



LORRAINE MICELI DEMAJO EXPLAINS

## WHEN & HOW TO DECANT WINE

*Decanting is much discussed but little understood, largely because its effect on a given wine is unpredictable. Many questions are regularly asked during wine tasting sessions.*



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*“Some old wines can “die” if decanted too early”*



**Why is wine decanted?**

**Why are some bottles decanted and others not?**

**How long should you decant for?**

**Which wines should you decant?**

Decanting is simply the process of pouring wine from its bottle into a container, normally a decanter to serve wine. Decanters vary in shape, size and design and are usually made of an inert material (such as glass). These normally hold one or two bottles of wine.

Decanters have played a significant role in the serving of wine throughout history. Wine was originally stored in amphoras that could not be brought to table, therefore decanters were invented as these could easily be handled by a single servant and also looked better at table.

The Ancient Romans pioneered the use of glass as a material. After the fall of the Roman Empire, glass production was scarce causing the majority of decanters to be made of bronze, silver, gold or earthenware. The Venetians reintroduced glass decanters during the Renaissance period and pioneered the style of a long slender neck that opens to a wide body, increasing the exposed surface area of the wine, allowing it to react with air. In the 1730's British glass makers introduced the stopper to limit exposure to air. Since then there has been very little change to the basic aspects of the decanter.



## HOW TO DECANT WINE

Decanting a young wine is easy, all one has to do is just splash the wine into the decanter. The more it splashes into the decanter, the more it comes in contact with oxygen. Let the wine settle and rest for a while (1/2 – 2 hours, or follow producer's information).

Decanting older wine with sediment requires a bit more time and experience. First of all it is better if it is left standing for at least 24 hours to allow the sediment to settle. Remove the cork gently and smell it, then remove the entire capsule from around the neck of the bottle using a knife as you will have a clear view of the bottle neck while decanting. Next wipe the lip of the bottle to make sure there is no cork or dust that can fall into the wine. Then light a candle or use a torch or table-lamp, and position under the neck of the bottle and pour gently into the decanter. By keeping the neck of the bottle over the light source you will be able to see the arrowhead of tannin approach the bottle shoulder where they should collect. When this happens, stop pouring as the sediment should not be allowed to spill into the bottle neck. If decanting has been done correctly only half a glass of wine with sediment should remain. Should the cork break or disintegrate one can also use a coffee filter or a muslin cloth not washed in detergent to pour the wine through them.

It is also important when using a decanter to make sure it is clean and dry and free from any musty cupboard aromas. Rinse it with mineral water to remove any residual chlorine odor. Never clean your decanter with detergent, because the shape of a decanter makes it very difficult to get soapy residue out. Instead, use a mixture of crushed ice and coarse salt. These will remove any residual wine without leaving behind any aroma of their own. ☺



## REASONS FOR DECANTING WINE

The most obvious reason for decanting wine is to separate it from any sediment which has formed, as is the case for well cellared wines, these include old red wines (approx. 10 years and older), unfiltered wines or vintage and crusted ports. Sediment is a combination of yeast, grape skins and other ingredients that over time precipitate in the wine and lead to an unpleasant taste while drinking. By removing the sediment, the wine will taste less bitter and/or astringent, also the texture of the wine will be smoother. Most wines on the shelves today, however, have no real need for decanting as modern winemaking processes ensure that wine is thoroughly clarified before it is bottled (even though this strips the wine of some flavour) by a process of fining and mechanical filtration. Although these wines are best served from the bottle, many others still benefit from decanting.

Another reason being, full bodied wines like Barolo, Bordeaux, Rhone, Cabernet Sauvignon or Tempranillo wines from Spain when young, can benefit from decanting. These wines can taste bitter and/or astringent and have an overpowering taste of alcohol when young. Allowing air to get across the surface area breaks up tannins and allows the flavour and aroma molecules in the wine to come out.

White wine can also be decanted, an example of these are premium Burgundies, like aged Montrachet, a young Mersault or Chablis. Wines made from age- worthy Riesling can also open up with decanting bringing out the beautiful petrol- mineral nose evolving Riesling is know for. If white wines are too cold, decanting can also help warm them up for their aromas and bouquet to come out, these would have otherwise been masked if white wine is drunk too chilled.

Wine is also decanted if it is suffering from excess CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub> or reduction. This helps them to quickly exit the wine and "blow off" before it is poured in a glass. A final reason to use a decanter is because it adds to the ambience of a beautifully set table and prepared dinner.

## REASONS FOR NOT DECANTING WINE

Those who feel most passionately opposed to decanting wine argue that there is a danger of losing some fruit and flavour or oxidising the wine while it is poured into and evolving in a decanter. Most notable of these is the oenologist Professor Emile Peynaud. His advice is to only decant wines with sediment and then only just before serving. It is certainly true that some old wines can "die" if decanted too early. These delicate wines are normally decanted before serving or even left in the bottle and then put in a wine cradle and poured carefully not to upset the sediment at the bottom of the bottle.

Aged Burgundies are also best left in bottle or decanted just before required as mature Pinot Noir is fragile and can deteriorate faster than you can consume it. It is also the case for aged Rhone wines both from the north as well as the south and the delicate wines from Chianti. Therefore if one is opening an aged wine of a particular brand for the first time it is wise to be cautious and to leave it in bottle and monitor the wine as it evolves in the glass as well as the bottle taking notes for the next time. 🍷