

ON AGEABILITY

The experience of tasting a nicely aged wine can be amazing, unforgettable. I still remember my first encounter nearly 40 years ago. In the glass, the hue was a glowing ruby, the nose was ethereal, of leather, roses, spice, tobacco. . . but the palate was the most important: the silky-smooth entry led to a round, mouth-filling sensation, evaporating in a cloud of perfume as the wine went down.

As a wine ages, the transformation is one of coming together, of melding its various elements into one seamless whole. The nose becomes more subtle and at the same time, more complex. The taste moves from fruity toward savory. Even as the wine seems less sweet, the acidity appears to soften, so the wine mellows. Although the volume of the wine is turned down, the texture becomes softer, more polished. It's like moving from electric guitar to acoustic. I like both.

Much has been written, but no one is quite sure what is necessary for a wine to be able to age. Based on my experience and speculation, here are some of the attributes that I believe are associated with wines that can age:

- **Adequate but not excessive ripeness.** Underripe fruit will never develop, while overripe fruit seems to fall apart.
- **Balance.** No one element of sweetness, acidity, astringency or bitterness should stick out.
- **Low intervention in the cellar.** The more manipulation a wine receives, the less harmoniously it will evolve. At Cain, this is



Corks and color show the effects of aging. On the left side of the glass 2008 Cain Five, on the right, 1987 Cain Five. What a difference 21 years can make. (Photographed January 2016)



an article of faith. We don't have direct experience, however the wines we tend to appreciate have been made by our friends and those acquaintances who share our approach.

• **Distinctive Character.** A wine that has no personality will simply fade away. If the wine has a message, it will come through.

The key is that even as a wine ages, it is still recognizably itself, and its character remains. It has been said that for a wine to be truly great, it must be able to age. I am not sure about this dictum, especially when so many wines in our culture are enjoyed so young. Nonetheless, I do believe that the ability to age is a sign of greatness.

— *Chris Howell*



Pruning

JANUARY

FEBRUARY



Budbreak

MARCH

APRIL