

GOOD TO THE LAST DROP

How to make leftovers last longer (or, code for: just drink it)

By Jessica Yadegaran
Contra Costa Times

There's a burning question wine drinkers ask themselves every time they pop a cork and can't finish the bottle: Will this taste good tomorrow?

Maybe you cracked that Cab on your own. Or your dining partner wanted red after you opened a white. Leftovers are easy when it comes to casseroles, but preserving an open bottle of wine for even one more day can be tricky. Most of us admit that silky Sangiovese just isn't the same the second night.

Devices such as vacuum pumps and inert gas dispensers promise to salvage those remains, but wine professionals are mixed on the performance of such tools. And then there are unconventional home remedies involving, among other things, cryogenics. Some of us are perfectly happy pouring the leftover wine into a Perrier bottle, screwing the cap and putting it in the fridge.

Either way, what you're basically fighting is air, and particularly the oxygen in air. Oxidation, by its nature, changes the chemistry of the components present in wine, says Susan Ebeler, a chemist and professor of enology at UC Davis. Namely, aroma and flavor.

With oxygen present, a microbial fermentation occurs, converting alcohol into acetic acid. In as little as three days, you might recognize this smell as eau de vinegar. And while oxygen does seep naturally through corks into wine, it would take many years to see real damage in your collection.

So gizmos are made to minimize an open bottle's exposure to oxygen. For \$10, the Vacu Vin Wine Saver pumps air out and puts a rubber stopper in. Private Preserve (\$9 a can) and Pek Preservation Systems (\$40 for kit) fill the headspace with inert gases such as argon and nitrogen, or blends of both. These gases are heavier than air and push it out. Just spray one long second followed by four short bursts, and your wine could be safe for weeks, if not months.

Sounds good in theory, but Matt Levin is on the fence. The chef and owner of the Refuge wine bar in San Carlos gases his 20 French wines with a nitrogen and carbon dioxide blend. The method buys him an extra day or two, but he always tastes the wines and tosses them if they're not up to par.

"I'm starting to think it doesn't make much of a difference," he says. "It would only work if I kept the cork on. But I take it on and off all day."

Rick Mitchell of Oakland's Franklin Square Wine Bar concurs. On a busy night the restaurant will open up to six cases of wine, or 72 bottles, and have 40 open by the end of the night. "I'm not entirely sure the gas doesn't change the flavor of the wine over time," he says. "Or the mouth-feel." Mitchell's a fan of the Vacu Vin, because, as he puts it, "you're not adding anything to the wine."

Neither Levin nor Mitchell gas at home. They both recork and refrigerate. Levin appreciates wines that've been open, he says. The last 2 ounces of a 5-ounce glass are his favorite. "The wine has a chance to get to know its new environment," he says. "Babies come out looking like aliens. Then they come to life and get pink and cute. You start to love them."

Whites get better with time, he says, and he's noticed that wines with higher acidity and alcohol can sometimes last up to four days; biodynamic ones, five.

Master sommelier Evan Goldstein, who favors Private Preserve, believes that you have to plan your preservation. Keep a supply of empty half-bottles handy. If you're a glass-a-night drinker, open the bottle and immediately pour half into a 375-ml bottle, gas it, recork it and stick it — red or white — in a 55-to-60-degree fridge.

"You might even be able to stick the red back in your cellar for a week," Goldstein says. He's a fan of experimentation. "Try different methods," he says. "Get some people together and bring your wines from the night before," he says. "See what works."

That said, you'd never want to gas or vacuum a Champagne. A bouchon, or sparkling-specific sealer, preserves bubbles in the fridge for a few days. And, Goldstein adds, even though sugar is a natural preservative, you still want to gas dessert wines, particularly vintage ports, which begin to dive after a few weeks in the liquor cabinet.

While he doesn't practice these methods, Goldstein is familiar with and has friends who replace the air in a partial bottle with glass marbles, and others who freeze their leftovers. Marbles are a good way to minimize headspace, confirms Ebeler, the enology professor. As for wine cryogenics? No comment.

Perhaps it's just too much work. If the wine's that special, just finish it. Or do what chef Jacob Alioto of Franklin Square does. Succumb to chemistry, and make vinegar.