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## **Doug Frost: A little air lifts some wine**

I remember a “Hagar the Horrible” cartoon in which Hagar came upon a bottle of wine that was “breathing” — the cork was removed so that the wine was exposed to air.

“It’s not breathing!” he screamed. “Quick! Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation!”

And he chugged the bottle.

I’ve always found the idea of “breathing” a bottle of wine to be absurd. If wine needs to breathe, removing the cork and hoping some air finds its way through the little opening at the top of the bottle seems overly optimistic.

Instead, pour it into wine glasses or into a decanter or a carafe. The action of pouring infuses the wine with air, and the opening at the top of a carafe is far wider than the top of a wine bottle.

There are other reasons to decant wine: Perhaps the wine has sediment in it, as is typical of older red wines. If so, it’s best to decant carefully, trying not to mix the sediment at the bottom of the bottle with the clear wine in the top.

But if you’re decanting a wine to help it “breathe,” pour the wine vigorously, even violently, to add air to it. Like Hagar, I think many wines improve with air, especially younger wines. But that opinion is not one that is universally echoed among the world’s wine writers and sommeliers. So I decided to conduct some experiments over the Labor Day weekend.

A Spanish red, Juan Gil 2005 Monastrell (Monastrell’s the grape and the wine usually costs about \$17) was a good first choice for such an experiment. Upon opening, the wine was young and fruity and seemed more like alcoholic grape juice than an exciting, or at least interesting, wine.

I opened a second bottle of the same wine and poured it into a decanter. After a few minutes the decanted wine seemed different; it had gained depth and richness. An hour later both wines seemed to taste more or less the same.

Next I opened a 2005 Mendocino Zinfandel from Edmeades Vineyards (\$20). The first tastes were astringent and rather disjointed. So I poured it back and forth between the bottle and a carafe and re-tasted it. It had more fruit and seemed more complete.

So, I went for broke. If decanting the bottle gives it air and improves a young wine, maybe a LOT of air would be better. I put the wine into a blender.

I’ve done this before at restaurants where I’ve worked, although I wouldn’t advise you hit the “liquefy” button at home. It didn’t work for this wine, though I have seen some wines improve under the setting of, say, “grate.”

Finally, I opened three bottles of a Spanish wine with a bit of age on it — Protocolo 1999 (the 2005 is about \$11). The first bottle was pleasant, if a little tired; that is to say, it didn’t have a lot of fruit. The bottle improved over the next hour, but the wine never became very interesting.

So I opened the second bottle and decanted repeatedly. Within minutes it was better, and for the next two hours it tasted riper and fruitier than the first bottle. The third bottle was somewhere in between.

So the more air the wine gets, the better, right?

Nope. Most wines would like a little bit of air, but a lot of air is the enemy of wine. If a bottle is open for a day or so, very little of the original fruit remains. No surprise that lots of money is spent on wine preservation systems, especially in restaurant and retail settings.

***The newest cool thing is the ENOmatic, a wine dispersal mechanism that allows wine to be poured gently from the bottom of its bottle, and still never exposes the wine to air. For retailers, such as Lukas Liquors in southern Kansas City, part of the allure of the ENOmatic is that customers can buy wine by the glass or by the half glass.***

My interest in Lukas Liquors' ***ENOmatic lay in its ability to preserve a bottle of wine.*** So I bought a glass of Hartford Pinot Noir 2005 Land's Edge Vineyard (\$36) from a bottle that had been open and on the ENOmatic machine for more than two weeks. To compare, I bought a bottle of the same wine and tasted it at home. I tasted it again the next day.

The verdict: A few hours after I opened the wine, it tasted more vibrant than the glass I had at Lukas Liquors, although it wasn't as soft and seductive. By the next day, it didn't taste as good at all. And the ***ENOmatic version I tasted was easier to drink than any of the versions I had at home.***

Do I think everyone should buy an ENOmatic?

Hardly. Extremely expensive, ***ENOmatics are great for retailers who want to offer their customers a glass of wine in excellent condition.*** The home version is your refrigerator. If you open a bottle of wine and don't consume it, put it in the fridge, regardless of whether it's a white wine or a red. The chill will slow the deterioration to a few days.