



Parenting 101

ON RAISING A FINE WINE

WHEN ASKED WHICH of their wines they like the best, winemakers often reply, “These wines are like my children—I love them all equally.” That may be a diplomatic answer to keep marketing departments happy, but it also speaks to an important truth about winemakers: We take responsibility, and we don’t rest until the wine has been bottled, flown the coop, and nestled nicely in someone’s cellar. Even then, we are not fully satisfied until we know it has aged the way we hoped it would. Much like parents, no?

This analogy has been with us for centuries and has worked its way into our speech. The French term *élevage*, which roughly translates as “raise,” describes how a wine is looked after between the end of fermentation and bottling. This is an essential stage in its maturation process; as with a child, a wine that has been neglected is rarely the better for it. So what happens when we are separated from a wine that has not completed its *élevage*?

When a departing winemaker leaves wines unfinished, their successor must ask two key questions: “Where did these wines come from? And where are they going?” The goal is to preserve their spirit—or enhance it if necessary. I’ve written about the virtues of making wine without a lot of numerical data, but this is an instance in which lab numbers are vital. High volatile acidity suggests spoilage organisms that may still be active. Sulfur dioxide should be checked and corrected if appropriate. Lurking residual sugar will need to be fermented.

Sometimes the wines that give us the most cause for alarm in the production

phase are the most sublime once finished. There is always an emotional attachment to them, problem children or not: We don’t want to hand them over to someone who might not recognize their unique qualities and blend them away into something less exciting.

There is also one’s reputation to consider: The strengths or faults of a finished wine fall squarely on the producer’s shoulders. Sometimes a winemaker leaves before the high scores roll in and credit is given; conversely, I have “inherited”

wines that were jaw-droppingly flawed. In those cases, I’ve had the unenviable job of telling the owner that their wines were irredeemable and must be destroyed. Fortunately that is a rarity; most wines are left in decent or better shape.

Regardless, this is where the concept of intellectual generosity becomes vital. Assume that your predecessor knew what they were doing and did the best they could with what they had. Then pull up your boots and make that wine the most delicious possible. *sj*

