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# François Audouze: Guardian of Memories

Each wine conveys a message, but you have to be sufficiently open-minded and humble to hear it. François Audouze has been collecting old wines for over 50 years, made by the finest wineries. As well as around 40,000 bottles of some of the world's most incredible nectars, he guards the memory of these wines by storing their cork stoppers. He recently donated part of his cork stopper collection to Corticeira Amorim, which is now on display at Heritage House.

**You're passionate about old wines.**

**Why did you start to collect them?**

When I began working I didn't know anything about wine, but when I was very young I bought a house and it had a wine cellar. If you have a cellar, you think about filling it with wine. I was completely ignorant about this, so I went to a wine shop, a very important one, the Nicolas wine cellar, and bought some wine. I didn't know anything about wine, so I would taste it, and if I liked it, I would buy it. If I tasted it and it was bad, I wouldn't buy it. Through this trial and error process, I started buying wine to fill my cellar.

**When did you suddenly realise that this was going to be your life?**

One day someone told me to go to another wine shop, where there were blind tastings every Friday. I went to that tasting and at one point I almost fell off my chair because the flavour was so incredible that I was completely astonished. It was a 1923 Sauternes and I realised that the truth is in old wines, that nothing can come close to the complexity of old wines. So I began a journey into the world of old wine.



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**You've just said that the truth is in old wines. What do you look for when you receive an old wine?**

I look for flavours. It can come from a very cheap wine or very expensive wine. The question isn't whether it's expensive or cheap, but whether it has a flavour that I really enjoy. When you're in this world, you have to be open-minded and completely humble. I have dinners with people who have never drunk any wine from the 1920s. So I tell them - this is very important for me - if you know anything about wine, forget everything you know. If you think you know nothing about wine, forget that you know nothing. That's why I say: be humble, never judge a wine, try to understand it. I emphasise the importance of the word "try". Because if you try it, it means that you are humble, it means that you will always understand a wine if you are humble. If you have preconceived ideas, you will never understand a wine. That's why, in every experience, I have an open mind and try to understand the unique message of the wine. With old wines we have a complexity, a wide range of flavours, which always makes the experience very interesting.

I'm never nervous about whether the wine will be any good. I may say to a friend: let's open a wine from 1935. They usually reply: is it still good? That's what everyone says! But that's not the problem. It's about entering the world of this wine. If you enter, you'll understand the wine.

**Does that mean that even if it's not "drinkable", it doesn't matter? The important thing is the experience?**

You know, when you're in front of a wine, imagine that the bouquet isn't good, you might say "blargh" and then abandon it. But I won't. I'm going to try to understand the message of this wine, because it has something to tell me. Of course, if it's awful, you will say it's awful. But there are so many occasions when people judge before drinking, instead of tasting the wine! In my opinion, more than half of the wines that have been thrown away are great wines. People judged the wine too quickly and didn't understand the wine's message. I must add that my method of opening a wine can work miracles. Wines that people reject are possibly very good wines.

I trust old wines. I'm never afraid when I open an old wine, because I believe in it. Regarding the relationship with cork, I prefer original cork stoppers to recorked bottles. Because an original cork stopper has kept the air, the initial air. When you put in a new cork, you also put in new air and that changes the flavour. All my experiences with recorked bottles show that the flavour is not the same as bottles that have the original cork stopper. The cork plays the role of keeping the wine in its best shape. I open a bottle very slowly so that the air expands gently - if I remove the stopper too quickly, the air won't be happy. You should never pour a glass, to check whether it's good. Don't check, let the slow oxygenation do the work by itself. If you let the bottle stand, the contact with the air will be slow, and the wine will be perfect. And don't decant the wine, because decanting is fast oxygenation, it's too fast!

**You've tasted so many incredible, even legendary old wines. Are there one or two wines that stand out in your memory?**

I have great memories! Usually, when there is something impressive, it's almost a physical shock. Let me explain: one day, in the cellar of Maison Bouchard, I was invited to drink an 1865 Montrachet. When I tasted it - there were several people with me - it was as if nothing existed around me. I was in a bubble, alone, time suddenly disappeared, the world disappeared, I was alone with the expression of this wine. It was a physical shock. Incredible. I didn't believe that an 1865 Montrachet - a white wine - could be any good, but I was absolutely amazed at its perfection. It's a wine that, when you drink it, you can't imagine it could be any better and nothing better could have been made. And I've known 30 or 40 perfect wines in my life. It's something you recognise immediately. Imagine you go to Rome, to the Sistine Chapel. When you enter, you are awestruck by the beauty and say: "Wow, it's impossible to make anything better". It's the same thing with wine. When it's perfect, you immediately realise that it's perfect. I've had the opportunity to drink wines like that.

**Not only have you collected and drunk so many wines, but every time you open a wine, you keep the cork stopper. What is the significance of this little cylinder?**

When I started keeping the bottles, I saw the beauty of the bottle, the capsule and the cork. So I kept them. For me, it was about respect for the wine. If I respect the wine, I respect the bottle, and also respect the cork. Because the cork is very important. I don't think anyone in the world today has opened as many old bottles of wine as I have. I have opened all the bottles that I've drunk. In the cork stopper collection I donated, there are only the good ones, I kept the bad ones, (laughs) But I kept them because they represent memories. They're very important. My whole life has been about respecting wine, respecting everything that surrounds wine.

**You donated part of your cork collection to Corticeira Amorim. What led you to take this decision? Are you satisfied with the way that the collection is integrated in the museum?**

I thought it would be good to donate the collection to the world's largest producer of cork stoppers, because it makes sense

for them to keep the stoppers. It makes sense to preserve the memory of old corks. I believe that in everything I've drunk, the quality of the wine depends on the quality of the cork, so it makes sense for them to go back to Amorim. I'm happy that my collection is in Amorim's hands. I was fortunate to meet António (Rios de Amorim), who is a very positive person and who runs this company with a very positive spirit. To have seen all the people interested in my collection makes me very happy, because I think it will be preserved forever. I have wines that are made to be kept forever and knowing that the corks will also be preserved is my greatest pleasure.

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