

5 Techniques For Bottling Your Wine



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Bottling your wine can be one of the most challenging and time consuming parts of the wine making process or one of the easiest after some practice and the right equipment. These are my tips and suggestions to help you get this part of making your own wine done with less hassle and more time to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Bottles

Building a supply of bottles can be as easy as going to your local supply store and buying them. This is what I did in the beginning but it can get expensive especially if you have to pay for shipping if you don't have a supply shop nearby.

A more economical solution is to reuse empty bottles which can be acquired for free from friends, local bars or restaurants. For the normal 6 gallon batch made from kits you will need 31 empty 750 ml bottles for your wine. I thought a batch makes only 30 bottles you are thinking, but if you have racked your wine well and there is no fines in the bottom of a full carboy it will yield 31 bottles. I use many 1.5 L bottles which also saves time and money since there are fewer bottles to clean and sanitize and less corks to buy.

Cleaning the Outside

Cleaning the used bottles can be a challenge but I have found a straightforward approach, which works, well for me. I have a deep plastic sink set up in the basement where I do all my cleaning/washing which beats the heck out of carry everything up the stairs to the kitchen and making a mess in the wife's space! I use a scraper sold in the paint section of your local hardware store which you can replace the razor blades to scrape the labels off under hot running water. Replace the blade often; scraping the glass does dull them. Work horizontally across the bottle and most labels come off fairly easily. The hot water helps soften the glue but I have found some labels actually get stickier with hot water. For these problem ones I use product called Goo Gone (also found in the paint

section) to help dissolve the glue. After you have the labels removed I use a SOS pad to scrub the remaining glue off and then rinse in hot water.

Cleaning the Inside

Now that the outside of the bottles is clean it is time to clean the insides. If the bottles were not rinsed when they were emptied and have sat around awhile the mold starts to grow and these are only good for the recycle bin. I would not take a chance trying to clean them and possibly contaminating your wine. Tell your friends to rinse please after they empty their wine bottles. Get yourself a bottle washer that attaches to the faucet on your sink. This is one of the most time saving items you can have as a wine maker; it makes rinsing bottles and carboys a snap! Using your bottle washer to rinse the bottles well with hot water and inspect each one to make sure the inside is visually clean. If any bottles need cleaning of solids or stains (remember no mold!) you can use a bottle brush and an oxygen based cleanser like B-Brite to clean your bottles. I then rinse the bottles with hot water using my bottle washer.

Sanitize before filling

Now that the bottles are clean, it is time to be sanitize them for filling. The next two pieces of equipment are not required, but will save you time and hassle. These are the bottle rinse rinser and a bottle drainer tree. Make up your sanitizing solution and add it to the bottle rinser and rinse each bottle with the solution. My sanitizer of choice (and the one recommended by all wine kit manufacturers) is Potassium Metabisulfite or Sodium Metabisulfite. A solution is prepared by mixing 3 tbsp. to a gallon of water. This solution does not require rinsing as the residual amount of sulfite left in the bottle is well below 1 ppm. This solution will keep for 2-3 months and I store mine in a 1-gallon glass jug. Place the sanitized bottles on your clean bottle tree as you go. After some drying time, your clean and sanitized bottles are now ready to be filled with your wine.

Filling your bottles

There are different ways to fill your bottles and you should find the way that works the best for you and use it. I fill most of my bottles straight from the carboy using a Fermtech Auto Siphon with 5-6 ft. of tubing and spring loaded or fast-flow bottle filler. This only works when you have racked your wine well and there are no fines at the bottom. This method works well with a helper, which I usually have and she corks the bottles as I fill them.

The other method used is racking your finished wine into a bottling bucket. This works well if you are bottling by yourself and also if you need to rack off from some fines in your carboy. The bottling bucket has a spigot near the bottom and you attach a short piece of tubing between the spigot and your bottle filler.

Whatever method you use the most important part is cleaning and sanitizing all the equipment you use to get the wine from your carboy and into your bottles. Use caution and limit the amount of splashing you do when transferring your finished wine and filling bottles, as this could dissolve oxygen in to your wine. Your bottles should be filled so that after you insert the cork or cap you limit the head space to no more than 1 inch. The larger the head space the more chance of oxygenation occurring in your wine after it is bottled even if you have the proper amount of free SO₂.

Corks and Caps

There are basically 3 types of corks you can use seal your bottles:

- Natural corks, which are the most expensive and most likely not the choice of most home winemakers because of the cost and ability to find good quality ones.
- Manufactured or agglomerated corks, which are used by most homemakers because of reasonable cost and very good quality.
- Synthetic corks, which are plastic and are used by some home winemakers and commercial wineries but personally have tried different brands and found they tend to leak so I stopped using them.

Without going into great details about types of corks and preparation I will say you should choose a good quality cork and use a corker that makes the job quick and hassle free. I usually let my bottles sit upright for 2-3 days before they are placed on the racks so the corks can expand and form a good seal in the bottle. Storing bottles on their sides keeps the corks wet so they don't dry out over time. Many commercial wineries and home makers are now using bottles with twist caps. This option eliminates the need to choose what type of cork to use and the need of a corker.

There are many choices you can make when it comes to bottles, closures and methods to get your wine into the bottle and protecting it from spoiling. The only choice you don't have is to not keeping your equipment and work area clean and proper sanitation of everything that touches your finished wine.