

Technology uncorked on fruit of the vine

by Maria C. Hunt

There's a romantic notion of buying wine and carefully tucking it away in your cellar, patiently waiting to open it until it's perfectly ready to drink.

RAISING THE GLASS - Wine consultant Danae Rubenstein was part of a panel that assessed how new gadgets affect the flavor of wine. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. **TASTE TESTS** - Some new wine accessories include: 1. the Vinturi Essential Wine Aerator, \$39.95; 2. the BevWizard Wine Smoother, \$29.99; 3. the Wine Whisk, \$24.95; and 4. the Catania Mezzo Wine Enhancer, \$64.99, a metallic disk made, according to the Catania Web site, of a proprietary blend of metals chosen for their vibrational frequencies, which are said to harmonize the atoms in the wine. CNS Photos by Eduardo Contreras. **NEW DECANTER** - The new Crystal Decanter, \$30, is supposed to make wine taste more mature and smooth. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. But the reality is that most of the wine we buy these days is uncorked and poured within 24 hours of purchase. If it's a young red - especially a bold wine such as a cabernet sauvignon, merlot or petite sirah - it can be somewhat awkward with tannins, acids and flavors that have not had time to become mellow and harmonious.

Decanting and exposing the wine to some air for 30 minutes or so is an age-old way to round out its flavors and aromas.

"Aeration is something very important, especially with younger reds," said Brian Donegan, wine director at Market Restaurant and Bar in Del Mar, Calif. "It allows the tannins to soften up and the fruit to come forward. The wine will feel softer on your palate."

A number of new gadgets promising to improve the flavor of young wines has hit the market recently. The most space age is the Catania Wine Enhancer, a coppery metal disk that promises to harmonize the atoms in your wine in nine to 14 minutes.

The most low-tech is the Wine Whisk, a tiny stainless-steel whisk that a consumer can use to whip up a glass of wine, much like an omelet.

Ostensibly the most technical is the Vinturi Essential Wine Aerator, created by inventor and engineer Rio Sabadicci. Pour wine into the Vinturi, and the fluid exits with a giant sucking sound. Sabadicci said that's the sound of the air mixing with the wine. He was inspired after tasting for the first time a cabernet sauvignon that had been properly decanted.

"I couldn't believe how much better it tasted," he said. "I set off to speed up the process."

Karen MacNeil, author of "The Wine Bible," said devices that aerate wine by passing a stream through funnels or other devices have been used in Europe for years.

"The mere act of pouring wine through a spoutlike device into a decanter does help aerate the wine more thoroughly, quickly and completely," said MacNeil, who is director of wine studies at The Culinary Institute of America in Napa, Calif. But, she added, the devices "are certainly not essential.

"For the wine lover who has everything, it's a nice little extra added touch."

TASTE TEST

With curiosity tinged with skepticism, we put together a tasting panel and decided to see how four of these newer devices fared when compared with an old-fashioned decanter.

I was joined by Danae Rubenstein, an independent wine consultant and writer; Robin Stark, president of Starkland Cellars and a wine educator; Sharon Sausedo, a former wine broker; and Michele Joyce, a restaurant publicist. We tested the devices on a 2004 Lobsinger Stonebarn Vineyard Zinfandel from California's Sonoma County, a wine created by Rubenstein's boyfriend's family.

The panel started by tasting the wine poured from the bottle. It tasted young, with subtle notes of strawberries, blackberries, warm spice and chocolate, a moderate roughness from tannin and vibrant acidity veering toward sharpness.

Here's how the devices ranked on scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest:

1. The Vinturi Essential Wine Aerator, \$39.95.

How it works: Wine is poured into the bowl of the Vinturi, and, as it exits, the wine is mixed with air.

The effect: The Vinturi definitely smoothed the acidic flavors in the wine and made it taste more round. But some tasters thought the wine lost some of its brightness and subtle berry aromas. The sucking noise the device makes resembled an embarrassing bodily function.

Score: 3.

2. The BevWizard Wine Smoother, \$29.99.

How it works: The magnetic funnel is placed on the neck of the wine bottle, and wine is poured through the device.

The effect: Tasters detected almost no difference between the unaerated wine and the wine poured through the BevWizard, though the aroma seemed a little more round.

Score: 2 1/2.

3. The Wine Whisk, \$24.95.

How it works: Despite marketing materials threatening that the Wine Whisk will add phrases like "hyper-venta-lightful" to your vocabulary, it was a simple matter of whisking the wine in the glass until it had a nice froth.

The effect: Shockingly, the wine improved markedly, becoming rounder and more balanced with less acidic bite and bigger berry aromas and chocolate flavors.

Score: 3 1/2.

4. The Catania Mezzo Wine Enhancer, \$64.99.

How it works: A bottle of wine is placed upon a metallic disk made, according to the Catania Web site, of a proprietary blend of metals chosen for their vibrational frequencies, which are said to harmonize the atoms in the wine.

The effect: The berry aromas in the wine seemed more pronounced. Tasters found little difference in the taste of the wine, despite letting the bottle sit for 30 minutes.

Score: 2 3/4.

5. Crystal decanter, \$30 and up

How it works: Pour wine into the decanter, wait for 30 minutes or so, and swirl it around a few times before pouring.

The effect: The wine tasted much more mature and smooth, with balanced tannins and acidity and richer notes of chocolate and spice, deep cherry and almost jammy berries.

Score: 4.

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