

# BYO: (Build your own) wine collection

So you're thinking about starting a wine collection? There are a few rules of thumb to get you on your way.

Some of the most important factors are proper wine storage, the reason(s) you'd like to start a collection, and understanding which wines are meant to be aged, for how long, and which are meant to be enjoyed young.

I spoke to Sean King, a local wine collector and previous winemaker for Schrader Cellars in Napa Valley, and asked him to share some of his expertise. He worked with one of the best winemakers in Napa Valley, Thomas Brown, a Food & Wine magazine Winemaker of the Year winner.

Today, Sean can be found at Michael's Wine Cellar; he's a walking wine encyclopedia, even more important, he has a true passion and appreciation for wine.

"I collect wine because I love it," Sean says of his 1,400 bottle collection. "I don't buy wine so I can say I have it; wine is meant to be drunk and enjoyed."

He explained that it opens up great



Nicole Carbon

conversation and the best times are often found while eating and drinking.

To begin your collection, consider the reasons why you'd like to start collecting. They may include: you like wine and have an appreciation for it, you entertain a lot, you're making an investment, or you simply have an interest in collecting wine. The reasons can be any or all of the above.

To start, buy what you like to drink and learn more about your personal palate by trying different varietals. Trust your palate, just like with food, you know what tastes good to you and what doesn't. If you entertain often, stock up on good-valued crowd pleasers — Vinho Verde, mid-range Cabernets, Pinot Noirs and meritages or blends.

Next, get an idea of which wines store well. Some wines are meant to be consumed fairly young, within a year or so of bottling, such as Rosé, Grenache/Garnacha, Albariño, Vinho Verde and Torrontés.

"Most wine is consumed within 48 hours of purchasing," Sean says. He explained that some wines you open too soon and some too late. So, how do you know which wines to age? Think high-acid, high-tannin wines like big bold American Cabernets and French Bordeauxs, rich Italian wines like Nebbiolo and Sangiovese and generally anything that is more full-bodied.

"If it's aged perfectly, it will have seamless fruit and soft tannins," Sean adds.

An aged Cabernet may go from flavors of black cherries, raspberries, red pepper, and dark chocolate to dried figs, dried cherries, milk chocolate, and tobacco leaf. You'll notice the color turns from ruby to garnet with a slight brown tinge.

Wine storage also is an important part of collecting.

Some tips:

- Always keep bottles on their sides to protect corks, keeping them moist so they don't dry out.

- You'll want to be sure they're stored in the proper temperature from the time they have been bottled to when you bring them home.

- Invest in a wine cooler. You can start with a 28-bottle cooler for around \$200 and most have dual-zoned temperatures, for whites and reds. The more serious collector will want to invest in something larger or consider building a wine cellar.

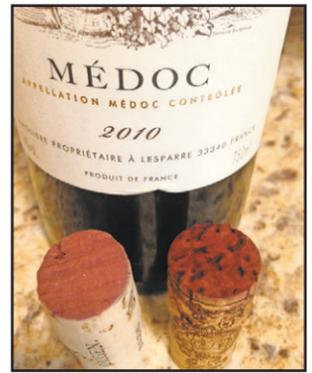
- When it is time to open a bottle of your properly-stored, aged-to-perfection wine, notice the distinct characteristics of the cork. Is it moist and intact when pulled from the bottle? There may be crystallization called tartrate crystals, which are odorless and harmless. This along with a moist cork are good signs. Next, smell the cork. Smelling the cork of both older and newer bottles is a sure-tell sign if the wine is good or spoiled. If it smells musty, sour or

what's described as wet dog, it's an indication that the wine is spoiled.

- When starting a collection, use your local wine shop as a resource. In the area, we are lucky to have a few, including Venice Wine and Coffee Company, and a little further up the road, Michael's Wine Cellar and the Butcher's Block. Stop in, ask questions. Each shop hosts informal wine-tasting events so you can go in and try different wines to see which you like best and pick the brains of the experts.

- If you want to take a day trip or make an overnight or weekend stay, there's another fantastic resource about an hour or so north in Tampa—the Epicurean Hotel. The hotel is centered around all things culinary and vino-related and they even hand you a glass of wine when checking in.

Just off the lobby area is Bern's Fine Wines & Spirits shop, tied to the iconic Bern's Steak House located across the street. Bern's Steak House has an award-winning wine list and its cellar is in its own free-standing building next door, so you'll be in good hands



SUN PHOTO BY NICOLE CARBON

**A comparison of two corks, one of a new wine and one of a wine that has been aged and is ready to open. Part of the collecting process is knowing when to open stored wine.**

if you choose to select wines from the shop.

Lastly, if you're interested in collecting wine, read about it, taste it, trust your palate and collect what you like.

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