

Wine Spectator

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Eyrie Vineyards Turns Back the Clock *Jason Lett's Cellar Certification program raises the bar for preserving library wine*

BY KATHERINE COLE

Even under ideal storage conditions, it's impossible to predict exactly how a wine will fare over time. After years in the cellar, a wine might be corked, or it could simply show its wrinkles a bit too soon. But for Jason Lett, winemaker and proprietor at Eyrie Vineyards in Oregon's Willamette Valley, notes of premature maturation simply aren't acceptable.

His new "Cellar Certification" program brings to mind the reconditioning process often seen in Bordeaux, in which the old cork is removed from an aged bottle, the ullage is filled and a new cork is inserted into the neck. Lett's program, however, which he's been developing for five years, takes the process a step further to ensure consistency.

David Lett, Jason's father, began holding back bottles in 1970 to observe how they aged. As a result, the winery now boasts approximately 6,000 cases of library wine.

In 2008, when Lett organized a retrospective tasting in honor of his father's retirement, he was dissatisfied by the bottle variation he found. "We'd open two bottles and they would be great and then the third wouldn't be so good," Jason says. "I don't feel comfortable releasing wines like that into the market. I want people to be able to buy a library wine and know that it is exactly as it should be."

To combat the flaws he discovered, Lett devised a system in which bottles are opened and assessed individually. Using a process similar to that of a Coravin preservation device, the Eyrie team injects argon gas through the corks of unopened bottles before extracting the wine, guaranteeing that no oxidation takes place during testing. Corked and overtly oxidized wines are discarded, while custom-designed equipment transfers the sound wines from their bottles to a drum, where they are gently blended for consistency. Finally, the blend is rebottled, labeled, topped with a new Diam cork, sealed and eventually released to the market as a "Cellar Certified" library wine. Wines that deviate even slightly from Lett's high standards become part of a custom multi-vintage blend, topped off with a vin doux naturel. The mellowing effect of a small amount of premature



Jason Lett samples each bottle for cork taint and oxidation. The Eyrie team may taste 300 bottles in a single session

oxidation imparts a tawny Port-like character to this non-vintage fortified wine, now in barrel and tentatively titled Abacus.

Lett and production manager Jeremy Saville may taste through 600 bottles in a single session. "You can shine a light through wine and, from the spectrum it transmits, gauge how brown the wine is. You can run the bottle through an MRI to tell if it's corked or not. But the most sensitive instrument for detecting oxidation is the human palate," says Lett. With the repetitive tasting process, outliers are easy to identify.

Lett also saves, measures and studies each cork. He has found a slight correlation between dense, stiff corks, high in the woody material known as lignin, and premature oxidation. Meanwhile, corks high in spongy, porous suberin appear to be more effective in creating a tight seal. "We've found that the cork that we pay more money for—the denser cork—is more likely to oxidize the wines," he says. "Instead of expanding like a wet sponge, it's acting like a dowel, allowing oxygen to seep into the sides of the neck."

Lett's methodology is unique, but it remains to be seen whether other wineries will follow suit. According to Jamie Ritchie, CEO and president of Sotheby's Wine in

the Americas and Asia, cellar reconditioning has fallen out of favor in recent years, with the market "taking the view that when a wine is ready to drink, it's ready to drink."

Given the extra time and labor he has put into the Cellar Certification project, Lett actually agrees with Ritchie: "It's not a big focus of mine moving forward," he admits. "I feel like it's good to have library wine to represent yourself at the occasional tasting, but I am not currently storing large quantities of wines to be resold in the future."

So far, though, the program has been a success. With retail prices ranging from \$75 for the 1992 Estate Pinot Gris to \$450 for the 1983 South Block Reserve Pinot Noir, the first round of seven "Cellar Certified" releases have been snapped up by restaurants and high-end retailers, with another run planned to hit the market in spring 2014. "Jason has done his best to eradicate any uncertainty," says Steven Morgan, sommelier at Alinea restaurant in Chicago. "When you buy older wines at auction, you have to be in a position where you can adjust the price in case you've gotten a flawed wine. Jason is really reconditioning the wine in a way that is very new."

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