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Cellar Building for the home winemaker

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Cellar building for the home winemaker may not be what it seems at first thought. While most of you may be thinking of actually building racks to hold your bottles of wine, what I am talking about is the process of actually accumulating the bottles of wine to fill the wine racks!

One of the "weaknesses" of home winemakers is that they often are drinking wine that they just bottled, and the wine has not yet had time to mature. About the time you are drinking the last 4 or 5 bottles out of a batch, they are just getting good. The first 25 bottles were consumed when they were immature. So keep in mind that some wines you make will be ready to drink a few months after you bottle them, and some will take up to a year or more until they are ready to drink.

When this happens it is time for the home winemaker to "build" a cellar full of wine! The only way this will happen is if the winemaker "plans" ahead to fill their cellar, which then allows all of your wine to properly age before you consume it.

Here is how to determine your cellar needs. The first thing to do is to determine how much wine is consumed in your house per month. Most of us in the Pacific Northwest either recycle bottles at the curb, or save our bottles for reuse. Step one is to count how many bottles get emptied in your house. An easy way is to count the number of wine bottles that end up in your recycle bin every week, plus wine bottles that you empty and put aside to reuse.

Most people underestimate how much wine gets consumed in their house. Maybe it is our puritan roots, but we often think we drink less than we do. So a hard count is required here. For example, you and your spouse have a bottle of wine with dinner twice a week. Plus one night a week you open a second bottle for sipping while reading or watching a movie. So there are 3 bottles a week. Plus you have 1 night a month where some friends come over for dinner, or you go to their house for dinner, and there are another 2 bottles per month. So now you have about 15 bottles a month you

consume in your house. Multiply that by 12 months, and you are close to 180 bottles a year. At 5 bottles per gallon of wine, you need to make 36 gallons of wine per year to keep up with consumption.

If you have been consuming 180 bottles a year, and making 180 bottles of wine a year, it means you are drinking the wine pretty much as fast as you bottle the wine. For the next year, you need to step up production by 50% just to get 6 month old wine that you are drinking. Then the following years if your production keeps up with consumption, you will always have wine that has been aged for at least 6 months. If you want wine that is aged a year before consuming, you would need to step up production by 100% for a year.

If you are making some of the Winexpert Limited Edition wines, or the Estate series Red wines or Crushendo wines, these wines really benefit from a year of aging. Cellar building allows you to make these wines and properly age them by reducing temptation when you have a cellar full of other wines that are ready to drink.

If you are making wine from fresh grapes, you typically only have one time per year to make your wine, so this cellar building exercise is critical for you to plan to make enough wine each year to prevent you from having an empty cellar.

One other way to try to build your cellar is to take half of each batch bottled, and put them in cases that you tape shut, and write on the box "do not open till December 2007 (9 months from the current date). Put these bottles in your cellar off to the side of all of your other wine that you have designated for "ready to drink". Now if you take inventory of what is "ready to drink", the amount is significantly less, and it will prompt you to make another replacement batch.

The last step is to sit down and plan how much of each style of wine do you want. Using the 36 gallon per year consumption model above, you will need to make close to 72 gallons this year, and then next year go back to 36 gallons. So for a single year, you may decide you want the following assortment:

6 gallons of Chenin Blanc
12 gallons Sauvignon Blanc
6 gallons Merlot
6 gallons Cabernet Franc/Merlot
6 gallons Super Tuscan

Now double that volume for the first year, and then the next year go back to the 36 gallon volume. That first year will also give you the ability to try some additional

wines since you are making more. You never know when you find your next favorite. So for year #1 you make this assortment:

6 gallons Chenin Blanc
6 gallons Muller-Thurgau
6 gallons Viognier
18 gallons Sauvignon Blanc
6 gallons Merlot
6 gallons Cabernet Franc/Merlot
6 gallons Shiraz/Syrah
12 gallons Super Tuscan
6 gallons Sangiovese

Now your cellar will be full of aged wine, and you go back to producing what you consume.

Last, find a good place to store this wine. In a perfect world that is a basement room with no windows and no heat. At least strive for a location that has constant temperatures, has little sunlight, and does not get hot in the summertime. Use the new synthetic corks that do not require the bottles to be laid on their side, and your life is a little easier. Be sure to sulfite your wine prior to bottling so that it does not oxidize while you patiently wait for the right time to open them. There are lots of storage/racking options here, so do the best you can.