

WINE GUIDE 101: Storing Wine

Many people think that if they're going to store wine at home then they need a cellar. But the word "cellar" conjures up images of dark, cavernous chambers cut out of bedrock, or slick, temperature and humidity-controlled rooms lined with mahogany wine racks. All very nice, but not at all necessary. We recommend you interpret "cellar" somewhat loosely.

There are four main things to consider when storing wine: temperature, light, vibration and keeping the cork wet.

Temperature: Both red and white wine likes to be kept cool. 55°F is ideal, but more important than this magic number is that the temperature doesn't fluctuate. Better a constant 65°F than 40° one day and 80° the next.

Light: Bright light and sunlight can damage wine as it ages in bottle, so the darker the room, the better. Total darkness is easily achieved by simply closing the lid of the case or the closet door.

Vibration: Areas subject to heavy foot traffic (or vacuum cleaners) should be avoided as wine, unlike martinis, should be neither shaken nor stirred.

Keep the cork wet: Laying your bottles down on their sides keeps the wine in contact with the cork, which in turn prevents the cork from drying out. Dry corks contract, allowing air to pass into the wine and wine will leak out. If air gets in, it renders the wine dull and lifeless and it will taste more like old sherry than wine.

If you keep these basic requirements in mind, you'll find it remarkable easy to find a place to store your wine and you won't need a cellar at all. A corner of the basement, a closet in a spare bedroom, your shipping box or the cupboard under the stairs will all do nicely. And remember, the longer you plan to store your wine, the more important these factors become. If a newly-purchased wine is to be drunk in a day or two, it really doesn't matter too much where you keep it, but if the wine is to be kept for weeks or months then find it a nice cool, dark spot.

Now, some wines require not months but many years, even decades, of bottle aging before they're ready to drink. This is a small percentage of all the wines made, but nonetheless, it is an important one. Where you store these high quality (and often expensive) wines designed for long aging takes on a special importance if your investment is to be protected. In this case you may want to consider one of the commercially available wine storage units, which come in a variety of sizes and finishes. Another alternative is off-site storage, where you rent a locker in a temperature and humidity-controlled wine storage facility. This option is great for wines that you don't plan to drink for some years and has the added advantage of being out of reach; a real bonus during those weak moments.

As your collection of wine grows you'll need to keep track of it. An old-fashioned cellar book where you record each new wine that goes into your cellar and cross them off as you take them out, works just fine. These days, however, there are also numerous cellar software programs that make it easy and fun to manage your wine collection.