



Wine

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Why great wine is worth waiting for

Wine lovers are finding it harder to source mature bottles, as the industry shifts focus to new releases. But some wines, if not all wines, only truly come alive with age



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One of the things that is supposed to make wine special – perhaps *the* thing – is its ability to improve with age. It’s such an ingrained part of the cultural imaginary, right down to the larky greeting cards that tell your dad or grandad (in my experience, this is a very male-oriented genre) how they’re ageing like a fine wine (or, as a kind of spin-off edition, ageing like fine milk, a gag that only serves to reinforce the idea of wine’s singular developmental wondrousness).

Most wine, however, doesn’t get the chance to show what it can do beyond the first couple of years of its existence, since most of us drink most of our wine before it’s had so much as a brief lie down. Indeed, for the group of old-wine lovers behind Libération Tardive, a non-profit foundation set up in 2024 to “champion the value of ageing wine and celebrate the wines that are made better by time”, finding mature wines has become ever more difficult in recent years. It’s not just that most of us don’t have the space or resources to age wine at home. According to Dominic Buckwell, Libération Tardive’s founder and director, since Covid, places that once used to deal in older wine – importers, distributors, retailers and restaurants – are now much more focused on selling new releases, a development that’s largely explained by the rise in interest rates, which has made the cost of holding stock for extended periods of time “prohibitive”.

Fashion and developments in winemaking have also played their part in making old-wine-drinking less common. There was a time when whole styles of wine – among them the top red wines of Bordeaux, Barolo and Brunello di Montalcino – were made on the understanding that their tannins would only begin to soften and become drinkable in a minimum of five to 10 years’ time, and preferably much longer. In recent years, however, wines are made to be much more approachable when they’re young – and many palates now prefer the brightness and fruit-filled vibrancy of young wines.

For Buckwell and the rest of the Libération Tardive team, however, many wines only really come into their own once they’ve had the chance to undergo the slow interaction with oxygen in a well-sealed bottle. And to prove their point and persuade the trade to start selling more mature bottles, they’ve been hosting a series of tastings in which the youngest versions of a set of wines are paired with their older iterations.

Their latest event focused on the grape variety that (alongside chenin blanc) is best suited to making long-lasting white wines: riesling. Featuring 10 pairs of bottles that were as much as two decades apart in age from some of the finest producers in Germany, Alsace, Australia and Austria, it was a revelatory experience. As, Anne Krebiehl, the supremely erudite London-based, German-born Master of Wine who led the tasting, put it in the context of the pair of (classically limey, super-dry) wines from Kilikanoon in South Australia’s Riesling heartland of Clare Valley (a 2012 and a 2024 of Mort’s Block Riesling; £18.50, thewhiskyexchange.com), “It’s as if only half the wine has turned up,” in the

younger wines. In all cases, they were transformed as they got older, with the zesty, floral and fundamentally light young wines growing into something altogether richer and more complex, taking on what Krebiehl called “a balm-like” texture, but without losing the steely raciness that is riesling’s card at all ages.

My favourites on the day were two contrasting greats from Germany: the seamless, dancing silkiness and joyously exotic-fruited Clemens Busch Pündericher Marienburg Rotherpfad Grosses Gewächs, Mosel 2008 (the younger wine, 2017, is £52.90 at honestgrapes.co.uk) and the sheer purity and intensity of the electrically charged, mineral rush of Dönnhoff Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Grosses Gewächs, Nahe 2015 (£315 for six bottles, ex-duty and VAT, at justerinis.com). But if you want to try this at home with the lower risk of a lower cost, grab a bottle of M&S Classics No 2 Riesling, Pfalz 2022 (£10, [M&S](https://www.marksandspencer.com)), stick it in a cool, dark place and wait. Even after four years, it should act as a reminder of what could be Libération Tardive’s motto: age doesn’t always bring beauty, but the best wines always get more beautiful with age.

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