

SPOTTSWOODE

A Wine's Life: When is a Wine at its Best?

WHEN is a particular wine at its “best”? This is a question that is often posed, and one that is almost impossible to answer. Why? Because wine is a living, evolving entity, and like we humans, it does not have one particular moment in its life at which it is “optimal.” It goes through many stages, some good and some less so, which is what makes wine—and the human race—so intriguing!

Since crafting our first Estate Cabernet in 1982, we have had the experience of making wine in vintages considered to be great, good, challenging or somewhere in between. Regardless of vintage, we find some commonality in the life cycle of our wines.

The first year in barrel is a time when our winemaker is monitoring the progress of a very young wine. Each vintage is initially comprised of many lots, representing different blocks of our estate vineyard. They are all in various states of development—some are going through malolactic fermentation while others have finished; some are blended together as the “core blend,” while other lots are kept separate to see how they will develop and to determine if they will be declassified and sold or become part of the final wine. The second year in the barrel is always highly anticipated by the rest of us at the winery, as we are finally able to become familiar with and enjoy our Cabernet. During this stage the wines show beautifully, exhibiting classic “baby fat” characteristics, as we call them—they are showy, fresh, and luscious. Yet they are somewhat disparate—their various characteristics (fruit, oak, tannin, etc.) have not yet coalesced. Visitors to the winery also greatly enjoy tasting these wines from the barrel, and it is always fun for us to introduce them at this young stage.

Upon bottling, our Cabernets go through a rather tight stage known as bottle shock, yet when released one year later they are again showy and youthful. For the next eighteen months or so, our wines are almost as opulent and generous as they were in barrel, exhibiting the classic “Spottswode-esque” deep plum color and forward, exuberant fruit. They remain youthful for a period of roughly four or five years after release, and then they enter the dreaded teenage years. That is, they can be awkward, brooding and even a bit strange, captured somewhere between the

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A Family Wine Estate



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rambunctiousness of youth and the nuances that come with greater maturity. This stage seems interminable, as one notes the loss of the innocent fruity stage and does not have a sense of how the wine will sort itself out. Miraculously, after roughly two or three years, the wine re-emerges and begins to express interesting nuances not there in its child stage—the lovely fruit, well balanced with oak, is still present, but a greater subtlety begins to develop, displaying some new characteristics altogether. The wine, as opposed to being so innocently open, is a bit more elusive—layers of complexity are more apparent, and one notices warmer, almost berry pie nuances as opposed to the juicy, obvious fruit of youth. “Berry pie,” to us, conjures up aromas and flavors of pie spice, incense, sandalwood, violets, rose petals and potpourri—all of our vintages will express some of these characteristics to various degrees. The wine is also better with food at this stage, as it does not overwhelm with its youthful, fruity forwardness.

From this point on our Cabernet Sauvignon goes through stages, some better than others (though none as seemingly dramatic as those teenage years, thankfully!), and ages gracefully until finally, at some point, it hits a plateau from which it may go no higher and from which it will ultimately fall. It is a testament to the Spottswoode Vineyard that none of our vintages are “over the hill,” as it were. We feel, however, that some have reached their plateau and would best be consumed sooner rather than later (as we note annually in our Wine Library Notes). Having reviewed the “life cycle” of our Cabernet Sauvignon, what differentiates a vintage that is deemed “great” from one that is less highly praised? Those special “great” wines possess a core of fruit, an almost indefinable center, if you will—bestowed upon them by Mother Nature—that allows them to age for a longer period than “lesser” vintages. Their Golden Years are more extended, as they have the structure and natural components that allow them to age gracefully over time. Regardless of how a vintage is perceived, how can one ascertain the optimal time to drink a particular wine? Ideally, by enjoying it intermittently throughout the various stages of its life.