

BUBBLE RAP

Henry Speer on how to keep those elusive bubbles in the bottle overnight . . .

One of the great unanswered questions of the modern era, especially over the Christmas period, is how to keep your champagne fresh and bubbly for tomorrow when you can't quite polish it all off today. The problem has been addressed in song in relation to chewing gum and bedposts but it continues to challenge champagne lovers the words over. As a champagne supplier, this is one of the questions I am asked most often. In particular can you keep the bubbles in if you put the bottle in the fridge with a spoon in the top?

It is certainly true that this suggested remedy to the problem has been in circulation for many years. Rumours that it was invented by the Chinese 4,000 years ago, or that this solution was found in Babylon in the time of Nebuchadnezzar can quickly be dismissed. Champagne was not invented or more accurately discovered (by the English in fact) until the 17th century, so this pressing problem cannot have been taxing the world's greatest minds for more than 200 or 300 years at the most.

The spoon solution seems to have strong support among sommeliers and they ought to know; one of them, at Chez Josephine in Paris, always puts a silver spoon in the top of a bottle when he has opened it and poured the first glasses for his diners and wants to keep the bubbles fresh all the way through the bottle. When asked Does it really work? says: It works for me; it works for my mother, who taught me the trick; and it worked for her mother, who taught it to her.

Champagne drinkers are divided on the topic but all agree it has to be a silver spoon stainless steel and aluminium alloys just will not do. It is certainly the case that silver has been widely regarded as having medicinal, even magical properties and indeed has been recognised for centuries as having a wide spectrum of anti bacterial qualities. Another special quality of silver is that it is a catalyst in oxidation oxygen dissolves in silver which makes it useful in certain types of chemical treatments.

So if silver really does have special attributes, maybe there is some genuine substance behind the suggestion that a silver spoon in the neck of the bottle will preserve the bubbles overnight. Perhaps the silver is reacting in some chemical way with the carbon dioxide in the champagne to delay the release of those precious bubbles.

Other experts dismiss the silver spoon

technique but swear by various types of bottle sealer. There are at least 50 different types on the market, each one ingeniously designed to achieve the same objective in a different way and using different materials. Prices range from £70 for a cork with a silver top to 50p for a lowly plastic closer which I can get at the Growers supply shop at Epemay. There appear to be no purpose-made stoppers where the part of the stopper which is next to the inside of the bottle is made from silver.

Scientific tests have been carried out to try to answer this taxing problem. The best known research was by Dr Richard Zare and some students at Stanford University. In Zare's studies, there was no significant difference in the effervescence of champagnes stored overnight with a silver spoon and those stored without one. The spoon doesn't hurt, but it doesn't help either. Dr Zare says: What's keeping the champagne bubbly has less to do with the silver spoon and more to do with the temperature of the fridge. The colder a liquid is, the more gas it can hold. As the liquid gets warmer, energy increases and carbon dioxide molecules escape. However one flaw in the Zare research was that the carbon dioxide levels were tested subjectively by his students whose judgement became increasingly erratic as the testing was carried out.

So I checked out a report by American wine adviser Robin Garr.

This is what he says I put one bottle in the refrigerator with no effort to protect it, the other got the silver-spoon treatment with the handle well short of the surface of the wine.

Twenty-four hours later, we tried the wines again. Both wines poured up with a frothy mousse and lasting streams of bubbles. I could detect no real difference between their character on the second night and the impressions I had recorded upon opening the wines the night before. We spent a little time closely examining each wine and trying to detect whether one was more bubbly, both wines remained in fine shape.

I expected this. Champagne will keep well for a day or two under refrigeration with no protection at all, not even recorking or a special stopper. The bubbles in sparkling wine are carbon dioxide (CO₂), a gas that's both inert and heavy. The CO₂ forms a protective blanket on top of the wine, forestalling oxidation and holding much of the remaining carbonation in liquid form, especially under refrigeration. Adding

the silver spoon does no harm, but it does no particular good, either. You simply don't need it.

All in all these tests must be regarded as inconclusive, although all are agreed that if champagne is stored in a cold environment after being opened, that helps preserve the sparkle, and putting a spoon in the neck of the bottle does not obviously help. An enjoyable way to reach a conclusion that will satisfy your own curiosity is to conduct your own test; make it an entertaining interactive family activity over the Christmas holiday!

As for me, I don't like the idea of drinking just some of a bottle of champagne today and finishing it off tomorrow. Part of the fun of champagne is the ceremonial opening of the bottle, the pop and the release of the little bit of smoke as the cork comes out. There's something rather unsatisfactory in returning to yesterday's bottle. So I say drink it all up and if you really don't want a whole bottle in one go, drink a half bottle today and another tomorrow, and why not another the day after. It won't break the bank either my very reasonably priced half bottles start at £8.25 each!

■ Henry Speer, Champers Limited, tel: 01284 386348, email henry@champers.net

