

PREPARING WINES FOR A COMPETITION

Well, that's easy enough, just select a few bottles from the cellar, fill out the entry form and stick an appropriate label on the bottle and we're done! Yes, you can do it that way but are you really giving yourself the best chance at success? Definitely not, why not, because you don't have any real idea what is in the bottle. Just because another bottle of the same wine was fine doesn't necessarily mean that the one you have selected is in the same condition.

Lets look at why that might be...

Most of the reasons why the wine might be different have to do with the closure that you have used. This presupposes that you have followed the usual sanitation guidelines like thoroughly washing and sanitizing the bottles before you filled them, and that the wine that you put into the bottles was, at the time, the best that you could produce. In other words it was properly balanced [alcohol, sugar and acid] and that it was crystal clear. This presentation is aimed directly at preparing wines for competition and is not intended to detail the methods of producing a winning wine, so we assume that the wine that you are contemplating entering is basically sound and competition ready.

Back to closures...

There is currently a huge debate among commercial wineries concerning the best closures, be it some form of cork or screw top, or some other form. We won't go there, except to say that commercial wineries have a major advantage over we amateurs in that their bottles are standardized and they can therefore order closures to fit the bottles. For the most part we are faced with using recycled bottles and for those that don't know, the inside diameter of bottles from different suppliers do in fact vary, generally within a small range but are nonetheless variable. I'm sure that you have all, from time to time, noticed that a cork from the same batch either goes in easily or hard, and similarly you will have experienced the cork that comes out easily and you wonder if the wine has deteriorated as a result. Some of the problem can relate to the quality of the cork but also to the bottle variation.

More on corks...

Cork manufacturers generally package their product in plastic bags containing 1000 corks and upwards. Prior to packaging the corks are sanitized by the production process and the bags are usually inerted with nitrogen so that while the bag remains sealed the corks remain in a sanitized condition. Despite this it is said that commercial wineries can experience up to 10% cork taint!! So if that is the case what chance do we amateurs have!! On top of all that we usually buy our corks in smaller packages so that means that the retailer has, sometime in the past, torn open the original plastic bags and transferred the corks from that

into smaller bags. I wonder how many fell on the floor during this process, or whether the retailers assistant was wearing gloves, or perhaps he had just finished lugging carboys about [if it is also a you brew], or doing other dust raising things in the warehouse. Or maybe he had just been transferring dextrose from a big bag into retail packages – you get the idea. It is little wonder therefore that the use of corks is a bit like Russian Roulette and its probably surprising that we get away with as much as we do.

Enough on corks, but hopefully you can now see why you shouldn't just take a bottle off the shelf and enter it in the competition. So what to do....

Sometime before the competition, preferably at least a month before but no more than three months before, you should select the bottles that you plan to enter and open and taste them. You will not be looking for flaws in the wine because that is something that you will have done before the original bottling, but rather you will be looking for faults, primarily oxidation and cork taint. At this point it might be appropriate to touch on the difference between a fault and a flaw. Wikipedia has a good article on this but basically a flaw is something that detracts from the overall quality of the wine but it remains drinkable, whereas a fault is something such as oxidation or cork taint which renders the wine undrinkable.

Most competitions allow entry of half bottles so that you have a great opportunity to taste the wine and if it's OK to transfer the entry into a half bottle. The reason for the time constraint between three and one month before the competition is that you will no doubt be closing your half bottle with a cork so you don't want to have it in the bottle for too long in case it might cause taint or oxidation. It should be done at least a month before to allow the wine to settle in its new home to avoid "bottle shock"

Most of the foregoing applies to both red and white wines. An additional advantage of the process when dealing with red wines is that it provides an opportunity to eliminate any sediment on the bottom and sides of the bottle that can occur over time. It's most likely that any red wines that you enter will be at least a couple of years old so given that red wines are not normally filtered the chances of sediment in the bottle are pretty good.

Once you have the best wine that you can produce in a clean bottle then thoroughly read the entry regulations and follow them to the letter. Many competitions are quite rigidly controlled and any deviation from the regulations can result in the entry being disqualified. Then fully complete the entry form giving as much information about the wine as possible. Many entry forms request information about the sweetness and alcohol levels of the wine. It is important to be as accurate as possible when answering these questions as flights are prepared with dry wines first followed by wines of increasing sweetness so as to avoid assaulting the judges palates with an off dry or semi-sweet wine before a dry wine in the same class. Sweetness guides can be found

on the Internet and it should be possible to determine a close proximity to the final alcohol using the starting SG. It is also very important to ensure that you enter the wine in its most appropriate category. In some competitions a wine will simply be rejected rather than re-classed if it is entered in the wrong class.

Finally a word about feedback....

You might be tempted to enter a wine with faults in the hope that the judges will give feedback so that you will be able to either correct the fault, or more likely avoid it in the future. Unfortunately it is unlikely that you will receive such feedback for two reasons. The first is that in a competition there is usually limited time so that feedback from judges will generally only deal with flaws [acid and sugar out of balance for example]. The second reason is that judges may not themselves be winemakers so that, although they are able to recognize them, they may not be in a position to advise on the avoidance of faults and flaws

In conclusion only enter your very best wines in the competition. If you have concerns about faults and flaws bring the wine to a meeting and enter it in Wine Doctor where it can be considered and discussed at length and rectification recommended.