggest the fridge no matter which colour. You can always let reds warm up on the counter for an hour prior to serving. Either way, a half-finished bottle will lose its vigour and freshness considerably after about two or three days.

Should you wish to extend the shelf life even longer, try the freezer. It won't harm the wine, at least not much. Just be sure the fill level has been reduced by at least a couple of ounces. Liquids expand when frozen. That's why an unopened bottle will shatter or push up the cork in the freezer.

How long does a box of red plonk tend to last, once opened, given that each contains about four litres when full?

Boxed wine – it's nice to know this newspaper hasn't lost touch with the common folk.

I believe this question is a sequel to a recent answer I tendered regarding the longevity of an open bottle. It was, of course, callously presumptuous of me to assume that all people drink wine from old-fangled glass containers. The answer is: pretty long.

Boxed wine, sometimes referred to as bag-in-box, contains a plastic bladder attached to an air-tight spout that protrudes from the cardboard carton. As you tap the spout to pour, the bladder collapses, just like those burp-free Playtex Nurser baby bottles. This minimizes the wine's exposure to air, and thus to the corrosive effects of oxidation, as it's dispensed.

A boxed wine can survive nicely for several weeks after opening. The bag offers a less-than-perfect hermetic seal, however. Small amounts of air get in over time, even if the box remains unopened. Typically, it's meant to be consumed within nine months to a year, and many boxes come stamped with best-before dates.

While it suffers from a down-market stigma, bag-in-box has other advantages, not least the fact that it weighs far less than the same volume of wine shipped in standard-size glass bottles. That means lower greenhouse-gas emissions related to transport. That red plonk you're consuming is relatively green. But, of course, you're drinking it for the great flavour, not the environment.

How long can an open bottle of wine last in the fridge?

Generally no more than three or four days, but it depends on the wine style, the fluid level and your taste preferences.

Your chilling instincts are wise. All wine survives longer in the fridge. The reaction with oxygen, which initially benefits flavour but eventually causes an ignominious decline, decelerates at lower temperatures. I'm assuming you've replugged the bottle with the cork or some other stopper, which is crucial in preventing more air – or, worse, stale Chinese takeout odours – from turning your wine into ghastly swill.

Red wines, which contain protective tannins, tend to fare better than whites over time. Fuller-bodied, heavily tannic reds such as cabernet sauvignon last the longest, while light reds such as Beaujolais can fall apart more quickly, losing their fruitiness and taking on a

bruised, sherry-like tang. Heavier reds can eventually acquire a port-like, prune quality, a flaw that some people (not me) enjoy. If you're dealing with a red, you'll want to remove it from the fridge an hour or so before serving.

Because oxygen is the culprit, bottles with more air between the fluid and the neck will decline more rapidly than fuller bottles. If your merlot or pinot grigio is less than half full, I wouldn't hang on to it for much more than two days. Unless, of course, there's nothing else in the house to drink, and you've had a hard day at work.

Will removing the air from an opened bottle of wine make it last longer?

Unequivocally, yes. Oxygen spoils a wine the way it spoils many unprotected foods, such as a peeled apple. Flavours in an uncorked wine always develop nicely after a few minutes or hours. But most will eventually degrade. After a day or two, most half-finished bottles, even when resealed, start to taste less than pleasant, not as crisp or fruity as before. There are various options to keep your wine fresh. Some liquor stores sell canisters of inert gas, equipped with a thin, straw-like flexible nozzle, that acts as a heavier-than-air blanket. Before resealing the wine with the cork or screw cap, squirt a few shots of the gas into the bottle. One popular brand, which sells for about $15 to $18, is called Private Preserve. One can is good for up to about 100 uses. Another option is to decant the leftover wine into a smaller bottle, say, a half-size wine bottle, eliminating or minimizing the air pocket above the liquid. There's another trick that Archimedes would applaud, too. If you've got a bunch of spare, and clean, marbles handy, drop them, one by one, into the half-empty bottle. The volume of the round spheres will displace the liquid until it reaches back up the neck, eliminating the air pocket. Of course, you'll have to strain the wine with some sort of sieve when you go to pour it back out. See, that high-school physics class wasn't as useless as you thought it was going to be.

I forgot wine in the trunk of my car for a week and the temperature's been pretty hot. Is it okay?

It may not be gone, but it's probably down for the count.

You've no doubt heard of the greenhouse effect. Solar heat enters and can't escape. Your car's trunk, though windowless, is not a pleasant place in summer, and this is July. That's especially true for dark-painted cars, which absorb more radiation than lighter-coloured cars.

I suspect that if the temperature's been very hot where you are, you'll notice the evidence. Heat causes liquid to expand, and this could force the cork upward and beyond the tip of the neck, creating a bulge in the capsule at the top of the bottle. You may also notice sticky residue on the sides of the glass below the capsule. That's wine that has expanded up between the cork, out and down the inside of the capsule. Not a good sign.

After a mere week, your wine will likely still be drinkable and even pleasant, but I suspect it won't be comparable in freshness to the wine you purchased all those days ago. It may taste less fruity and possibly cooked or pruney. Most critically, perhaps, the wine won't age as well. If some liquid did in fact seep out of the bottle, there will be a larger pocket of air below the cork, and that will prematurely oxidize the wine in the months and years ahead. If we're talking wine sealed under a screwcap and that cap is still in good condition, you may be fine.

I accidentally left a bottle of wine in the trunk of my car and it froze. Is it still fine to drink?

Welcome to February in the Great White North. Mercifully, your wine should still be okay.

Many liquids are reasonably tolerant to freezing. Fruit juice and milk, for example, suffer little. It's the same with wine. Some people maintain they can taste a difference, but any change in flavour will be extremely subtle. I've known people to advocate freezing a half-empty bottle as a way to prevent it from spoiling in the presence of air. Frozen wine certainly isn't dead. But I'd be less inclined to store a previously frozen wine in a cellar for the long term.

The more crucial concern in this case is with the seal on the bottle. Wine is mostly water. As water freezes, it expands. This can force the cork up and slightly out of the neck, allowing air to creep in. Because air is corrosive to wine, it's important to drink the bottle sooner rather than later. The same issue applies to screw caps, which may become deformed if the frozen liquid reaches the rim, breaching the

airtight seal.

Incidentally, freezing can cause a visible change in the wine in the form of potassium tartrate crystals. Sometimes called "wine diamonds," these resemble little shards of glass but are perfectly harmless. Tartaric acid occurs naturally in wine, and when the liquid is chilled, the acid combines with potassium to precipitate out of solution. The crystals will usually drop to the bottom of the bottle, but occasionally a few will adhere to the surface of a freshly pulled cork.

If you've accidentally frozen a wine, either in the trunk or because you've chilled it too long in the freezer (I've been guilty on both counts), let it thaw at room temperature. Under no circumstances should you microwave it, at least not with the cork still lodged in the neck. If you mistakenly set the timer to, say, two hours rather than two minutes (am I the only person who finds microwave control panels unnecessarily complicated?), you could end up dealing with a mess of real glass crystals.

What does "dumb period" mean in relation to wine?

I suppose it could describe the willingness of some consumers to pay $800 for a bottle of ballyhooed 2010 Bordeaux, but I digress.

The term is not an insult but rather used to describe cellar-worthy wines that have temporarily lost flavour. The science is sketchy because wine evolves in a complex way, with various components, such as phenols, oxygen and alcohol, playing off each other. At a certain stage, the reactions can conspire to rob an aging bottle of its fruitiness and complexity.

Not all cellar-worthy wines go through a dumb phase, however. The phenomenon can vary from bottle to bottle and region to region. Bordeaux and Burgundy are often cited in this context, and it usually occurs between three and 10 years of bottling. It may last six months or a couple of years, but generally not much longer. If you bought a case and have opened a bottle only to find that its flavour has gone AWOL, wait at least six months before you try another.

For what it's worth, I suspect reports of wine dumbness are greatly exaggerated. It can be tempting to believe that a ho-hum wine is merely passing through this temporary puberty stage, especially after you've forked out a fortune on a case. In

fact, the wine may not have been great to begin with. Small sample pours at winery tasting rooms can be deceptive if you're trying the wine with a nibble of flattering food or on a day when your palate was simply tired and playing tricks.

Incidentally, the dumb phase is not to be mistaken for "bottle shock" or "bottle sickness." Though the effects can be similar, bottle shock typically occurs shortly after bottling, an aggressive agitation that tends to mute flavour. Bottle shock lasts briefly (often just a few days or weeks) and normally wears off by the time the wine reaches your dining-room table. A bottle can be sick or dumb but, unlike people, it's rarely both at the same time.

I had heard that putting plonk into a blender significantly improved it through aeration. So I bought the worst plonk I could think of – name withheld – and guess what? Superb! Try it.

So, while this isn't a question, your letter raises an issue of mounting public interest. Plus, it's so cool that it merits a response.

The blender trick has been getting some ink in the press lately. For this we can thank (or blame) Nathan Myhrvold, former top technology executive with Microsoft Corp. He's a mathematical genius, not an appliance technician, and his interest in this matter of great human importance springs from his love of food and wine. (Dr. Myhrvold would take long leaves of absence to study at cooking schools in Europe, as I recall from my days as a technology editor.) He also is co-author of the recently released Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking, a $500, six-volume reference that's garnering great reviews and has established him as a star in the world of molecular cuisine (potato foam, anyone?).

He calls the blender trick "hyperdecanting," sort of like hypertext's answer to wine. I call it a wine smoothie. Pour the bottle into your Osterizer, switch it to high for 30 to 60 seconds, then wait for the foam to subside. The idea here

is to aerate the wine aggressively, vastly accelerating the process accomplished by a decanter, which is just a wide pitcher. Exposure to air can improve the flavour of most wines, though if the wine is left out for too long (hours or days) in a decanter, it will spoil, of course.

The blender trick can work, softening harsh tannins and rendering the wine mellower and fruitier. But it's not likely to turn a bottle of plonk into Château Mouton. The improvement, if you detect any at all, will be subtle. If your wine suddenly develops nuances of blueberry or banana that weren't there already, it likely means you didn't adequately clean the blender after your morning smoothie.

Truth be told, the concept is not that revolutionary. People have been trying to accomplish the same results in an unplugged way by beating vigorously with manual whisks, just as though they were making a wine soufflé. I have a little whisk designed specifically for wine, with a handle that doubles as a bottle stopper (try fitting that combination on the top shelf of your fridge!). And I had come across the blender trick before Dr. Myhrvold gave it a gazillionaire-scientist's credibility. Amateur sommeliers have come up with all sorts of ways to improve the drinking experience. I have a cousin who swears by microwaved Cognac, insisting that a short nuke is a more convenient way to warm his snifter than cupping the drink in his hands (as Cognac geeks do it).

But I love that Dr. Myhrvold is shaking up, so to speak, the often far-too-precious world of wine by pulling it out of formal dining rooms and into the relaxed, mix-it-up atmosphere of the kitchen. And here's the best thing: You can serve the wine straight from the blender jug, which comes with a convenient beer-mug handle. How's that for an ice-breaker at your next dinner party? Just tell your guests it's Château Microsoft.

It has been suggested that I purchase unglazed clay goblets to "smooth out" the taste of some more economical reds. What is your opinion?

Ah, the old pottery-class trick. What you've been told is not entirely bizarre, but I can't recommend the practice.

The theory has basis in science as well as ancient wine-making convention. Certain red wines, such as cabernet sauvignon, are high in tannins, natural compounds found in grape skins and seeds. They provide flavour structure and also protect wine from the ravages of oxygen. But they can taste harshly astringent. Think of the dry sensation of strong black tea or walnuts, which also contain tannins. Certain forms of clay can bind with

tannins and remove them from wine. Bentonite, a type of clay, is widely used in the so-called fining process to help clarify wine prior to bottling, stripping such particles as dead yeast cells, proteins and tannins that linger after fermentation. The particles clump together and drop down to the bottom of a barrel or tank, where they can be easily removed.

It's possible that pouring wine into an unglazed clay vessel would have an analogous effect. But if it occurs, the phenomenon would be subtle. That's because the goblet's inside surface has limited contact with the wine, and only for a short period (the time it takes you to drink up). Bentonite is added to wine barrels and tanks as a slurry – bentonite powder mixed with water. As it's stirred around, it mingles more thoroughly with the liquid. You'd have to pulverize a bunch of pottery and dump the powder in your goblet, then wait for it to settle at the bottom with the tannins to yield a comparable effect. You don't want to do that.

But there are people in the wine industry – let's call them mavericks – who may toast your ingenuity. There is a small but growing band of producers, mainly in Europe, who have been revisiting age-old practices, fermenting and in some cases aging wine in clay amphorae. They do this not so much to strip wine of tannin as simply to go against the modern grain and make wines that may offer some clue as to what stuff tasted like before technology got its hands on the business. One famous example is Josko Gravner in northeast Italy, but there are many others. It's possible that the clay, which is more porous than a steel tank, softens the wine simply through slow, controlled exposure to air. This is what happens in oak barrels (which are porous), but oak imparts its own strong flavour to a wine. Maturing a wine in clay rather than oak may deliver the softness of oak without the woody, vanilla-like flavour.

The problem with clay per se is that it can leach minerals into your wine, altering the flavour. Some people would describe the taste as earthy. So you'd still be stuck with a lot of tannin while messing with the natural flavour of the wine. You may find the resulting taste appealing, but I wouldn't sign up for a pottery class to make myself a new set of wine goblets – unless the teacher looked like Demi Moore in that scene from Ghost. Plus, you'd have to make more room in your cupboards next to your expensive wine glasses for all that crockery.

I recently opened a wine I thought might be corked. It didn't bother me, but I threw it out. Did I do the right thing?

I'd say so. When you think a wine is corked, it probably is, assuming you know a bit about cork taint.

That unpleasant odour (and taste), variously described as mouldy basement, wet cardboard and gym locker, comes in degrees. It depends on how badly the wine has been contaminated by the polluted fungus in bad cork.

A wine can suffer even when you don't sense the odour directly. This happens when the taint is below the human perception threshold but it leaves its mark in a smoking-gun sort of way – by muting the fruit in an otherwise tasty wine. In other cases, you may not pick up the odour initially and only notice halfway through your first glass (don't fret, this happens to experts frequently).

There's no health risk, so if you'd prefer not to waste the bottle and can tolerate a whiff of gym locker, be my guest. I, on the other hand, hate the odour and simply don't like the idea of consuming tainted wine. But there's a better solution than pouring it out. If you kept the receipt,

take it to the store and try to get a refund – or at least a second opinion.

I'm a pretty hard-core wine geek, currently living in a country where I cannot buy properly aged wines. I've had great wines such as Almaviva and Purple Angel when mature and hate drinking them so young. Would blendering a great but young wine help it taste more like it does when it's properly matured?

I've previously addressed the subject of wine in a kitchen blender. This is the technique whereby you can soften and improve the flavour of a young wine by aggressively frothing it on the high setting of your Osterizer (or any other blender) for 30 to 60 seconds. The idea is to accelerate the wine's exposure to air, rounding out the astringent tannins and enhancing the wine's fruitiness. Hyperdecanting is just a fast alternative to old-school decanting, which involves pouring a wine into a pitcher and letting it sit around for a few minutes or hours to mingle with air.

In my experience, decanting is not a surrogate for long-term cellaring. You'll get a potentially more complex flavour profile but your young Chilean cabernet won't suddenly taste like a 1982 Bordeaux. As wine ages, aided by slow exposure to air through the porous cork, the chemical transformation is much more elaborate. It may in fact taste less fruity than it would have had you opened it soon after bottling, but that fruitiness can give way to so-called secondary and tertiary notes, revealing an underlying earthiness. With some red wines you'll be able to detect notes of leather, tobacco, mineral and forest foliage, for example.

But if you've been unsatisfied with expensive, tannic red wines in their youth and don't want to wait a decade or more for the big prize, decanting is a good way to accelerate the aging process in a modest, subtle way. Think of decanting as you would going to school. It will make you smarter faster, but it's not going to give you all the wisdom you'll achieve by living long enough to become a senior citizen.

We received a complaint from a customer saying there is a chemical taste in our red wine. We tested it and all parameters were normal, and it was tasted by our winemaker, who responded that there is nothing wrong and that it's still fruity. What could have caused the chemical taste?

There are several possibilities. One is Brettanomyces. "Brett" is a spoilage yeast, often associated with dirty barrels. It can give off a variety of off-flavours, variously

described as metallic, manure-like (euphemistically referred to as barnyard) and Band-Aid. As a producer, you've done the lab work, so I suspect this is not the strongest possibility. That said, I notice from your e-mail signature that you're writing from a large brand-development company in South Africa. It's been widely observed that many South African reds have a synthetic overtone. It's by no means necessarily a bad thing, but I can't deny its existence. To me it comes across as smoky or rubbery, sometimes Band-Aid-like, though others might legitimately describe the flavour as metallic. I suspect that if your customer is South African and accustomed to drinking local wines, this – again – is probably not the issue.

The funny thing about wine is that we always tend to blame the bottle rather than ourselves or the food we're eating when there's a problem. Most people fail to appreciate that food strongly affects the flavour of wine, often, I must say, for the worse. Such items as eggs, artichokes and umami-rich soy sauce or tomatoes can cause a wine to taste metallic.

Health issues are another possibility. A metallic taste in the mouth is a common medical disorder. It's got a name: dysgeusia. Often it's linked to medications, such as some used to treat cancer, blood pressure, diabetes and heartburn. Antibiotics can cause it, too. These affect the flavour of food, of course, but often to a lesser degree, I think. Fine wine is a fragile pleasure, and it's easier to find stray metal in a wine glass than in a bowl of stew.

The science of wine

What are tannins? Do all wines have tannins, and are they good or bad?

They're astringent, sometimes furry-tasting compounds found mainly in red wines. They're never a bad thing where quality is concerned. In fact, some of the greatest, most cellar-worthy wines are strongly tannic. But like the bristly texture of a wool sweater, they can bother some consumers.

Naturally produced by plants, tannins get into the juice by way of grape skins, seeds and stems. They can also come from contact with oak barrels, because there are tannins in wood. If you drink white exclusively, you need not worry. Virtually all juice destined for white wine is drawn off the skins (and seeds and stems) prior to fermentation, and most whites spend little, if any, time in barrel.

On the plus side, tannins enhance flavour by imparting a sense of structure to the wine. Think of a frozen lemon slush versus watery lemonade, or the pulp in orange juice versus the pulp-free stuff you can now buy. Depending on winemaking practices, tannins can have either a raspy texture or a more polished, creamy feel.

Tannins also act as antioxidants, another good thing. They help preserve wine from the ravages of air, and that's the key reason reds tend to cellar better than whites. As wine ages in bottle, the tannins soften. Old reds tend to be less harsh than young ones.

On the downside, tannins aggravate some people because of that sometimes harsh astringency. The mouth-parching quality you get from strong black tea and walnuts is tannins at work. In the case of wine, you can think of tannins as the opposite of acidity; tannins stick to the gums and make you pucker, while acidity makes the mouth water.

Worse, tannins are purported to cause headaches in a small minority of people. The science is sketchy, though, and if you feel no pain consuming tea or walnuts, you're probably not sensitive to tannins. Besides, there are bigger culprits where wine headaches are the issue, notably substances called amines, which are also naturally found in wine. Many people also simply are allergic to alcohol and may not know it.

Even if you're a red-wine drinker, you can curb your tannin exposure, assuming you'd want to. Some red grapes contain more than others. Cabernet sauvignon and nebbiolo (of Barolo fame) are particularly tannic. Tempranillo (of Rioja fame) and sangiovese (the main grape of Chianti) are only moderately tannic, while gamay, the red grape of Beaujolais, and pinot noir tend to be on the tamer side.

That said, it's become a fashion among many producers to soften tannins using a variety of winemaking tricks. Harvesting later in the season can yield riper, less aggressive tannins, for example. And there's a fancy technique, first introduced about 20 years ago, called micro-oxygenation, which rounds out the angular texture with controlled exposure to air during fermentation or maturation, before the wine is bottled.

If it's simply the raspy, furry sensation you want to avoid, try pairing your young red with steak, lamb or cheese. Fats counteract astringency. That's one reason people take their tea with cream even if they're not aware of the science. Cream softens the rough edges. I, for one, have never been a cream man. I'd rather tenderize my tea with a juicy rib-eye.

Is there a way to remove sulphites from wine?

There are two ways, though I would only recommend one.

I'll mention the first and most effective way merely for trivia's sake; you probably don't want to try it at home. It involves adding a drop or two of hydrogen peroxide – the stuff sold in drugstores for disinfecting wounds – to a glass of wine.

As you may know, sulphites are commonly used in making wine to curb microbial growth and guard against spoilage due to oxidation. People who are sensitive to the compounds may experience respiratory distress in the form of coughing or wheezing (or worse in the case of some asthmatics), though this affects a small minority of the population. Sulphites react quickly to oxygen when exposed to air and tend to dissipate over time.

Hydrogen peroxide, a strong oxidizing agent, quickly reacts with sulphites to neutralize them. There was a time when some wine producers actually added hydrogen peroxide to their juice to reduce sulphite levels, but it's now frowned upon, if not illegal in many jurisdictions. Hydrogen peroxide solutions sold for medical use are very low in concentration, but they're not meant to be ingested. At high concentrations, the

substance can be corrosive.

It's also possible to reduce sulphites simply by aerating the wine, either by swirling it in a glass or sloshing it around in a decanter. Sulphites are pretty volatile, which is why the mere smell of a high-sulphite wine causes certain sensitive people to sneeze. Fred Freitag, medical director of the headache centre at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, recommends the aerating practice to patients who believe they may be sensitive to sulphites. "Open it up for at least half an hour and let it breathe," he told me recently. "Or if you really want to get the sulphites out, decant it."

The maker of one of those fancy funnel-shaped aerating tools sold in wine-accessory stores say its model, the Decantus Aero, reduces sulphites by up to 56 per cent. I can't vouch for that figure, but there you have it.

What makes some wines dry and others sweet, and how can I tell which is which?

It's a paramount consideration for most wine consumers, yet the industry likes to keep us guessing.

The relative dryness of a wine is measured in terms of residual sugar, or RS in the wine geek's argot. This is the level of natural grape sugar left after fermentation. Once grapes are crushed, yeast feeds off grape sugar to produce alcohol and carbon dioxide. It's hard to predict exactly how yeast will behave, and they rarely finish the job completely, mainly because some sugars are not easily fermented. There's always a little sugar left, even in the case of "dry" wines, though the level is pretty trivial. Technically, a wine is considered dry if it contains less than two grams of sugar per litre of fluid. But even here the perceived dryness of the wine depends on a host of other components, most notably acidity. If there's a lot of acidity in the wine (as in the case of, say, riesling), it can still taste pretty dry even if it contains much more than two grams per litre.

To produce off-dry or sweet wines, winemakers will intentionally halt fermentation prematurely, usually by controlling temperature. Chilling the vat paralyzes the yeasts, halting them from completing the job. Alternatively, many dessert wines are produced from dried grapes, essentially raisins, which contain a higher sugar-to-juice concentration. The yeasts will gorge till they get their fill, then die off as the alcohol rises, leaving behind lots of extra sugar. Many dessert wines contain much more than 100 grams of sugar per litre. Sweet port is made in yet another way, by halting fermentation halfway through the process with the addition of high-alcohol spirit. That extra alcohol instantly kills the yeast, once again leaving behind lots of natural grape sugar.

In a few cases, sweetness will be added to the wine from the outside, sometimes in the form of natural, unfermented grape juice. Many sparkling wines and German rieslings, which tend to be high in acidity, will be balanced in this way so as not to taste too sharp. But this can be considered an exception to the "residual-sugar" norm.

How do you know the sugar content? As I say, winemakers can be cagey. They rarely list whether a wine is dry, off-dry or sweet, preferring to let consumers make an educated guess. This can be frustrating, because with some wine styles the spectrum can range from bone-dry to quite sweet. Vouvray, an appellation of France's Loire Valley, is a classic example. You rarely know in advance how sweet the wine will be because only some

Vouvray producers list the terms "dry" or "sweet" on the label. Look for "sec" if you want to be certain it's dry ("moelleux" and "doux" denote sweet).

German labels tend to be descriptive, but it helps to know German as well as something about wine laws. "Trocken" means dry, though "dry" wines often contain much more than two grams-per-litre of sugar. Those wines are rendered essentially dry-tasting by the high acidity prevalent in German wines. The popular label term kabinett often is mistaken to mean dry when in fact it refers to the relative sweetness of the grapes at harvest, not the wine itself. That said, kabinett rieslings usually are on the drier side (no guarantees). One big and laudable exception is Canadian riesling. Often producers will helpfully label them as "off-dry" to distinguish slightly sweet styles from the dry riesling.

The best rule of thumb (and I'm sorry to say it's sorely inadequate) is to check for alcohol content. If the wine weighs in at 11 per cent or lower, chances are it's at least a little sweet. Low alcohol tends to mean the yeast did not finish the job (of converting sugar to alcohol). Less alcohol usually equals more RS.

In the end, sugar is just a rough gauge of whether the wine will taste sweet or not. It's a question of balance. Some 14-per-cent-alcohol wines can taste subtly sweet, not because they contain much sugar but because they're either very fruity (a flavour often confused with sweetness) or because they lack sufficient acidity to create a sensation of total dryness. Australian shiraz is a good example; it can taste vaguely sweet even when it's technically dry.

How does a rosé get its colour?

For the vast majority of rosés, it boils down to duration of skin contact.

Dark pigment is contained in grape skins, not juice. The latter is always white in the case of both white and red grapes. To obtain that pink hue, winemakers leave red skins in contact with the juice for only a short period before removing them to complete fermentation. Red wines, by contrast, stay in contact with skins for the whole ride, developing that saturated colour. In rare cases, notably some pink champagnes, a splash of red wine is added to white, but the practice is otherwise generally frowned upon.

So, rosé in a sense is just a light-coloured red wine. But from an enjoyment perspective, it's best to think of it as a white wine with some colour. Pink wines are designed to be chilled. And they begin to taste particularly delectable right about now through to the end of summer.

Do some wines stain teeth more than others?

You bet, and you've barked up the right tree with that question. In other words, colour me purple.

Where red wine enjoys popularity, dental hygienists and toothpaste vendors are sure to follow. Pigment in any red wine is pretty intense, which is why a single spot of merlot on a white blouse can be fatal for the garment. The colour saturation gets more intense as you go from light- to full-bodied, as you might have guessed. So, Beaujolais and pinot noir, for example, deliver less staining power than syrah, merlot and cabernet sauvignon, and wines such as Chianti and Rioja are more or less in the middle.

But colour saturation is not the only factor. Tannins, the astringent compounds found in grape skins, seeds and oak barrels, can act as a delivery mechanism and intensify the staining. Tannins

have a tendency to bind to things such as proteins and the surface of your teeth, taking colour along for the ride. That's bad news – again – for fans of syrah, merlot and cabernet sauvignon because those wines are highly tannic as well as inky.

So much for chemistry. I'd like to add something from experience: It's not just what you drink, it's how you drink. At professional tastings, you'll see people making a big show of sloshing wine around in their mouths and puckering as though they were impersonating a carp swallowing a frog. They do this to aerate the wine and coax out nuances of aroma and flavour. Believe me, sloshing, especially at the front of the mouth, is the black-smile highway. I can sip cabernet sauvignon all evening without a care, but when I aggressively slosh a few small pours of Beaujolais or pinot noir during the course of my day job, it's as though I've been hiding from the hygienist since the Depression. You may want to pay more attention to how you sip.

You can brush most of the stain away, thank goodness, but bear in mind this important rule: Don't brush too soon. Wait at least one hour after your last sip. Acid in wine (and fruit juice and soft drinks) temporarily renders teeth vulnerable to erosion. Brushing will scrape away vital enamel, not just cabernet.

My wife and I are building a new house. We are planning to include a root cellar, and I thought that this would also be an ideal place for my collectible wines. But our project manager has suggested that the wines, over time, would pick up flavours of the various vegetables, such as onions. Would this be true?

If that were true, then I'd suggest you ditch the onions and leave a glass of Lafite down there. That way your Gallo Hearty Burgundy will come out smelling like a first growth.

I hope you'll forgive the facetious remark (how could I resist?). To my knowledge, there's no hard science behind what your contractor said. In fact, there's not much science at all where long-term cellaring meets sensory nuance. Can you imagine the government-grant proposal? "Olfactory threshold of root-vegetable aromatics: a 20-year merlot analysis."

I once kept my precious stash in a cellar I'd mostly built myself out of 2-by-12 lumber joists and some pine. People advised me against it, and not just because I'm clumsy with a circular saw. They argued the wood would impart foul lignin odours to the wine. I moved out of that house a long time ago and am still drinking what's left of those wines. I'm happy to report I have yet to detect a note of lumber.

Onions can be more pungent, of course, but I believe the physics of the situation doesn't warrant much concern. Root vegetables, including onions with their skins intact, don't stink much. Besides, there's a lot of air in a root cellar to accommodate the odours they give off, with relatively few molecules per cubic centimetre compared with the smell of an onion held up close to your nose. And there are barriers in those bottle necks. They're called corks. Admittedly, cork is porous, but not dramatically so – otherwise it would not constitute a good seal in the first place. The amount of air that creeps into a bottle over 20 years is negligible. You can tell just how little by the small volume of liquid that evaporates over such a period leaving more and more air in the neck (an effect called ullage). I've got 20-year-old bottles whose fill level is still very much above the bottles' shoulders.

Besides, I've visited a few mouldy, smelly little wine cellars in Burgundy where old-school producers store their barrels. They're quaint but very filthy places with air as stagnant as my high-school gym's changing room. The wines might spend a mere year or two in those cellars before being bottled, but oak is porous, too, and those barrels are constantly being uncorked for sampling and blending, exposing the wines to plenty of rancid air. None of those producers or their well-heeled clients seem to find notes of fungus in their pinot noirs.

I might be concerned if you were storing open cans of turpentine down there or keeping a stable of sheep. But a few onions and rutabagas? If you're still queasy, just make sure to serve your wine with a dish cooked with plenty of onion. How's that for a symbiotic wine pairing?

I have sometimes found little crystal deposits stuck to the bottom of a wine cork that look like broken glass. What's the story?

You'll be relieved to know it's not glass, nor is it dangerous in the least.

Those are tartrate crystals, sometimes called wine diamonds and chemically known as potassium bitartrate. They're formed when tartaric acid, a natural component found in grapes as well as bananas, binds with potassium under cold conditions to form a crystalline salt. Although they adhere to corks, you may sometimes also find them sticking to the sides of your glass with the last pour from the bottle.

Tartrate crystals can be found in both red and white wines. But since whites are served chilled, many wineries prefer to eliminate the aesthetic nuissance by cold stabilizing prior to bottling. The liquid is chilled to near-freezing in tanks, causing

the crystals to precipitate out of the solution. Some wineries chill reds prior to bottling, too, anticipating that even a red wine can be inadvertently exposed to low temperatures during transport.

Though they can be off-putting to consumers who may be puzzled, the crystals are in fact an encouraging sign. Makers of high-quality wine prefer to intervene as little as possible with such techniques as cold stabilization and filtering, which can strip wine of subtle flavours. Diamonds are a wine lover's best friend.

I drink a lot of red wine and I notice that some red wines indicate "contains sulphites" while other red wines do not mention sulphites at all. Do all red wines contain sulphites? Or is it just the wines that indicate they contain sulphites that actually have sulphites? I am thinking that it would be best to purchase wines without the sulphites if possible.

All wines contain sulphites, generally in the form of sulphur dioxide. For most people, however, this is nothing to be alarmed about. Several jurisdictions around the world mandate that labels carry the warning when the sulphite content exceeds a certain threshold. A small percentage of people, notably some asthmatics, can have seriously adverse reactions to the compound, which, in high concentrations, gives off the smell of a freshly struck match.

Although sulphur dioxide is naturally present in wine, most wines contain an added dose of the chemical, which is widely used as a weapon against unwanted microbial activity and as a shield against oxidation, or exposure to air, which can spoil wine.

If you want to minimize your sulphur dioxide exposure because you suspect you are allergic, you might want to stick to red wines, which tend to have the lowest levels. White wines are generally treated with more of the compound because they don't have the natural protective barrier against oxidation provided by tannins. Sweet wines generally get the biggest sulphur dose.

I recently ordered some wine from a winery just after bottling, and was told the wine will be in bottle shock for a few weeks, but with screw-cap technology the bottle shock is much less than with cork. Not sure what bottle shock is, please advise.

It's not as alarming – or shocking – as it may sound, but, yes, you should take the winery's advice and exercise patience to be on the safe side.

It's a temporary condition that may

occur after bottling. Rough agitation can mute or otherwise disturb wine's flavours and aromas. The chemistry is poorly understood, though many winemakers will swear it happens. Tannins, enzymes and other compounds realign themselves when the liquid gets sloshed around, altering the taste profile. With a few weeks' rest, things return to normal.

In some cases, if a white wine is denied oxygen as it goes into bottle, a browning enzyme will take over and discolour the liquid, rendering it darker, a condition referred to as "pinking in the bottle." As the wine mingles with trace amounts of air in the bottle over time, the enzyme turns off and the wine's original colour becomes restored.

There is an interesting description of this latter phenomenon in George M. Taber's excellent book Judgment of Paris, which among other things chronicles an early chardonnay batch produced at Chateau Montelena in California in the 1970s. That wine, which turned an alarming coppery hue shortly after going into bottle, eventually cleared up and went on to win the white-wine category in the famous 1976 competition in Paris against a field of some of France's best white wines.

As to the question of cork versus screw cap, I'm not certain there's evidence to support the claim that cork-sealed wine is more prone to bottle shock. I think you'll find opinions on both sides of that fence.

What is micro-oxygenation. Is it good?

Perhaps you heard about the technology from Mondovino, a documentary that left a big impression on the wine world. Micro-oxygenation was cast as a force of evil, threatening to suck character and vitality out of the world's most romantic, subtle and varied beverage.

Introduced on a wide scale in the 1990s, it involves percolating fine streams of oxygen through a vat of liquid in a tightly controlled manner. Too much oxygen bruises and ultimately spoils wine; too little can lead to problems of its own, such as muted aromas and skunky flavours. When added in small doses during fermentation or aging, oxygen softens astringent tannins (essentially by creating longer-chain molecules), and improves aroma and colour stability.

Winemakers have in fact been accomplishing the same result for centuries with the use of oak barrels, which contain microscopic pores that permit wine to breathe slowly and beneficially. And aging in bottle does much the same thing because cork, too, is porous. Modern micro-oxygenation gets the job done quicker, in a matter of days or weeks (though it doesn't replace oak aging,

which imparts flavours and complexity of its own).

Thanks to the ingenious technique, many young wines taste smoother at an earlier stage, reducing the need for long-term cellaring to soften tannins in, say, an old-school cabernet sauvignon or merlot.

Is it a good thing? I suppose there's a rough car analogy. Yes if you're the type of person who likes automatic transmissions; not so much if you prefer to drive stick.

Health matters

How many calories are there in wine?

How big is your glass?

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating defines a glass of wine as 150 millilitres, or about five ounces. So, the answer is about 125 calories a serving. That's based on a rough estimate of 25 calories for every 30 millilitres. It varies with the style of wine and depends on sugar content and alcoholic strength. But the figure never strays too far from 125 as far as dry wines are concerned. Dessert wines contain an average of 236 calories, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's national nutrient database, but often sweet wines are consumed in smaller portions, so the count tends to be lower than 236.

Fashionable stemware has been ballooning in size, of course, but those big fancy glasses are designed to accommodate a standard 150-millilitre pour. The extra space simply leaves more headroom to collect and focus aromas, and permit you to swirl with abandon.

Though it's a "health" document, Canada's Food Guide does not exactly endorse wine. It defines moderate intake as one glass a day. And, unfortunately, wine does not count as a serving of fruit.

Why are beer, wine and spirits not required to disclose nutritional info? Shouldn't a wine drinker be just as entitled as a drinker of cola or juice to know how many calories he is consuming?

You've cited two things: nutrition and calories. Alcoholic drinks contain very little of one and a considerable amount of the other.

Since 2007, nutrition labelling has been mandatory in Canada for prepackaged foods. The handy "nutrition facts" table lists various items, including calories, cholesterol, fat, sodium and protein. Alcoholic beverages are exempt, as you note. But so are many other products, such as bakery goods and salad items packaged in the store. Other exemptions include items that contain few, if any, nutrients, such as coffee, tea and spices.

Wine, spirits and beer essentially fall into the latter category. With the notable exception of some sweet liqueurs (which feature ingredient lists), virtually all alcohol products contain no cholesterol, fat, sodium or protein. They are "empty-calorie" drinks and it's assumed that consumers know this. While it may give some people comfort to know precisely how many calories they're imbibing with each glass, the calorie count in most drinks - so long as you don't mix them with pop, fruit juice or sugar - is

fairly standard. A five-ounce (150-millilitre) glass of dry wine will add roughly 120 calories to your daily intake, give or take 15 calories, depending on the style of wine. (Higher alcohol usually means a higher calorie count.) Sweet wines can be slightly higher. A 341-millilitre bottle of beer contains roughly 130 to 170 calories, depending on alcoholic strength and brand, while a straight shot of vodka or gin delivers about 100 calories. The precise calorie count is unlikely to sway most buying decisions one way or another.

I purchased a bottle of Hardys Stamp of Australia Cabernet Merlot 2011. When I read the label at home I noticed it said "Contains: Milk, Egg, Fish." I have a shellfish allergy and have never heard of these contents in wine. Is this a printing error?

It's no error; it's for real. But, speaking personally, if I were allergic to shellfish, I would not be worried. Sturgeon is another matter.

I am no doctor, so take this as a mere talking point for you and your physician. In August, Health Canada introduced new food and beverage regulations to protect allergy sufferers and people with food intolerance. They're important, but they apply in an odd way to wine.

Bizarre as it may seem, animal-derived products have been used in wine production for a long time. They're not added to wine, per se, merely used to clarify it. Suspended particles in the fermenting vat clump around these so-called fining agents and fall to the bottom where they can be easily removed.

Milk proteins, egg whites and isinglass, a derivative of sturgeon bladders, are a few common agents. Others include bentonite, a form of clay, and gelatin. Because Health Canada requires plain-language descriptors, isinglass must be categorized as "fish."

If used properly, fining agents don't make their way into finished wine. But the concentrations are difficult to measure and are generally very low – if they are present at all. Rather than risk running afoul of the regulations, some wineries may choose to be on the safe side and carry the warning regardless.

For the record, here's a statement from Health Canada's website: "After conducting a thorough review of the current available scientific information, Health Canada scientists have concluded that the use of allergen-derived fining agents does not normally result in any appreciable amount of protein from food allergens remaining in the wine, particularly when usual manufacturing practices such as filtration steps are employed. As such, the use of food allergen-derived fining agents

in wine production, following good manufacturing practices, is not expected to produce wine that would pose a risk to egg, milk or fish allergic consumers."

But if you want to be on the safe side, avoid wines that carry a warning label.

I recently found out I am allergic to eggs. There are often egg shells or products used in the fining process, so I am constantly on the lookout for affordable wines without egg products. When are wines going to be required to list ingredients, like our food products?

You need not worry, but you raise an issue that most wine drinkers know little about.

Eggs, though not egg shells, are often used to clarify wines after fermentation. Egg whites, usually in powdered form, are added to the barrel and stirred around, where they bond to suspended solids and sink to the bottom. In addition to eggs, winemakers also can use milk, gelatin (another animal product) and even isinglass, a derivative of sturgeon bladders. But non-animal products, such as a clay called bentonite, can be used, too. No animal residue should remain in the finished wine, which is eventually separated from the heavy sediment. When it comes to allergies, it's essentially a non-issue, assuming the fining process has been conducted properly, and it almost always is. The big issue here really is for vegans who choose, for ethical reasons, to avoid products that use animal products.

That said, Health Canada, in deference to allergy sufferers, will introduce new rules as of August, 2012, requiring virtually all packaged foods to carry warnings on items that contain a host of allergens, including eggs, milk, fish and nuts. Liquor boards, such as the LCBO in Ontario, which will be responsible for complying with the rules as they apply to imported products, plan to demand that wine producers carry the warnings if their wines have been fined with animal products whether or not residues remain in the wines, because there's no viable commercial way to test for low-level residues. The LCBO, for one, feels it's better to err on the side of caution. But Health Canada has decreed that wine producers don't have to sticker their bottles with warnings if no traces of eggs, milk or fish remain.

I particularly enjoy wine. However, for medical reasons I have been advised to cut back. I would appreciate if you could recommend a reasonable wine, $15 more or less, dry red or white, where the alcohol content is lower than 10 per cent.

May I offer a few tips on how to fish before I hand you a fish, so to speak?

Winemakers in recent decades have placed a greater emphasis on harvesting fully ripened grapes. This has been a laudable trend because riper grapes produce richer, fruitier and more complex wines - in the same way that local, fresh produce results in a more flavourful dish. But ripe grapes have come with a drawback, brain-numbing (and, in your case, health-compromising) higher alcohol. The biochemistry is basic. Yeast in the fermenting vat feeds off fruit sugar to produce, among other things, alcohol. More food in the vat means higher-octane chardonnays and shirazes. Wines from generally sunny, grape-ripening places such as California and most regions of Chile and South Australia now commonly exceed 14 per cent. Today, unless you're willing to switch from wine to beer, you have few options below the 10-per-cent mark. As a general rule, look to cooler climates, because less sunshine means less alcohol. The source of most of the world's best under-10-per-cent wines is Germany, which lies at the northernmost latitude for quality wine grapes. There's a widely available German riesling, a white, called Dr. L from Loosen Bros., which contains 9.5-per-cent alcohol. It sells for $13.95 in Ontario.

But there's a trade-off with this and most other low-alcohol wines: noticeable sugar. In most cases, the alcohol level is kept low by intentionally cutting fermentation short, ending the yeast's meal before it can convert all the sugar into alcohol. That's the case, too, with a decent new offering from Niagara called Southbrook Connect Organic White, a pleasantly fruity, vidal-based wine selling for $14.95 in Ontario. Another good, and generally medium-sweet, category is moscato d'Asti from Italy, a delicious and slightly effervescent white, which typically carries 5- to 6-per-cent alcohol.

Because of a medical treatment, I have a sensitive mouth and throat. I find many wines too harsh. While visiting Arizona we ate at an Italian restaurant that served a house wine that was very easy on my palate. Can you suggest soft, reasonably priced red and white wines?

Wine can taste soft for several reasons. The good news is that softness is getting easier to find.

Acidity is one reason a wine can seem harsh. Some styles contain more acidity than others. White wines tend to be higher in acidity than reds. This is especially true of such varietals as sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio. Among whites, chardonnay is a good bet, generally lower in acidity and also often softened by oak fermentation and caressed by the sweet, vanilla-like character imparted by oak barrel-aging. Chardonnays from California and Australia can be particularly soft. The whites of France's Rhône Valley, based on such grapes as marsanne, roussanne and viognier, also merit consideration.

Tannins, natural substances found in grape seeds, skins and stems, can do battle with your palate. Tannins are what give strong tea and walnuts their bitter edge. Because red grapes are fermented on their skins, they generally contain much more tannin than white wines, which are almost always fermented as pure juice in the absence of skins. This is an argument against red wines generally, especially tannic varietals such as cabernet sauvignon and nebbiolo (the red grape of Barolo in Italy).

Increasingly, though, winemakers are softening red-wine tannins through a variety of practices, notably by exposing the fermenting juice to air in a controlled way. Picking grapes later in the fall, after the tannins have had a chance to fully ripen, is another practice.

The biggest source of modern-styled, softer reds is the New World, notably such places as California, Australia and British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, where sunny weather tends to ripen tannins and yield grapes with lower acidity.

Merlot tends to be particularly soft, though the style varies among producers. Shiraz from Australia is another, especially in the case of lower-priced wines, which are often designed to appeal to softness-seeking consumers. I'm not a big fan of the brand Yellow Tail from Australia, but you may want to give it a go. Little Penguin is another brand with softness written all over it. Expensive Australian reds often come with a glorious peppery quality that may not be so glorious to your sensitive taste buds.

There's another ingredient in wine that can produce a sensation of softness:

sugar. Sugar balances acidity, yielding a less-angular profile. Most dry wines contain very little sugar, but it's there, and some "dry" wines contain more than others. Again, here I'd look to New World producers. In fact, if I were you, I'd tend to stay away from European red wines as a rule because they tend not only to contain less sugar but also more acidity. That's a gross generalization, but it may be useful to you.

It's important also to consider that food can play a role in the perception of wine texture. Taste a tannic young cabernet from Bordeaux on its own and it can seem harsh and angular. Try it with rare red meat and the proteins and fats conspire to "melt" the tannins, for lack of a better term. I don't know how this wine-and-food phenomenon may impact your medical condition (I'm no doctor), but it's possible that the wine you enjoyed in Arizona gave you little trouble because of the meal. One of the most appealing ways to soften a red is by enjoying it with steak. But, depending on your cardiovascular health, a regular diet of fatty beef could land you in other medical trouble.

My wife and I have just turned 70, and along with this comes false teeth that significantly affects your taste. Most white wines, unless very fruity, are not particularly distinctive, and the reds have to be full-bodied to really register. Do you happen to have any recommendations for wines with a strong rather than subtle flavour? My wife prefers merlot, while I tend to prefer a cabernet sauvignon. This getting old is not fun!

Your candour on this sometimes sensitive issue is appreciated.

Palate sensitivity, like a lot of things, starts to sag when you get on in years. It depends on genetics and health, of course. Some people can go nose to nose with a hound dog well into their 80s. But, generally speaking, once you cross to the wiser side of 65, taste buds lose their edge. I don't know much about dentures (yet), but I'll take your word for it.

I've received similar letters, including one from an octogenarian looking to offload his old Bordeaux treasures because – though otherwise in fine health – he simply gets less pleasure from his investment. Admitting you're off your game, taste-wise, is sort of like admitting you no longer have the reflexes to drive a car. It's a pride issue.

My suggestion: Explore New World wines. Sunny climates in many major

regions outside Europe, such as much of California, South Australia, Chile and Argentina, tend to produce fuller-flavoured, highly fruity wines, the kind you seem to enjoy. You may have heard the term fruit bomb. Usually it's used as a pejorative to describe warm-climate reds. In your case, it may have appealing resonance.

I'd side with you over your wife on the grape issue. Cabernet sauvignon is one of the most full-bodied and powerful wines, though smooth and plummy merlot is another good option. British Columbia makes some gorgeous, full-bodied merlot-based reds. Two other good choices include shiraz from Australia, particularly from the hot Barossa Valley, and red zinfandel from California. Fruit bombs don't come any more explosive than Barossa shiraz or California zin. People who prefer white wines may want to try highly aromatic, fruity styles, such as New Zealand sauvignon blanc, Argentine torrontes, California moscato (usually semi-sweet) or gewurztraminer from Canada.

There's a trade-off with some of the reds I've listed, though. They tend to carry high alcohol, which contributes body and power. That can be especially unwelcome with advanced age. Hangovers are no way to spend part of your retirement. And a tipsy head won't cut it if you want to keep driving.

I am sure you know that red wines are often listed as triggers for migraine headaches. My wife went to a function recently and returned home with the name of a red wine, Pascual Toso malbec, which her friends claimed is low in histamines, ingredients that apparently cause migraines. Have you heard of one red wine being lower in histamines than another? Do you know of any wine being "good" for migraines?

Research on the subject is all over the map, but it appears some wines are bigger headache hazards than others …

Histamines are part of a family of substances called biogenic amines, which have long been fingered as culprits in red-wine headaches. Amines are produced by otherwise harmless micro-organisms, often in the course of fermentation, and are found in many things we consume, including beer, cheese, sausages, bananas, chocolate, canned tuna and wine. Some people lack sufficient quantities of an enzyme that synthesizes dietary amines, leaving them susceptible to headaches or severe migraines.

While scientists have published many papers on the subject, I have yet to come across findings that could be called comprehensive. I must admit I don't know specifically whether the Pascual Toso malbec you cite is indeed low in amines.

Amine content is not listed on wine labels but it does appear to vary depending on the specific soil and weather in the vineyard. One study has concluded that French wines have higher amine content than wines from several other countries. That study also concluded that California reds are particularly high. But that's painting the world with a broad brush. Amine content also depends on wine-making methods.

If you want a general guide, I believe it's safe to say that red wine tends to contain more amines than white. Several reasons may account for this, notably the fact that white wine, lacking the higher protective tannin content of most reds, is stabilized more frequently and to a higher degree with sulphur in the winery. Amines are produced by microbial activity, and sulphur is a germ killer. This fact also has led some researchers to speculate that organically produced wines, which tend to contain low amounts of sulphur, may in fact contain higher histamine levels than non-organic wines (another vast generalization). On the downside, some people have adverse reactions to sulphur. For them, white wine can be more problematic.

The red-wine-headache question is tricky. If Pascual Toso malbec works for you (or your wife) and you like the wine, it could be a solution – and probably a more practical answer than any you'll get from a doctor or wine expert.

Sometimes when drinking white wines I immediately get a blistering headache. A sip or two is all that it takes. Oddly, I have had a pinot gris from the Okanagan which was fine, but when purchasing a new vintage of the same wine, I get this reaction. Is it sulphites? If so, why not from all vintages of the same wine?

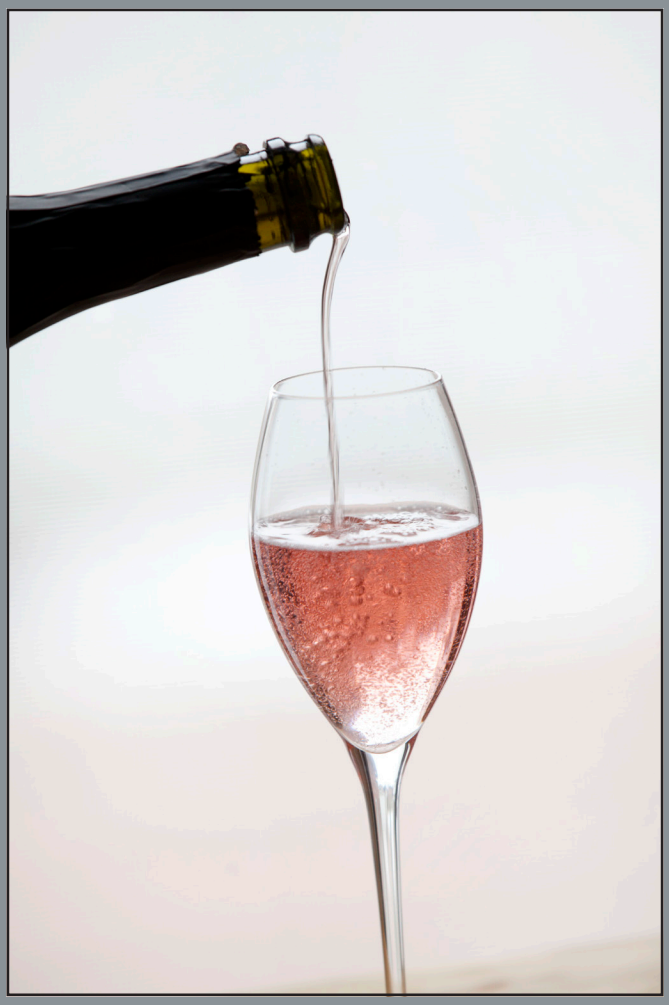
That's an interesting twist to a subject – sulphites – I'm asked about constantly.

Yes, I suspect you may be reacting to sulphites, though I hasten to add I'm not a physician. White wine tends to be higher in the substances, which may be added by way of a related compound called sulphur dioxide which curbs spoilage and bacterial growth. In small doses, sulphites are harmless to most people, though a tiny proportion of drinkers can have serious reactions. And I should also add that all wine contains sulphites, which are also produced naturally during fermentation. Red wines contain tannins that help curb oxidation, so they generally require less in the way of added sulphur dioxide.

In your case, I'm using some deductive logic. If a person reacts badly to red wines as well as whites, I'd say the bigger problem is more likely attributable to alcohol

itself or to amines, natural chemicals that are copious in red wines and give many people headaches. Do you react to dried fruit? That can contain lots of natural sulphites, by the way.

As to the interesting twist concerning vintage variation, I'm guessing that, too, points in the direction of sulphites. Depending on the year the wine was bottled, a winery may add more or less sulphur dioxide, either because the juice required it or simply because the bottling line happened to be set up to add more.



Reds, whites & bubbly

Champagne

Is Champagne really made from pinot noir? That's a red grape and Champagne is white.

You can make white wine, including Champagne, from red grapes.

Real-deal French Champagne relies on three varieties, pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay. The first two are red. Often Champagne is blended from all three, though it can be made from just one or two.

All grape juice is white. Only the skins of red berries contain the dark pigment. If the juice is separated from skins shortly after crush, it remains white. Only by leaving juice in contact with red skins during fermentation does it become dark.

There is pink Champagne, of course. That's made either by permitting the skins to remain in contact with the juice for a brief period or by adding a small quantity of red wine to the finished bubbly.

Does a half-empty bottle of Champagne keep bubbles longer if you leave a spoon inside the neck?

That's a classic folk tale; you've just opened a can of worms with the opened bottle of bubbly.

The short answer is no. Dangling a spoon inside the neck – with the oval portion sticking out – fails to stop carbon dioxide from escaping. The practice is common in European households, where they tend to specifically prescribe a silver spoon. But the metal doesn't matter. Silver or stainless yields the same (ineffective) result.

A researcher at no less august an institution than California's Stanford University tested the theory in the early 1990s, and I can almost guarantee you're going to be surprised by the findings. According to blind taste tests, an opened bottle with no cork reinserted actually performed just as well as a bottle that was given the spoon trick. And here's the clincher: That opened bottle also tasted better than one that had been resealed.

Chemistry professor Richard Zare, who specializes in watching molecules dance in chemical reactions, teamed up with

well-known food-science writer Harold McGee for the myth-busting experiment. They tested five methods, each with a single glass of champagne removed from the bottle. One bottle was uncorked 26 hours prior to tasting and left open. Another was left with a silver spoon in the neck for 26 hours. A third used a stainless spoon in the same way. The fourth was opened and resealed the night before. The last was opened just prior to the test. (They in fact used two bottles for each treatment as a redundancy measure to safeguard against potential variations in flavour between bottles, which is always a possibility with a natural product such as wine.)

According to the eight amateur tasters, the spoon treatments were no more successful in maintaining sparkle than the bottle that was simply left open. But their least-favourite wine was the recorked sample. And by least favourite I am referring to flavour rather than spritz.

The result was a bit of a mystery at first, but Dr. Zare subsequently speculated that the unsealed bottles may have tasted better because, paradoxically, a loss of carbonation altered their flavour for the better. It's known that gases such as carbon dioxide remove flavour components from a beverage as they move from the dissolved to gaseous state, percolating up in the form of bubbles. That's the reason the head on a mug of beer tastes more sharply bitter than the beer itself; the froth extracts some of the bitter hop flavouring. In the case of champagne, the wines likely were rendered sweeter tasting, and that must have pleased the tasters.

For my money, though, I would not want champagne any sweeter. I tend to like its naturally high acidity and bitter-mineral quality. And I love tiny bubbles for their own sake. So I'll continue to reseal my opened sparkling wines using one of those champagne stoppers you can buy in liquor and kitchenware stores. They do, in fact, trap the bubbles, an undeniable fact of physics and common-sense logic. (You can also use a regular wine cork, of course, just not the original mushroom-shaped champagne cork because it won't fit back in after it has expanded.)

The most important consideration, in the end, is temperature. Keep the bottle cool. Opened champagne absolutely has to go back in the fridge because cold liquids retain dissolved gases better than room-temperature liquids, and even an unsealed bottle will retain a good amount of spritz for a day or so. I just wouldn't store it in a fridge that also contains an unwrapped wheel of époisses unless you plan to enjoy the stinky champagne with the stinky cheese.

I was given a bottle of Dom Perignon 1985 about 12 or 13 years ago as a gift. We have never opened it and now are considering opening it for our 65th birthdays. My question is twofold: Has it gone flat and tasteless? Does it have any value?

Happy birthday. Providing it has been stored in a cool, humid cellar, Dom Perignon 1985 should make for a memorable toast for your celebration.

Dom Perignon is a top French Champagne, made only in the best years. Unlike most Champagnes, it carries an age-statement on the label (in this case 1985). It's meant to be cellared. After 10 or more years, such wines usually develop intriguingly nutty, honeyed nuances. The bubbles should remain pretty much intact, though I find that very old champagnes tend to lose a modicum of effervescence (no biggie, though).

Yes, you are clutching a valuable wine. At auction, it could fetch well above Dom Perignon's current, new-vintage selling price of more than $200. A licensed appraiser could give you a figure, but - hey - it was a gift, right? And it's your birthday! A gold-plated wine to launch your golden years.

What's the difference between Champagne and cava?

About $25. (Rim shot, please.) That price difference might suggest a much bigger gap in quality than is often the case.

Champagne comes from France, of course, specifically the chalky, rolling hills of the region that gave the wine its name. The king of sparkling wines, it's based on three grapes, pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier (sometimes from just one and often from two or all three). Besides the chalk and cool climate, which impart crisp nerve and complexity to the wine, it has another defining feature that distinguishes not just Champagne but most high-quality sparkling wines. It gets its bubbles by way of a second fermentation that takes place inside each bottle. That step, sometimes called the Champagne method, involves adding yeast and a sugar solution to bottles of finished still wine, then capping the bottles tightly to contain the resulting carbon-dioxide pressure. This stands in contrast to industrially manufactured sparkling wines, such as prosecco from Italy, most of which get their bubbles by way of refermentation in huge pressurized tanks. Bottle fermentation is believed to account for greater complexity and elegance.

Cava comes from Spain, and while the vast majority is made in the northeast

Penedes district surrounding Barcelona, it's not strictly the product of one region; it can be made in various parts of the country. The word merely means "cave" or "cellar" in Spanish, a reference to the fact the bottles were traditionally left to referment and age in underground caves. Spain uses its own distinct grapes, too, mainly xarello, parellada and macabeo.

So much for differences. Cava, like other, more expensive sparkling wines also employs the costly bottle-fermented technique. Curiously, however, it tends to cost a fraction of the price, typically $14 to $18 compared with $40-plus for Champagne. To my mind, that makes cava, as a category, one of the world's great wine bargains. Stellar bubbles at down-to-earth prices.

We enjoy a bottle of Cristal Brut on occasion but would like you to suggest substitutes (or as close as possible) at a lesser price. We look forward to your recommendations.

Yikes. That's a tall order. Cristal is the iconic $300 Champagne knocked back by hip-hop moguls and Hollywood royalty (often straight from the bottle in Cadillac Escalades and hot tubs).

The full name is Louis Roederer Cristal, and it does happen to be a gem. Packaged in a distinguished clear-glass bottle wrapped in ultraviolet-filtering cellophane, it is one of the most coveted big-brand Champagnes, along with Dom Perignon and Krug.

The wine was born in 1876. Tsar Alexander II of Russia was a Roederer fan and had asked the house to come up with a bottle that could be distinguished from the "common" dark-glass Champagne making the rounds. (According to alternative variations of the story, he wanted to make sure it wasn't laced with poison.)

Ostentatious though the packaging may be (call me cynical, but I suspect it's the key reason free-spending showbiz types have gravitated to it), the liquid inside is awesome. The thing is, it's a vintage Champagne, which means it's bottled only in the best years. Most other Champagnes are blended from juice produced over several years and are crafted to taste pretty much the same year after year. Vintage Champagnes don't conform to a "house" style in the same way.

What does Cristal taste like? I'd say it varies significantly from vintage to vintage, and that's part of any vintage Champagne's attraction.

Peruse the critical reviews and you'll find a wide swath of adjectives, from "stony" and "chalky" to "fruity" and "yeasty." I'm not the world expert on the wine by any means, and I no doubt have consumed less "Cris" than Jay-Z, Tupac Shakur, 50 Cent and Oprah Winfrey. But I'll say two things with confidence: It tends to have a seductively round mid-palate, usually suggesting brioche pastry, which I love; and it's designed to age gracefully, something I suspect makes little or no difference to most showbiz personalities who immediately stash it in their Sub-Zero fridges.

Is there such a thing as a "baby" Cristal? Not really. But let me offer two feeble answers. First of all, consider Louis Roederer Brut Premier. That's the excellent, entry-level, non-vintage Champagne from the same house. It costs about $70 a bottle. Not cheap, but compared with Cristal it may sound like a steal. Roederer also happens to make less expensive and very fine bubbly in California. Their

top sparkling wine from that property, Roederer Estate l'Hermitage Brut, is superb, at about $55. Some people have suggested it comes close to Cristal in quality. One of the first vintages I tried, back in the mid-1990s, came pretty close. The lower-end Roederer Estate Brut costs about $29 and is splendid, too.

Whites

What's the difference between Pouilly-Fumé and Pouilly-Fuissé?

It's the difference between sauvignon blanc and chardonnay.

They're both appellations of France. Pouilly-Fumé is located in the Loire Valley and is known for white wines based on sauvignon blanc, just like its neighbouring appellation of Sancerre (which also makes small quantities of rosé and red). Pouilly-Fuissé, on the other hand, lies in southern Burgundy, and the wines can only be made from chardonnay. It's easy to confuse the two, as with Kourtney and Khloe Kardashian (I never know which is which, not that it matters). While dining with a friend recently, a waiter asked if we'd like a bottle of a special Pouilly-Fuissé that the restaurant had just sourced. My friend, who knows a bit about wine, said he didn't feel like sauvignon blanc. Oops.

What is the shelf life of most white wines? Clearly it is related to temperature, but is cooler always better? Should I refrigerate my whites if possible? Is there an ideal temperature? I generally prefer the more acidic whites – sauvignon blancs, pinot gris etc.

It's tough to generalize, but most crisp whites have a best-before date of roughly two years from the vintage date on the label.

I'm heartened by your preference for acidic whites, as you call them, a style often overshadowed in this age of big, smooth reds. There's mouth-watering satisfaction – and great food harmony – in crisp whites.

Most crisp whites are designed for early consumption. There's virtually no tannin in such wines, and tannins – an astringent compound found in grape skins – provide the antioxidant protection required for long-term cellaring. Some sauvignon blancs, particularly those of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé in the Loire Valley, can gain complexity with, say, three to four more years. But this assumes you're the type of person who enjoys the nutty, sherry-like tang that comes with age in a white wine. I'm such a person,

but I suspect most people are not. Good riesling, which contains plenty of acidity, is one white that's famous for improving with age. Over the course of a decade or more in the cellar it can develop prized notes of petrol and honey.

But the wine won't suddenly go bad after two years, like milk after a few weeks; it will slowly lose its freshness and eventually merely taste stale and lifeless.

Your hunch about the fridge is wise, though. Cooler temperatures slow down chemical reactions, so if you lack a cool cellar, the fridge is not a bad option. You're essentially placing the wine in a state of suspended animation. It won't evolve much, but it will at least be well-preserved.

On the downside, some people would submit that fridge temperatures are so cold as to force the wine into a dumb – or flavourless – state after many months next to the mayo and pickles. My experience tells me they're wrong, but I'll grant that it's a debatable point. And, of course, I'm assuming you are speaking of sealed bottles. If the bottle's been uncorked and left half-empty, the freshness will be pretty much gone in three to five days.

I'd like to know if a bag-in-box white wine can be maintained outside the fridge and for how long.

Yes, it can. Once opened, the box should stay fresh for roughly six weeks. Estimates differ, but that's the assertion made by one of the leading producers of bag-in-box packaging. Most consumers are familiar with the packaging, though it's not as prevalent here as in, say, Australia. Inside the box is a plastic bladder containing anywhere from 1 1/2 to several litres of wine. The bag comes with a spout that protrudes out from the base of the box and is designed to extend over the edge of a kitchen counter or fridge shelf for easy pouring.

Bag-in-box saves on packaging and shipping costs, but the big benefit for consumers is convenience. As you pour, the bladder collapses inside the box, leaving no residual air to oxidize – or spoil – the wine. But the seal is not perfect; traces of air permeate through the spout, and within about six weeks the wine will begin to significantly lose freshness. (Until the spout is breached, a bag can stay fresh for several months, and some wineries include recommended best-before dates on their boxes.)

As with all wine, bag-in-box products last longer in the fridge (whether it's a white or a red) simply because cool

temperatures slow down the chemical reactions associated with spoilage. But the big enemy with wine is oxygen, and bag-in-box provides a pretty good barrier against it, so it's not crucial that you store your white boxed wine in the fridge. Unless, of course, you want to hide the box from your guests.

A client gave me a 13-year-old bottle of white Italian wine they bought on their honeymoon in Italy. It has been stored in a liquor cabinet since. Would it still be safe to drink?

It's impossible to say for certain without knowing the name of the wine. But, sorry to be a bad-news bearer, it's likely your gift is going to taste less than delicious.

The vast majority of Italian white wines are meant to be consumed in their youth, typically within three years of the date on the label. To your specific point, it's not likely to harm you, though.

The fatal problem is your storage strategy. Room temperature is fine for a few weeks or even a couple of months for most wines. But, over the long haul, it will encourage the chemical reactions that age and, eventually, degrade fermented fruit juice. It's like keeping lettuce on the counter rather than the in the fridge, only not nearly as dramatic.

The flavour is likely to be unpleasantly nutty or stale, though errant bacteria may also produce a vinegar-like taste. Have a look at the wine's colour, assuming it's in a transparent bottle. Has it darkened over the years? That would mean too much oxygen has seeped through the cork, which is porous, oxidizing it the way air turns apple flesh brown. But even wine protected under the perfect seal of a screw-cap will eventually wilt due to the excess heat of a warm room.

Had the vino been stored in a cold cellar, it might even be reasonably enjoyable today, and I'd be happy to join you in a glass for my own edification. But, again, it depends on the style of the wine in question.

I've been hearing about cool-climate chardonnays. How do they differ from chardonnay in general?

I like to think of the distinction metaphorically. Warm-climate chardonnays run on gas, cool-climate chardonnays run on electricity.

Before I elaborate, let me say that your question is timely because Niagara recently hosted an international summit of producers specializing in cool-climate chardonnays. Excellent Canadian wineries such as Tawse and Flat Rock of Niagara and Blue Mountain of British Columbia poured their wines alongside

such esteemed names as Nicholas Potel of Burgundy and Mt. Difficulty of New Zealand. It was a lively, bacchanalian festival held over three days.

But back to the electricity metaphor. Grapes grown in cool climates tend to yield crisper wines. That's because lower temperatures preserve natural fruit acidity. In the case of white grapes, cool conditions also produce flavours leaning more toward the mouth-puckering citrus and orchard-fruit spectrum (think apples and peaches) rather than tropical flavours (such as pineapple or mango). That's the case with chardonnay, the world's most popular white wine. Chablis in Burgundy, one of the most revered chardonnay zones in the world, is considered a cool climate. Chablis is all about high-voltage tension.

The fruit profile of such grapes also tends to inspire a more delicate approach to winemaking. Chardonnay is sometimes referred to as a "winemaker's grape." This captures the fact that chardonnay typically is left to age in oak barrels (unlike other whites, such as riesling and pinot grigio). More often than not, its flavours find a natural complement in the vanilla and toasty profile contributed by maturation in charred wood. The type of barrels (new or used) and length of contact are matters of the winemaker's discretion. Some chardonnays, including many Chablis, see no oak at all. Generally speaking, the hotter the climate, the more a winemaker will be tempted to lavish it with oak, and it's easy to go too far. A ripe, fat, tropical-styled chardonnay can end up tasting like the product of a lumber yard rather than a vineyard. The flipside is that the wine can end up losing the special fruit character imbued by the local soil and microclimate, the French concept of terroir. A kiss of oak is nice, but too much is the kiss of death.

I'd argue that good producers in cool climates tend to be especially sensitive to this. They're wary of too much oak because their leaner, crisper fruit compels them to be. And fans of cool-climate chardonnay like to keep them on their toes. Again, I'm generalizing. There are many inferior, overoaked cool-climate chardonnays out there. It's a fine balance. I think the first wine listed in this newsletter captures the style beautifully.

I know that white wines don't age, at least not like red wines, but do they get old? If there's no reason to leave them in your wine cellar for years, is there reason to drink them sooner?

Like some humans, many can, indeed, age gracefully. But most just get old quickly.

White wines lack or are very low in the tannins that act as antioxidants in red wines. So, they're not as protected against the ravages of oxygen. But a small minority are prized for their ability to improve with cellaring. Examples I'd lump into that category include riesling (especially German riesling), fine white Burgundy, vintage-dated Champagne, Australian semillon and Sauternes. In fact, the last in that list ranks among the longest-lived wines, period, capable of improving with many decades in the cellar. Acidity, generally higher in white wine, and sugar act as preservatives, too.

In fairness, aged white wine is something of an acquired taste. I wouldn't recommend it to most people. It can develop odd flavours that many detest. I'm talking nutty tang along the lines of sherry, petrol-like flavours (especially in the case of riesling) and earthy-tobacco notes. Taste just about any white Rioja (often aged before it's bottled) and you'll see what I'm talking about.

But to your question, finally: Yes, white wines do get old – and quickly. Most will start to taste tired two to four years after the harvest date on the label. This is especially true of light, inexpensive styles, such as Mediterranean whites. Pinot grigio, come on down. If it tastes flat and dull and has turned slightly brown (white wines get darker as they age), it has probably kicked the bucket.

Reds

If I am serving a series of different red wines using a decanter, should I wash out the decanter between bottles or simply rinse with water? Or should I do nothing and pour the new bottle into the decanter?

Laziness is highly underrated sometimes. The answer is: Do nothing.

Chlorine from tap water can adversely affect the new wine, more so than the residue from the previous bottle (though we're talking about subtle effects). Soapy residue is worse, so I wouldn't take the chance of washing out the decanter. Simply drain as much of the first wine as possible, then pour in the next bottle. You won't be corrupting the second with flavours of the first if a few drops remain in the decanter.

If the first wine has left visible sediment, you may want to consider rinsing with plain water. But you shouldn't have much residue in the decanter in the first place.

There are two reasons to decant a wine. The first is to aerate so that oxygen can soften the wine's astringent tannins and amplify its fruit flavours. The other is purely aesthetic – to pour an old wine off its sediment. After many years, some red wines develop harmless residue, which precipitates out of the liquid and down to the bottom of the bottle (assuming you've moved the bottle from the horizontal cellar position to the vertical position at least eight hours before serving, which is recommended). Old wines should be decanted slowly and in good lighting conditions. This will allow you to ease up on the pour just before the sediment can make its way into the decanter.

I received a bottle of Zenato Amarone Classico 1995 several years ago, maybe eight. I completely forgot about it on a shelf in the basement. How do I know if it is still any good?

I'd open it soon and not get my hopes up. Amarone is a full-bodied, robust red designed for cellaring. In an ideal world, that Zenato should improve with up to 15 years in the cellar, perhaps longer. However, like all wines, it must be kept considerably cooler than average basement temperature – ideally 13 celsius versus 18 or 19 – if it's to go the long haul. Was it standing upright rather than horizontal? That's critical. If upright, you may have a problem. The cork will likely have dried out, letting in too much air, and that spoils wine. (It may also crumble

when you attempt to pull the cork, a sure sign that it dried out.) Check the fill level. Has the volume noticeably declined such that the fluid surface is closer to the bottle's shoulders than the cork? There should be no more than a centimetre and a half between the base of the cork and the liquid's surface at this point.
I can't say with certainty that your wine is toast. It may in fact be fine. Amarone can withstand punishment more than most wines. Just don't expect nectar of the gods.

A good friend just presented me with a Margaux 2004 for Father's Day and now I'm caught between two choices: Hold off 20 years before drinking it (I'm 75) or uncork it on my mother-in-law's 100th birthday this September. What to do?

Drink up or lay down – it's the collector's constant preoccupation. I say drink it. You have a fine red there. Château Margaux is among Bordeaux's undisputed gems, powerful, structured and, like your mother-in-law, built to attain grace with advanced age. As for specifics, the 2004 Bordeaux vintage was good but not stupendous, though Margaux, as usual, was a stellar performer. If it were made in a knockout, very young vintage, such as 2010, I might be inclined to counsel patience. But the 2004, while capable of improving for another dozen years at least, should be relatively supple by now, ready to deliver great pleasure. Many top international critics see no issue with uncorking a 2004 Margaux today.

The wine's evolutionary track aside, there are clearly good personal reasons to pull that cork in your case. Time has a way of sneaking up on collectors, some of whom sadly feel compelled to sell off their inventory as they lose the passion they once had. I'm not suggesting this will be your case 20 years from now, but I've received letters from people as young as 80 who have lamented that they no longer enjoy wine the way they used to. I say enjoy it while you're still keen and have such a treasured relative to share it with. That wine's time has come.

I have a bet going with my father-in-law as to just how long some reds can last after being opened. Can you help settle the score? Could some wines maintain their lustre for more than three days, or even a week?

Don't quote me in any illicit gambling scheme if the authorities come knocking. Three days is a good, though very rough, average. Some can indeed last longer. Several factors are at play here. First is the quality of the wine. Lighter reds, such as gamay and pinot noir (including red Burgundy), tend to decline quickly. I find most day-old gamays and pinot noirs as appealing as day-old doughnuts. That's mainly because they contain fewer tannins, the antioxidant compounds that protect them from corrosive contact with oxygen. Full-bodied - and usually more tannic - reds such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah can retain their pleasant flavours considerably longer. I've kept rich cabernets and syrahs on the counter for up to a week and they've tasted fine - some even better than when first opened, because oxygen initially can soften a harsh, youthful red and make it more approachable.

These are gross generalizations. The longevity of an opened bottle depends greatly on the overall quality and concentration, too. A great red Burgundy can blossom after four or five days with exposure to a bit of air - but I have to stress the word "great," as in a $90-plus grand cru. It also depends strongly on how much wine is left in the bottle. The higher the fill (and thus smaller the air pocket), the longer the wine will last.

Another big factor is temperature. The fridge is a better place than your counter to store opened wine, whether it's white or red. Lower temperatures slow down the chemical reactions that spoil wine. A good, half-finished cabernet can survive nicely for up to two weeks in the fridge. Just make sure to pull your red wines from the fridge a good hour or so before serving. Fridge-temperature reds taste lousy.

My question is, when chilling, should you already have decanted a red wine; i.e., should I pour my pinot noir into a decanter first and let it sit out for an hour or two before I place in the fridge for 10 minutes?

Odd as that crystal decanter may look in your fridge next to the Hellman's, go for it.

As you note, I've suggested in the past that red wine generally tastes better when slightly chilled. Heat can exacerbate wine's harsh components, and Canadian room temperature is too toasty for wine. It depends on the grape variety, to be sure. Lighter-bodied reds, such as gamay, dolcetto and pinot noir, can benefit with up to 30 minutes in the Frigidaire. Cold enhances the palate's sensitivity to acidity, so you're bolstering a cherished feature of many such wines. Fuller-bodied reds, such as cabernet sauvignon and shiraz, tend to improve with a 15-minute chill.

Decanting, as you also seem to have gathered, is another way to improve flavour without forking out big money. By decanting wine into a pitcher, you're exposing it to air, softening the astringent tannins and enhancing fruity bouquet. It stands to reason that if you chill the bottle first and let it sit around in a decanter for an hour or more prior to serving, you're losing the chill, rendering the fridge exercise worthless.

Here's what I'd do: Decant the wine and let it sit on the counter until 15 to 30 minutes before serving; then place it in the fridge till dinner's ready. There's a caveat here. Decanters are just fancy crystal pitchers shaped with a wide bowl to maximize the fluid's surface area (and thus exposure to air). They tend to have open spouts. That means your wine will be vulnerable to fridge odours. I don't know about you, but I'm not always prompt in replacing that box of baking soda every month or two (or is it six?). Tear off a small sheet of plastic wrap and stretch it over the decanter's spout to form a seal before you place it in the fridge. Make sense?

I suspect there's a key reason few people place decanters in the fridge: space.

If you can't find enough room next to the Hellman's and yesterday's Chinese takeout, consider freeing up more rack space by removing that old box of Arm & Hammer; it's probably stale anyway.

What is the right amount of time to chill a red? Does that timing change depending on the type of red, from light to super full?

Yes to the second question. As for the first part, timing can range from about 10 to 40 minutes in the fridge depending on how warm the wine is to begin with. I tend to like my reds cooler than most people and find the typical room temperature in Canada to be too balmy for just about any wine. Generally speaking, the lighter the style, the more you should chill. Gamay and pinot noir, being lighter, tend to taste best when pretty cool, say 14 Celsius. Full-bodied cabernet sauvignons and syrahs are nice at about 18 degrees. Medium-bodied reds such as sangiovese (think Chianti) and tempranillo (Rioja) fall somewhere in the middle. It's a matter of taste, of course. But there's no excuse for serving 27-degree cabernet in August unless your fridge is on the fritz or you enjoy the heightened medicinal scent of warm alcohol.

At the table

What are the best wines for barbecue?

Anthony Collet, the head of marketing for Inter Beaujolais, a trade group representing Beaujolais producers, asked me a timely question on a recent visit to Toronto: "What wines do Canadians drink with barbecue?"

There are lots of options, I told him, not least because barbecue isn't a food item but a process and in this country it can involve all types of fare, from beef and fish to eggplant and pizza. I have no doubt charcoal-happy Canadians would grill ice cream in the summer if they could.

Collet, though, was wondering about red meat in particular, so I eventually cited Australian shiraz and Argentine malbec, two styles that frequently get the nod as quintessential grapes for the grill. Jammy and powerful, they seem to fit the bill. But even when it comes to red meat, I'm not sure they always work wonders. It depends on the animal part and the specific cooking technique.

There are two main ways to approach meat on the Weber: Sear it fast or take it low and slow. Simply grilled steaks and chops work well on high. Tougher cuts like ribs and pork shoulder need time to tenderize. You also don't want an out-of-control blaze to scorch that sweet barbecue sauce, as I seem especially gifted to do every summer.

That is why I'm leading the reviews below with European selections. They are, for the most part, more subdued, crisp and overtly tannic, qualities that better suit juicy steaks and chops, especially when cooked no further than medium rare. (Though other cool-climate regions, such as Niagara and New Zealand, also qualify on that score.) I prefer to pair fruit-forward, jammier, warm-climate styles from the New World with slow, Southern-influenced barbecue.

Burgers? The pickles, mayo, ketchup and mustard demand a red with verve, which is why I side with Rajat Parr, the wine director of RN74 in San Francisco and co-author of Secrets of the Sommeliers. Try Beaujolais, he says.

I am from a Korean heritage and my wife comes from a Chinese heritage. When we cook for ourselves, it's always non-Asian fare and we usually have a full-bodied cab, carmenere or syrah etc. However, at times, when our parents come over or we go over there, we eat Korean or Chinese food. Korean food has a lot of spicy dishes. I love it but it doesn't go well with any of the wines I usually drink. Does any wine go with Korean food? I have the same question for Chinese dishes.

Korean food does tend to present a challenge for wine, which is why most drinkers go for beer, soju or sake. But, as always, it depends on the specific dish.

As you suggest, the main red flag is spice. This often arrives in the form of hot-pepper flakes or chili paste, though seasonings and preparations certainly vary from region to region. Even when the main dish itself is free of hot spice, there is often kimchi to contend with. That's the fermented side dish (or condiment) based on a variety of vegetables, including cabbages and radishes, kicked up by chilis and other aromatic seasonings.

Kimchi can be kryptonite for big reds such as those you favour with non-Asian food. But if you adore full-bodied red wine, I'd suggest zinfandel (the red, not pink, stuff) with meat-based dishes. It's got the jammy fruit to help tame the spice. On the lighter, opposite side, you might entertain a chilled, crisp Beaujolais.

A better general strategy, I think, is to stick to whites with a hint of sweetness and balancing acidity. Alsatian wines based on gewürztraminer, riesling or pinot gris are among the top choices. If nothing else, their ample fruitiness will harmonize with the aromatic seasonings and douse the fire. I'd suggest the same wines for many Chinese dishes – again bearing in mind that I'm making gross generalizations about two vast and varied cuisines. On the drier front, try crisp Austrian gruner-veltliner, another white.

Whatever you serve, I'd suggest keeping it reasonably affordable. The subtleties of expensive Burgundy are doomed to lose the battle against all that deliciously aromatic and vibrant chili, garlic, ginger and soy.

What's a good wine for sushi?

I love a good East-meets-West challenge, and I love sushi, so I've given this some thought over the years.

Many people equate the term sushi with raw fish, but the more correct word in that case is sashimi. Sushi is a Japanese dish involving vinegared rice, most commonly a roll stuffed with raw fish, though the rolls, typically sliced into disks, can contain other ingredients, notably raw vegetables. A "sushi" meal usually consists of a variety of such rolls as well as a few artfully sliced standalone pieces of raw fish. We're talking freshness and delicacy, and that pretty much dictates a white wine. (I'm assuming from your question that you're not, as am I, partial to the classic pairing, sake.)

Often the rice is infused with sugar and served in the company of two condiments, soy sauce and wasabi, which has a pungent flavour comparable to Dijon mustard or horseradish. So there's usually a sour-sweet-salty-spicy symphony going on. I know one veteran sushi chef who swears by New Zealand sauvignon blanc, a zesty-fruity white that, though technically dry, contains underlying sugar that resonates nicely with the rice.

My own preference, however, veers more toward leaner, less brassy styles, because I want the sushi to take the lead rather than share its glory with the grape (that's why I strongly favour neutral, vaguely sweet sake). My top wine choice is dry sherry, specifically the styles labelled fino and manzanilla, which are clear in colour, tangy as the dickens and always served cold. But most people find the racy, saline quality of dry sherry jarring. That's why I'd suggest gruner veltliner from Austria. It's fruitier than sherry, and drier and more neutral than New Zealand sauvignon blanc, but still delivers a yin-yang of sourness and subtle sweetness. Some people like sushi with muscadet from France, a very neutral white that also happens to be a classic pairing for raw oysters. I think it goes nicely with sashimi unadorned with wasabi, not so much with a condiment, and rice-laden sushi platter.

It's become fashionable for Alsatian winemakers in particular to say that their white wines – riesling, muscat and gewurztraminer in particular – are well-suited to sushi. I wouldn't argue. Alsatian whites, usually dry, have a fruity-aromatic quality that stands up (reasonably) well to a dollop of wasabi. They also often tingle with a mineral-like character that resonates with the saline-maritime qualities of the fish.

If you are a diehard red wine drinker, here's my recommendation: Skip the sushi and grill up a steak.

I love spicy food and I love red wines. Can the two get along?

I hardly expect to convert a red-wine diehard, but I'd be negligent in failing to stress that aromatic white wines, notably gewurztraminer, pinot gris and riesling (especially off-dry riesling), sing with spice. To ask a red wine to pair fantastically with spicy food is to ask an SUV to handle like a Maserati around the curves. A nimble white with a yin-yang of sweet fruit and mouthwatering acidity carries through and tames the heat. Red wines tend to be drier and also come with a truckload of tannins, astringent compounds that can turn noticeably bitter in the presence of chilies and other aromatic spices. If you disdain whites (which can be just as serious as reds), I'd suggest either a light, crisp Beaujolais (which should be served slightly chilled) or a boldly jammy, full-bodied style, such as shiraz or red zinfandel.

Tiny super-specialized tacos continue to dominate this summer, dispensed by food trucks and a never-ending parade of hipster taco joints peddling beef cheeks, deep-fried fish and roasted cauliflower specialties loaded with spice and cream. Can any wine stand up to the smorgasbord?

It's a tall order, and the short answer, strictly speaking, is no.

I had a marinated-octopus taco from a food truck recently and wished I could have quenched my thirst for a dry Mediterranean white or cold shot of tequila with a squirt of lime. For richer beef tacos I tend to favour fruity reds, especially red (not pink) zinfandel or shiraz in the case of particularly spicy preparations. Hearty meat and bold heat demand the cooling embrace of jammy fruit. If I had to settle on just one wine to cover the waterfront, I'd probably go with chilled gamay, the light, crisp red variety most often associated with Beaujolais. Zesty, fruity and not too pretentious or expensive, it's as cheerful as a mariachi band at an open-bar wedding. Or there's always sangria if you really must have wine instead of beer or tequila.

Social Qs

At The Party

What's the best style of wine to bring to a holiday gathering?

The safest bet is Champagne or another good sparkling wine (especially if you're coming to my holiday gathering).

A wine gift should flatter the host, and bubbly is always welcome, especially with New Year's Eve approaching.

If it's a dinner and you expect the wine will be served with the meal, ask if you can bring something to match the food. If, on the other hand, it's more of a cocktail gathering and you are talking specifically about a gift to be consumed later, in addition to Champagne I'd suggest a European red, such as good Côtes du Rhône or Chianti. These tend to be affordable (mainly in the $15 to $30 zone, though some are more expensive) and would please most people.

How many bottles do I bring to a dinner party?

There are unstated assumptions here. Do you know the hosts well? Are they wine aficionados? Is it a weeknight or a more leisurely weekend party? Can you trust the guests won't pound back your two or three bottles and get behind the wheel? And, not least, are you concerned about getting to sample the wine yourself?

Etiquette experts mostly agree that the wine you bring is intended for the hosts' cellar (or broom closet, as the case may be). They are under no obligation to open it. That's based on the assumption your hosts have laboured all day and, if they're keen about wine, prefer to honour the fancy food, and you, with an appropriate beverage.

If you want to bring something to enjoy personally, consider bringing two bottles, being careful to announce which one is for the house and which one for the table. This presumes you know the people reasonably well. You could also call in advance to ask if they'd appreciate a specific wine style for the meal – cabernet for roast beef, for example. This telegraphs your intent, in which case you can just bring one.

All things being equal, it's often not out of place to bring two anyway, assuming you can afford it, because more people drink wine today than in the past. It's not necessarily a sign you're a candidate for rehab. Take my experience as a guide if you will: I've never been turned away at the door for bringing too much wine.

My district supervisor is a wine snob. What sort of wine should I bring to his dinner party?

There are two main snob profiles, so I've got a two-pronged suggestion.

Is he a mere label chaser or a curious enthusiast with deep knowledge? That's a critical distinction. Some people are keen on certain expensive brands and lofty appellations (because they've got the money to pay for them) but lack true encyclopedic knowledge and curiosity. These people don't need to bother "wasting" their time learning a lot about wine because they can afford to buy the obvious, expensive stuff.

For this sort of person, I'd recommend an expensive red from: Bordeaux (any "grand cru classé" will do); Burgundy ("grand cru" or "premier cru"); Napa Valley (preferably cabernet sauvignon), Tuscany (Chianti riserva or Brunello di Montalcino) or Piedmont (Barolo or Barbaresco). In this case, the more you spend, the better your chances of landing a familiar label that will meet with approval. That typically means $40-plus, though you may find a good Chianti riserva for $25 to $30. Personally, I'd take a more oblique route and go for a red from the southern Rhône Valley – say, a Gigondas or Vacqueyras ($25 and up). A snob should be familiar with these cellar-worthy Rhône reds and may even be more impressed with your savvy.

The other sort of geek tends to take joy in all sorts of wines. One of the most affordable snob-approved options is cru Beaujolais. Sommeliers tend to love the stuff – for good reason. This is the elite class of red Beaujolais from such villages as Brouilly, Moulin-à-Vent, Chénas, Fleurie and Morgon, all relatively light but wonderfully complex and food-friendly. You'll see the village name prominently displayed on the label. They tend to sell for $20 to $30, and Morgon is arguably the top of the heap. Look for one from either 2009 or 2011, two great recent vintages.

I'm looking for a reasonably priced crisp white and rich red for a summer wedding. People in their 20s seem to like pinot grigios while people in my age group tend to gravitate to chardonnays, so that's my dilemma. The menu is a choice of chicken, fish or vegetarian?

Let me start with a contrarian opinion, if I may: The menu should not be allowed to factor heavily into this decision.

You've got to satisfy a large crowd, and I suspect most people won't pay much attention to the suitability of the wines with the food. People tend to judge wine on the first sip. If they like it on its own, they'll generally be happy with how it pairs with the food. Not everyone, of course, but I'm speaking in broad terms. (Dinner parties at home present a different scenario. Guests tend to be more focused on what you've lovingly set out on the table and may be more disposed to cut the wine some slack if they are given the impression that it was chosen for the meal.)

Besides, you've got several food options for the wedding, none of them very heavy. Depending on how the dishes are prepared, you may not want to go with a rich red at all, assuming food-and-wine matching is your paramount concern. For delicate fish, for example, a light, crisp Beaujolais would be more suitable than a hefty cabernet sauvignon or shiraz. But the vast majority of guests will not, I guarantee you, love Beaujolais regardless of its synergy with fish.

Putting aside the matter of food, I think your instincts are sound with regard to the wine guidelines you've set for me. Pinot grigio is immensely popular; it will please many people (though perhaps not most wine critics!). So is chardonnay. And most people who drink red in Canada favour big, mouth-filling wines (not Beaujolais).

Given that cost is a concern, as it is with pretty much all weddings except those of the royal kind, I'd be more inclined toward crisp pinot grigio than chardonnay. It's a summer wedding after all, and light, zesty wines tend to taste better in the heat. More importantly, you'd be hard-pressed to find a good chardonnay for under $10.

Citra, a big, widely available brand from Italy, makes a decent pinot grigio for $8.25 (in Ontario), though there are many other bargain options.

If you're willing to pay more, I'd suggest Masi Masianco from Italy ($15). It's based mainly on pinot grigio but contains a dollop of superripe verduzzo, which pulls the wine into richer territory that may also please a chardonnay lover. Another option, at about $16, is Anselmi San Vincenzo. It's mainly based on the zesty

garganega grape (not dissimilar to pinot grigio) but it contains a small quantity of chardonnay – again, giving the wine more heft.

As for rich reds, Chile offers great value. At about $10, Cono Sur Bicicleta Merlot is a bargain, substantial yet crisp. Even better, at about $13, there's Pasqua Villa Borghetti Passimento. It's a dynamite value from northern Italy, a turbocharged Valpolicella made from grapes that were left to dry for a month after harvest to concentrate flavours. Wines from Italy made in this manner have become very popular. You can think of them as rich-red counterparts to light, fashionable pinot grigios.

I want to buy a cellar-worthy wine that I can present to my niece when she turns 18. She was born in 2008. Any affordable suggestions, or is this a bad idea? I would store it in our basement cold room.

I get the question a lot (not specifically about your niece, of course, and not just about 2008). Permit me to offer some broad observations before addressing your specific needs.

Your instinct to seek advice is wise because the vast majority of wines made today would start falling apart long before your niece starts finger-painting "Dear Auntie" greeting cards, let alone enters university. Price is a major issue, sadly. Only fine wines with sound balance and good tannin-acid structure can blossom into their late teens. Wine styles with the best long-term track records (and you can add the qualification "expensive" for each in this list) include red Bordeaux, red burgundy, Rhône Valley reds such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, California cabernet sauvignon, German riesling, vintage-dated champagne, Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino; vintage port and Madeira. That's by no means a complete list, but it's a good guideline.

The other big consideration is vintage, or the harvest year designated on the

label. Like people, wines have good years and bad. This is where you may want to consult the Internet for a so-called vintage chart. These charts list a variety of regions around the world along with a corresponding point score (out of 100). That score reflects the general quality of the growing season in the region. The higher the number, the more likely a wine from the region will be built for the long haul.

I regret to say that 2008 was less than stellar in most major regions, but you've got choices. The year was decent in Bordeaux, particularly the district called Pomerol. Three other good European options from 2008: German riesling, Barolo from Piedmont and reds from the Maremma coast of Tuscany, home to many so-called super Tuscans. Chile, Argentina and California (specifically cabernet sauvignon from all three) did well, too.

Among all of the above, my inclination would be to go with Barolo. Can you afford $50 or more? That's the price of entry for a good Barolo. If you want to try your luck for less than, say, $30, I'd suggest cabernet sauvignon from Chile. I've enjoyed older, affordable Chileans that stood the test of time, and Chile is an underrated category for cellar-worthiness in my book.

The safer option is vintage port, a great fortified wine from Portugal, which tends to improve with many decades in bottle even in the less-than-ideal cellar conditions of an old-fashioned cold room. But port comes with two drawbacks in your case. The vintage bottlings, unlike less-expensive non-vintage-dated ports, are pricey, usually upward of $50 and $100-plus for the best. The other problem is that they're heavy and sweet. There are few 18-year-old women (or men, for that matter), who like to sit around the fireplace and hold forth on Victorian politics over a heartwarming glass of port. I suspect your niece, when she turns 18, would be happier with a bottle of raspberry vodka. But, of course, it's the thought that counts, and she's a lucky girl to have such a thoughtful aunt. She'll be able to hold on to that Barolo or port for a few years more, too. And perhaps by the time 2026 rolls around our nation's youth will have moved beyond flavoured vodka.

What's the right number of bottles to buy for a wedding with 80 guests?

Are these my friends and family or yours? The answer depends.

You, of course, are the best judge of your crowd's thirst. But I can offer a guideline. While not intended to encourage over-consumption, of course, especially where driving is involved, the absolute minimum is half a bottle a person – not including bubbly for a toast or hard liquor at the bar. The night will be long and joyous, and there will be food and dancing. There will be abstainers in the mix, but others will imbibe more than their share (if my experience as a wedding guest is an indication).

My personal strategy would be to spring for at least a bottle for each adult, more likely a bottle and a half. I'm sorry if that sounds scandalous. Just be sure to make an announcement that no one should overimbibe without a designated driver. You can usually return what you don't use. Alternatively, if the reception is held in an unlicensed establishment, such as a private garden, you can keep the leftovers and relive the festive day over and over again with the same wines.

I like weddings, and there is no excuse (except poverty) for running out of booze on a great evening such as this. As with flattery for the bride, it's better to err on the side of too much than too little.

At The Restaurant

What's the best wine to order in a restaurant if I want bang for my buck?

Beer. (Just kidding.) It depends on the establishment, but there's something to be said for choosing the offbeat. Restaurants can't afford to have inventory collecting dust, unless we're talking about trophy wines that get more expensive as they collect dust. Wines made from uncommon grapes or wine styles that simply get little attention usually have been priced to sell. This can include oddities like ribolla from Italy or piquepoul from France, and it includes appellations like Toro in Spain.

It can also include something as familiar as Beaujolais, the red wine based on gamay, simply because there's not a lot of demand for Beaujolais. (I often choose Beaujolais because it's food-friendly, refreshing and usually well-priced.)

Why would a restaurant carry wines few people drink? Because of the sommelier. These wine experts, who control or assist in the buying, want to keep things interesting. They also want to carry selections they believe will pair well with the chef's food, and that may mean stocking up on Corsican sciacarello even if

nobody's heard of it. Usually these wines are a point of pride for sommeliers, and the restaurant is likely to price them well because the sommelier wants people to share his or her enthusiasm. A restaurant could get by just selling wines based on popular grapes, such as cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and pinot noir, but what fun would that be?

Obscurity is no guarantee of value, of course. Some restaurants calculate a fixed percentage markup regardless of the bottle. But you're more likely to get gouged by pinot grigio than gros manseng.

Tonight we ate at a cool little diner. I ordered a nice glass of syrah from the bartender. Later, our food server asked if I wanted another glass. I said yes. She proceeded to pour literally half the amount I got the first time around. I've had this happen to me numerous times in the past, and there never seems to be a solution. What does one say without sounding trivial or annoying?

The depressing short pour – I share your frustration. By drawing attention to the matter, you obviously risk being objectified as a lush, cheapskate or just plain jerky. But you have every right to expect a second glass equal in volume to the first.

The presence of two pourers complicates your situation. A complaint will have the effect of painting the hard-working waitress as chintzy next to Free-Pour Willy behind the bar. It could backfire, too, assuming Shot-Glass Sally is in no mood for a challenge. She could argue that the bartender – not she – was in error with regard to volume, that you were already ahead of the game with that liberal first pour.

Perversely, there is no guarantee of consistency at most fine-dining establishments. Virtually all but the cheapest places use glassware much larger than the serving size. The point here is to provide headroom for swirling and sniffing, which is a good thing. Five ounces should be the standard pour, but how do you know what you're getting?

The upsetting issue here is that most bartenders and waiters do not use a proper measuring vessel. They simply aim for an imaginary line somewhere up the side of the glass and stop when they think they've reached it. You'll notice they usually do this with a calculated air of conviction, which is part of the game ("I'm a pro"). But human servers do not have the precision of government-inspected gas pumps. (Imagine if they sold gasoline using the rough-guess method!) As we all know – and as you have noted in your question – the imaginary line has a funny way of moving up and down based on the person and the moment.

Curiously, this doesn't happen much with beer. You know you're getting a consistent volume of brew each time you order – either a full glass or a standard brewery bottle.

I would speak up – but respectfully. Try something like: "I don't mean this as a complaint, and I'm having a great time. But I was hoping the second glass would be just as substantial as the first. Am I being rude if I ask for a splash more? If so, don't worry about it, I'll survive."

Remember, servers tend to earn most of their income from tips. They want you to feel satisfied. When they underpour,

they usually do so inadvertently. (It's the owner who stands to gain from skinflint service, not the salaried server.) They'll probably conclude that an extra ounce or two of moderately priced wine is a small price to pay for a patron's satisfaction. If the server balks, at least you've got your frustration out of your system. And you've got the last laugh: It's called undertipping.

How do I get the waiter to pick me to taste-test a wine if I don't trust my friends to judge whether it's "off"?

If this were a Dear Abby-style column, I suppose I'd start by advising you to make friends you can trust. But there's an easier solution for your predicament.

Restaurant custom dictates that the server defer to the guest who ordered the bottle. He or she will first display the label to ensure the brand and vintage date correspond to what has been ordered. Then comes the sample pour, enabling the guest to sniff and scrutinize for faults, such as cork taint (a musty aroma), volatile acidity (vinegar) or just plain tired and stale (often a sign it was cellared improperly).

The best way to insinuate yourself here is to prevail on your dining companions to let you order the wine. If you're concerned about coming across like a control freak (or, worse, wine snob), consider a subtle approach. Try a line like, "Hey, I've been to this restaurant before and have a few favourites on the wine list. Anybody mind if I make a few suggestions based on the table's preferences and what we'll be eating?" I find that people often are glad to be relieved of the burden. But, of course, it depends on the crowd.

Let's say somebody in the group has already hogged the wine list and beaten you to the punch. You've got another option. "Hey, that's a great choice," you might say (flattery is catnip for wine snobs). "Could we do away with convention and let me be the first to try it when it comes?" Or you could try a more subversive approach. Tell your companion(s) that you've been reading up on wine faults and would love to test your skills in a formal setting, adding that if the wine turns out to be defective even after you give it the thumbs up, then you'll pick up the dinner tab.

If you've got friends like mine, that last promise should do the trick. Just one caveat: Make certain that you know more about wine faults than your friends.

My wife and I were dining with friends at a restaurant in Toronto that allows BYOB. Our friends ended up bringing a bottle from their cellar, which we drank with dinner. What's the etiquette? Were we supposed to pick up more than our share of the check?

If the wine was Romanée-Conti, yes. If not, a gracious thank you would have sufficed.

BYOB stands for bring-your-own-booze, and restaurants in certain jurisdictions are permitted to allow patrons to walk in with a sealed bottle of wine. The systems vary based on geography. In Toronto, restaurants that already sell alcohol can opt to let customers bring their own. In Quebec, BYOB is generally permitted only in restaurants that do not sell alcohol but are licensed to serve it.

I'm assuming from your question that your friends surprised you with a special bottle and that there was no prior arrangement regarding whom, if anyone, was to bring wine. That's the key here. On the face of it, I'd interpret the gesture as a gift to be shared, so there's no debt, per se, on your part.

But one generous act deserves another. It's good to make some sort of gesture – short of whipping out calculators and prorating the bill based on the estimated current auction value of the cellared bottle.

My first inclination, given that you were at a licensed establishment in Toronto, would be to offer to buy the table a round of aperitifs from the restaurant, assuming it's a thirsty group and there's no tipsy-driving risk. That's considerate toward the restaurant as well, since there are costs associated with BYOB service. The restaurant loses its fat alcohol markup – booze, not food, is where many high-end restaurants make their money.

An alternative gesture is to offer to tip for the whole table, letting the restaurant simply divide the meal cost down the middle between two credit cards.

There's yet another appropriate move. Most restaurants in jurisdictions such as Toronto charge a so-called corkage fee – often between $10 and $25 but in some cases as high as $40 – to cover costs associated with BYOB service. You could simply offer to cover the corkage fee, a nice, tidy solution.

In the end it all depends on how well you know your friends and whether you suspect they were counting on being reimbursed. In my book, no one should come bearing a surprise bottle and expect to gain something apart from heartfelt thanks.

When a waiter provides you with a small amount of wine that you have selected, do you need to taste it? I find that nosing the wine provides sufficient information to determine if the wine is off.

I merely sniff, rarely taste, before accepting or rejecting the bottle.

The custom of presenting a small pour for examination is widely misunderstood. It's rooted in the fact that wine is frequently plagued by faults. The patron is supposed to verify that it's in sound condition, free of chemical flaws, such as cork taint (a mouldy smell caused by a contaminated cork), volatile acidity (the smell of vinegar) and the like.

I regret to say the ritual has nothing to do with whether you like the wine or not, assuming it's in sound condition. Restaurants can't – and, in fairness, should not be expected to – guarantee you'll be happy with the quality or style of wine. (You ordered it for a reason, after all.) That said, some fine restaurants will occasionally offer to replace a wine you don't like, but this is generally understood to be at the waiter's discretion.

Most technical flaws, such as those I've outlined, reveal themselves in the aroma, which is why I rarely bother to taste the sample. Another reason I usually don't bother has to do with palate readiness. If you've just brushed your teeth before heading to the restaurant, the minty residue will play havoc with your palate. I find my nose tends to be sharper than my tongue after I've brushed or, say, munched on garlicky bruschetta while waiting for the bottle to arrive.

In any case, should you find later in the meal that the wine is indeed faulty, feel free to bring this to the waiter's attention. There's no shame; I've dined with astute experts – winemakers and top sommeliers – who have missed the cork taint at first, only to be alerted later by someone else at the table that the wine is indeed subtly corked. Most good restaurants will be keen to replace the bottle even halfway through the meal if it's defective. Sommeliers are usually quite happy to take back the bottle and return it to the importer; they're in the business because they care about this sort of thing.

The important thing, I think, is to not feel pressured into speed-sniffing that first pour. Take your time and consider passing the glass to another guest at the table for a second opinion if you're in doubt. The pretense that tends to surround wine can put people on the spot, and that's a lousy place to be when you're out to have a good time.

...And Other Sticky Situations

My girlfriend and I had the opportunity to visit the French wine region Châteauneuf-du-Pape and bought a bottle for about €35 [roughly $45 at current exchange rates] The intention was to save it for a future birthday. We arrived back to our apartment in Aix-en-Provence and found there was dried-up wine along the side of the bottle, which had clearly run down the neck. On further inspection, there was also fresh wine slowly oozing down the side. I took it to a local wine purveyor and asked what I should do. His view was that there was some problem with the corking and that it should be drunk immediately. So we did. Should I try to get in touch with the winery and ask for a refund?

Sorry about your experience. But my theory diverges from the wine purveyor's.

The sticky wine residue may – I stress, may – have been caused by negligent handling after your purchase. Did the bottle travel back to your apartment in the trunk of your car in summer? Wine is highly sensitive to heat. Fluid expands as temperature climbs, while the solid bottle retains the same dimensions. The wine may have pushed up through the sides of the cork. The tin capsule that covers the top of the neck would have forced the wine to flow down the side of the bottle, leaving that sticky, semi-dry residue. It's a judgment call as to whom to blame. The cork may indeed have been cut to a diameter that was too narrow to provide a tight seal, but even a cork machined to a perfect tolerance likely would have permitted the wine to pass by.

A car trunk can quickly turn into a sauna in the heat of a southern French summer. It's easy to underestimate the phenomenon when you're riding in air-conditioned comfort sipping a cool Evian. That's why I always travel with insulated Styrofoam containers, which preserve the bottle's chill, and ask the rental agency for a white car. White paint reflects the sun's rays, while dark colours absorb. (Yes, I'm a wine geek.)

Again, I'm not insisting it was entirely your fault. I'm just guessing, because I learned my lesson the hard way during a Napa Valley heat wave many years ago.

Incidentally, it doesn't necessarily mean your wine was completely spoiled. But often a bottle that's suffered heat-stroke will taste "cooked," which is to say more prune-like than it should. Had I been in your position, I might have

saved the wine and cellared it for, say, six to eight years maximum, not the usual 15 that can turn a fine Châteauneuf-du-Pape – the southern region named after the 14th-century French home of the papacy – into potable bliss. But there's no use crying over spilled Châteauneuf. At least you got to drink it, and the mishap is a notch on your wine-education belt, a story you can tell at dinner parties. Consider it your wine-geek baptism at the hands of a "pope."

We will be dining with an abstaining couple on New Year's Eve. Do we bring wine for ourselves? Help.

Oh yes you do, my friend, unless you have reason to suspect the couple in question would be offended on religious grounds.

It's best to call ahead if you are in doubt regarding the religion issue. Some people don't want alcohol in their homes, period, and homes are sacrosanct. But if it's just a case of people who prefer not to imbibe, you are entitled to honour their meal by enjoying it to the fullest, and if that to you means savouring it with pinot noir or chardonnay, take wine and mumble something to that effect. "We hope it's okay we brought this to enjoy with your meal. We love to have great food with some wine."

The key, though, is to be circumspect

around the bottle (or bottles) you bring. Keep the effusive wine-geek comments to a minimum. Non-drinkers will never understand the appeal, and wine talk will drive them into a coma. And be kind if they trot out tumblers instead of Riedel Sommelier series stemware. One more thing: Bring a corkscrew just in case they don't have one; much better to leave the wine at home than to suffer through a meal in plain sight of an uncorked bottle.

For those dining at a restaurant under similar circumstances, make sure to kick in for the full cost of the wine when the check comes. If there's one thing non-drinkers resent more than the presence of alcohol, it's having to pay for it.

What is the acceptable wine closure – screw cap or cork – to bring to a host/ dinner party? I have been under the impression that cork should be brought and that metal twist tops would be perceived as cheap.

You've raised a dilemma that plagues me (and I'm certain other readers) often.

We are still in the early days of the screw-cap boom, even though an estimated 17 per cent of wines now come sealed with that type of closure. Many people remain tied to the notion that aluminum signifies cheap wine. They'd be surprised to learn than many exceedingly expensive wines – I'm talking $100-plus a bottle – twist open. It's not a cost issue for quality wineries but rather a way to spare consumers from the scourge of cork taint, a foul-smelling, if harmless, pollutant that ruins many wines without warning.

I have bestowed many a screw-cap wine on dinner hosts, so consider me a true believer (I am sensitive to cork taint and loathe it). But sometimes I feel compelled to mutter a lame apology. It usually goes something like this: "Hey, I brought you a really cool wine. It's got a screw cap, but, trust me, it's serious stuff. Don't try to empty it into the marinade when I'm not looking." That kind of spoils the grace of the gesture, of course. It's sort of like saying, "Here's your gift. I paid a lot for this sucker. You'd better appreciate it." That's why I prefer the term "serious" rather than "expensive." But people expect a wine critic to bring decent wine to a party, so they probably figure I'm being sincere.

For most people eager to make an impression, cork, alas, is still the anxiety-free preference. If you're fond of a particular screw-cap wine that would make a fine gift, though, you could try my approach and hand it over with a word of reassurance. You could even tell them that virtually all the fine wines made in New Zealand are bottled under screw cap. Or you could tell them that The Globe and Mail's wine critic brings twist-open bottles to parties all the time.

Many of my friends make their own wine and I need a list of euphemistic adjectives to describe it. I realize frank discussion could end the friendships (and future dinners) if I tell the truth. Criticizing your friends' wine is like criticizing their children. Help!!!

Welcome to my life. I have neighbours who make their own. Joe relies on imported California grapes. Eric gets Joe to crush a proud red from a decades-old concord-grape arbour that grows like something out of Jack and the Beanstalk over Eric's back porch. Both wines are surprisingly well-crafted, but the fruit is not exactly grand cru. I have to make excuses for why Château Joe doesn't meet the quality criteria to warrant a splashy column in The Globe.

More frequently I find myself in the company of professionals whose juice isn't always up to snuff. So, I keep a handy mental glossary of polite winespeak. Here's a list, followed by phrases winemakers themselves often use to cover for their mistakes.

Assertive: A wine can, indeed, have too much flavour – bad flavour. This flexible catch-all covers everything from the foxy, wet-wool character of a red made from native North American vines (hello, concord) to the nail-polish fumes of a defect known as volatile acidity.

Food wine: Here's another versatile descriptor, but it's particularly apt for atrocities with a grip as bracing as battery acid. Nothing protects the taste buds, or tooth enamel, from oenological napalm like a hearty repast. Honourable mentions: vibrant, lively, tangy.

Closed: All wine should taste of fruit. But some young reds can be so cloaked in astringent tannins that the frutiness goes AWOL. It's not necessarily a defect, because the wine may eventually come around in the cellar. But it's hard to predict whether that's going to happen. In the meantime, you're safe with, "This strikes me as a bit closed. I think it needs time."

Bold: Do you grow listless or drowsy after two sips of a syrupy shiraz, jammy zinfandel or high-alcohol New World pinot noir? You've just had a "bold" wine, my friend.

Toasty: Like all euphemisms, this can apply in a sincerely complimentary context, specifically with respect to good wines carrying a nuance of charred wood from barrel maturation. That's why a lumber-loving winemaker would blush to hear that his or her overoaked chardonnay is "toasty."

Layered: Complexity is the hallmark of fine wine. "Layered" is sufficiently vague to acquit you in any circumstance.

Ripe: Grapes should be ripe when harvested, so this word is flattering by definition. When grapes cross the line, though, and develop a cloying raisin-like character, you can diplomatically omit the prefix "over" from "overripe."

Great nose: Too bad about the taste.

And from the winemaker's PR phrasebook:

It's an early-drinking vintage: Substitute "bad weather" for "early-drinking" and you've nailed it. Wines from poor harvests don't cellar well. Drink up soon because this dog is going nowhere.

We picked before (or after) the rains: Autumn can be precarious in many vineyard regions, with precipitation that turns berries into water balloons with diluted flavour. No one picks when the skies of October turn gloomy – or at least no savvy marketer admits to doing so.

Don't you love the matchstick?: No, I don't, at least not when it's highly pronounced. Sulphur compounds, either added as a preservative or produced naturally in tank or barrel through negligent practices, can get out of hand.

We use oak only as a seasoning: Many winemakers who rely on barrel aging trot out this cliché, even when the wine tastes like a two-by-four soaked in grape juice.

The grapes were hand-picked: And I proofread my columns with a pencil. So what?

We farm biodynamically: Then I hope your wine will taste better when the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars. It's quaint to follow astrology and bury a cow horn in the vineyard, but if the guy down the road makes better cabernet than you at a cheaper price, he's got my patronage.

Our pinot noir vineyards are planted with the Dijon 777 clone: Maybe that's why I'm getting a note of hot mustard.

This goes beautifully with sushi: So does pilsner. And a six-pack of Urquell is $20 cheaper than a bottle of your riesling.

The Globe and Mail's Beppi Crosariol