

Home Winemakers Are No Longer Amateurs

Back in the days of Ancient Rome the word 'amateur' meant 'lover' and was used to refer to an individual who engaged in something from a love of doing it, instead of for any financial gain. Such individuals were thought of as the highest of experts because they perfected their craft motivated by simple joy for their work.

Despite the fact that wine professionals still fill their work with passion and skill, amateurs, assisted by modern technology and knowledge passed down over generations, can generally now produce similar results.

The chemistry of the fermentation process was poorly understood until the start of the 20th century but, even so, the process of fermentation has been used for more than 5,000 years. Left alone a wine grape will ripen until the skin ruptures and the juice ferments naturally. Now, however, this process is guided by a combination of art and science.

Grapes are put into a press in which they are turned into must which is a mixture of skin, pulp and juice. Natural yeast (which is found on the skin near the stem) and additional yeast interacts with the sugars in the wine juice to produce alcohol (ethanol), carbon dioxide and heat. This process continues until the sugars are depleted or the yeast is killed off by the products of the reaction.

Because of the work of Pasteur and others we can now control the process so that we get just the result we wish for. For those people who are not fortunate enough to have their own vineyard close to hand, wine juice concentrates can now be purchased quite cheaply.

Merely add acids, yeasts, sugars and nutrients (to feed the yeast) to a container such as a carboy or other jug and let the mixture sit for several at around 75 degrees fahrenheit (24 degrees centigrade). Specific recipes are usually provided with the wine juice concentrate giving specific quantities and fermentation details.

In several days, strain the liquid off the pulp and let it ferment at about 65 degrees fahrenheit (18 degrees centigrade) for a few weeks until bubbling (gas production) ceases. Then, siphon the wine from the sediments (lees) and store the wine bottles on their sides at 55 degrees fahrenheit (13 degrees centigrade) for six months in the case of white wine and up to a year for red wine before tasting.

Naturally, it sounds easier than it is in reality but it is most certainly not beyond the dedicated amateur's ability. Nowadays, the process is monitored and sometimes adjusted on a daily basis and, thanks to cheap refractometers to measure the concentration of sugar, thermometers, hydrometers, temperature controlled cabinets and a host of other items the job is a lot easier than it used to be.

Not surprisingly things can and do go wrong as nature takes its course. Fermentation might not start, it may start and then mysteriously stop prematurely, the wine may be excessively sweet or cloudy or filled with sediments. The wine may have excessive pectin, too many bacteria, taste flat or sulphurous or even moldy. Crystals may form if the temperature is too low or secondary fermentation may result from keeping the wine at too high a temperature.

Even so, in no small measure thanks to the Internet, today there are several websites which are devoted to assisting the amateur winemaker to produce a wine that can rival those made by the wine masters. The only thing that it needs is a bit of practice.

About the Author

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