

# THE MEANING OF ÉLEVAGE

**F**OR MOST OF US, the distance between the raw, turbid, slightly stinky, bubbling stew of grapes in the fermenter and that beautiful, complex, nuanced, refined glass of wine in your hand seems impossibly wide. It is a case of metamorphosis, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. How does it happen? It is part of our craft. The answer, in a word, is, “*élevage*.”

It’s a French word, and as with a few other words in wine, such as “*terroir*,” we have no equivalent in English. *Élevage*, in the context of wine, leads us to think of the “bringing up,” “raising,” or even the “educating” of the young wine, as one would care for a young child. It’s a beautiful image, and would be a beautiful and poetic metaphor, were it not that the French use precisely this word, literally, to describe their work in the cellar to develop the raw, immature, new wine into the balanced and fully expressed message of the vineyard that we know wine can be.

Done right, the process is slow, methodical, and painstaking. Nothing can be rushed. The methods have been developed over thousands of years. The exact methods employed in *élevage* and their timing must be adapted to each wine and the basic wine style. Here is the general approach we take at Cain:

## WHAT HAPPENS FIRST

The yeast and bacteria will complete their fermentations.

The fizziness dissipates, as the carbon dioxide slowly escapes from the new wine.

The suspended particles of grapes, yeast, and bacteria slowly settle, as the cloudy wine slowly becomes transparent.

The aromas of the grape and the vineyard will be revealed as the yeasty, egg-y smells of the new fermentation fade away (oxygen plays a role here).

For all of these phenomena, a relatively small, slightly porous vessel works best. This is why we use

wooden barrels at Cain (see *On Barrels*). And they should be kept in a safe and protected place: clean, cool, damp, and quiet is best—like a root cellar.

Over the first weeks and months the new wine will be revealed, but it is still raw, rough and unpolished. The aromas are rudimentary and the mouth-feel is aggressive. Like a teenager: charming at one moment, off-putting the next. We need patience and time. Like a child, it’s also true that the new wine should not be neglected. In its youth, it needs more attention.

## TECHNIQUES OF ÉLEVAGE

The French have defined and codified the elemental techniques of *élevage*:

**Ouillage** (topping): We top up the barrels regularly to keep them absolutely full.

**Soutirage** (racking): We decant, “rack,” the wine from its sediment at the bottom of the barrel. Giving it some aeration helps the new wine to develop. And we clean the barrel. We may do this a few times in the first year, and then a couple of times more in the second year.

**Assemblage** (blending): In the spring, we compose the blend. We can begin to understand the new wines and foresee the harmony between various elements from the vineyard (see *On Blending, Notes From Cain*, Summer 2016). We assemble the chosen lots early so that they can marry through the course of the *élevage*.

Slowly, over the next few months, through the winter into the spring and summer following the vintage, the young wine begins to take form. What, exactly, happens has not yet been completely explained by science. Somehow, the substances in the wine realign, aromas appear, others disappear and the bouquet begins to form. The texture changes from rough harshness to softness as the wine is slowly polished. The mouth-feel broadens and becomes smoother; the finish lingers. Nuances become apparent.

As the wine enters its second year, development slows. It is a time of incubation, of reconsolidation and hibernation, as the elements of the young wine begin to come together and harmonize.

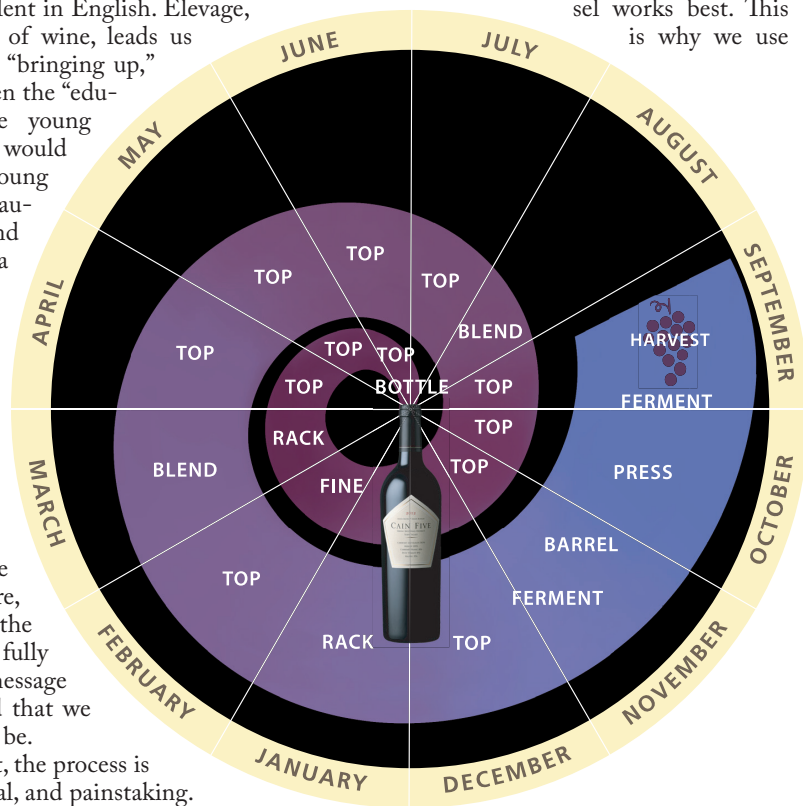
**Collage** (fining): In the second winter,

we will consider whether to polish the wine just a bit more by fining it with an eggwhite. The protein, dispersed in the wine, will coagulate with some of the harsh tannins and gently settle, pulling light particulates down to the bottom of the barrel. It’s a matter of taste. For everything gained, something is lost. Our purpose is to lend the wine still more *élan*.

As we continue to work with the young wine in the cellar, many of its attributes will be brought out. Eventually we will see that our work is done—anything more would be harmful—and that the wine is ready for the bottle. In getting the wine into the bottle, our whole purpose is to move the wine intact and with minimum trauma.

Now the wine is on its own. The last steps must be made by the wine alone as it develops in the bottle. For this reason we have learned to hold the wine a minimum of one year, and frequently two or more years, to give the wine adequate time to reach full expression. Even then, the trajectory can be long, a decade or more. What delights await, if we have the time!

— Chris Howell



## THE TWO-YEAR CYCLE OF ÉLEVAGE

*At Cain, we devote two years to bringing up our young wines and preparing them for their future life in the bottle. To see what these terms mean, refer to the “Techniques of *Élevage*.”*

## ON BARRELS

UNLIKE WHISKY or Bourbon, at Cain, barrels, per se, are not the definition of our wine. We use the barrels not as flavoring agents, but as a key tool in our *élevage*. Our purpose is not to have a wine that tastes like a barrel, but rather, to work with barrels that are the most harmonious in developing our young wine. The choices of the cooper, the forest, the grain, the methods of air-drying, the preparation, and the selection of the staves, the heating and bending of the staves are all serious considerations. But, for us at Cain, these choices will not define our wines; they are only about providing the wine a good place for it to develop as gently as possible.