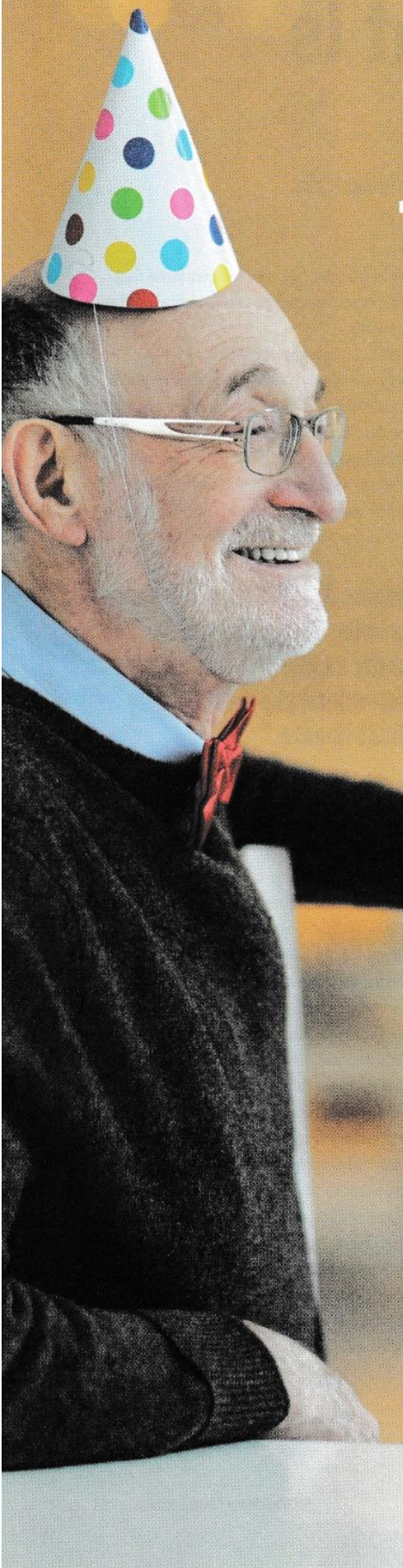


Light up a face

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI



Imagine the buzz you could get from the look on a friend's face when they open their birthday present from you and find that it is a bottle of wine from their birth year. Trust me, the experience is truly awesome for both of you. Their face lights up with pleasure not only from the wine, but also at your thoughtfulness of going to such an effort for them. In turn you get a huge buzz at being able to give a friend so much pleasure.

Well, the good news is that it is not that hard to do, especially if you and/or your friends are vintage 1970s or 1980s. It's harder, but still possible to do, for vintage 1960s people and extremely difficult for us pre-vintage 1960 oldies. I have enjoyed wines from my vintage for my 40th, 50th and 60th birthdays - all of which were drinkable - with some like the Orlando Barossa Shiraz and the Chateau Latour being absolutely sensational. I still have one bottle of Wynns Hermitage and one or two fortified (Portuguese and Australian) tucked away in the cellar for my 70th birthday - if I can still remember that by then.

There are some excellent wine auction houses around Australia, such as Wickmans and Oddbins in Adelaide and Sterling's in Perth to name a few, which conduct regular auctions with good volumes of wines over the net. In each auction a few gems from the past will appear. I'm not talking about 1970 to 1990 Granges or Hill of Grace at astronomical prices, which are out of the reach of most of us, but rather more affordable wines from the likes of Seppelts, Wynns, Orlando, Redman, McWilliams and the like.

It is of course a gamble to buy old wines at auction, however most of these wines have been owned by serious collectors or else they would not have survived this long, having been either drunk or tipped out.

They are now on the market due to death, infirmity, old age or financial needs of their owners. Back when these wines were released, the concept of buying and cellaring wine as an investment was almost non-existent, so these wines were tucked away by people who planned to mature them and then enjoy them at their best. Now for one reason or another they are selling them, which gives you an opportunity to impress a friend, and maybe even taste a venerable old wine with them.

To improve the chances of the wine being in sound condition there are a few simple guidelines to follow.

Auction houses detail the level of the wine in the bottle for old wines. They describe them with terms such as: *high shoulder* (meaning that the wine is no longer into the neck of the bottle, but that the wine level is now on the higher part of the shoulder of the bottle), *mid shoulder*, *low shoulder* and *low level*. When the wine is extremely 'ullaged' (low level) they measure it in centimetres from the bottom of the cork or the bottom of the neck of the bottle. While this sounds bad, for ports and some classic long-lived wines, it does not necessarily mean that the wine will be no good. For example, a bottle of 1944 Seppelts Para Port, which is described as "level 5cm from bottom of the cork" is probably okay and quite drinkable. Though obviously the higher the level in the bottle (less ullaged) the better the chances of the wine being in good condition.

The auctioneers will also advise if, for example, a white wine is rather dark in the bottle. They will also tell you if the labels or the capsule are damaged, which may give an indication of the wine's storage conditions over its lifetime. For instance, the notation 'weeping cork' is a good warning sign for table wines, but not necessarily for a fortified. In the late 1990s my best drinking buddy and I bought a stack of 1974-1976 McLaren Vale vintage ports with weeping corks for around \$5 a bottle. We are still enjoying these superb wines from time to time today.

If you read the information they provide carefully you will get a good idea of what state that particular bottle is likely to be in.

Of course, there is still the chance that the wine is corked, or has aged too much and fallen apart, but that is simply the luck of the draw.

In Europe they can quite confidently buy 100-year-old Bordeaux wines which have lived in the likes of Scottish castles, where the temperature in the cellar probably drops down to not much above freezing point in winter and rises to around a balmy eight to 10 degrees in the middle of summer. Here in Australia with our warm climate it is wise to buy older wines that have lived in the southern part of the continent, unless the auction house can give you confidence in the cellaring provenance of the wines. For example, in their printed catalogues, Oddbins put a hashtag next to those lots which they know come from good cellars – provenance.

The chances of a 25-year-old wine being in good condition if it has lived north of Sydney are much lower than if it has lived in Adelaide, Melbourne or Hobart. Unless if it has been housed in a temperature-controlled cellar.

Fortified wines live much longer than table wines. Most ports from almost any era are still going strong and selling for a song.

Today you can buy 1970s ports for not that much more than what they cost when brand new and they will most likely be drinkable due to them being a fortified wine.

Naturally some vintages are more readily available than others, as they were more sought after by the wine collectors of the time. It also helps if you or the intended recipient was born in a great wine year, as it is more likely that there will still be bottles around.

Last year I gave a dear friend a bottle of 1933 Para Port to celebrate his 85th birthday. It was bought at auction in the preceding 12 months.

Sorry, bad luck if you were born in an ordinary/mediocre wine year. The news is much better for younger people as due to technology, there have been far fewer poor years in the last two to three decades than before.

There is also of course a great selection of recent vintages available at auction for gift

giving. Recently I have been acquiring a few 2014 wines because two lots of our younger friends had their first child in 2014. Tucked away judiciously in the cellar, they will be enjoyable at the child's 18th or 21st birthday. Hey, if the child does not grow up enjoying wine (parents' fault) then there will be all the more for the parents (and friends) to enjoy on that special occasion!

So with some degree of forethought and careful planning you can either enjoy a marvellous old wine on your special occasion, or give somebody a memorable thrill by presenting them with a wine from a year that is special to them, like a birth year or wedding year – or perhaps even in some cases, a divorce year. It's worth the effort if the person is worth it. ♦

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