



Variable(s)

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Last week, I was in San Diego for the Filemaker Developers Conference to learn more about working with databases to get better information for decision making for myself and for Spec's

other buyers – which got me thinking about variables. Variables are part of the calculations and scripts that make databases such as Filemaker so useful. Variables – and with them variations -also come into play with wine. Even though we want wine to be consistent, the same wine can vary from experience to experience. Although I was giving my liver the week off while in San Diego (no daily tasting), I did taste – OK, drink – some wine while there. One in particular comes to mind – a bottle of Rodney Strong Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 I bought on the way to the hotel with the idea that I might drink it with dinner in my room one night. I got to it the last night I was there. It was good but it wasn't the wine I was used to – I have drunk several bottles of this wine in Houston and even made it a Spec's "Wine of the Week" pick - which got me thinking about why it didn't taste as good as I had expected. Some of the variables in a finished wine's quality are under the control of the winery, some are under the control of the wholesaler and/or retailer, and some are under the control of the consumer.

Let's start with the consumer and work backward. Let's say you have bought two bottles of the same wine from the same store on the same day and carried them home together. The vintage is the same. For all intents and purposes, they are identical. You drink one and really like it. A few days or weeks later, you open and drink the other one - and it is not the same or maybe not as good. Why is that? Looking only at what is under your control, there are several possibilities. The wine may have gotten hot while you were keeping it at home. The second bottle may have been served at the wrong temperature or in the wrong kind of glass. The first bottle may have been drunk on a day with lower barometric pressure and the second on a higher barometric pressure day (even though we both know that Texas no longer has low barometric pressure days). You may have drunk the first bottle while watching a recording of the Texans' 2010 season-opening win over Indianapolis and the second while paying bills and arguing with your spouse. Any of these things could cause a wine to taste different and some could cause it to taste worse. Put any few variables together and there is even more chance for variation.

If you regularly read these pages, you know to take your wine straight home in your air-conditioned vehicle (not in the trunk) to keep the wine from ever getting warm. You know to store your wine cool, to serve your wines at the right temperatures, and to use proper glassware. And you know that variables such as barometric pressure and even your mood have an effect on your enjoyment of any wine.

The one thing most often responsible for wine tasting "off" or "not showing as well" as it should is heat damage. Before you buy the wine, the winery, the wholesaler, and the retailer all have a duty to you to keep the wine cool and never allow it to get warm or undergo rapid temperature changes. At the wholesale and retail levels, maintaining a proper temperature can be the biggest challenge. This is especially true during the time that a wine is being transported from the winery to the wholesaler and from the wholesaler's warehouse to the retailer. Which is why, where we have control, Spec's insists that all our wines be shipped in reefer containers (not what you are thinking – "reefer" is industry short hand for "refrigerated container") and on refrigerated trucks. We pay a bit extra for this but it's worth it if we can eliminate some of the negative variables in making sure that you get a good bottle of wine. Nevertheless, we sometimes still have to argue with people who should know better to get the wine into refrigerated transport. I had a wine maker in Australia once tell me that a reefer was unnecessary. He said "Dude, it's winter down here."

IDENTIFYING HEAT DAMAGED WINE

Heat damage will leave a mark on a bottle of wine. Sometimes that mark is visible and sometimes it is not. In either case we describe heat damaged wines as "cooked" as in "That wine's been cooked." or "He cooked that wine when he stopped at the cleaner's on his way home."

Visible indications of heat damage include seepage of wine around the cork or around the capsule, a cork that is pushing out or a capsule that is domed and squishy. Sometimes you will see drips inside the case or corrosion (from the wine's acidity) around the bottom of the capsule. When you pull the cork, you might see a streak where the wine has tried to push through on one side of the cork.

All of these signs come about because a wine gets hot, usually fairly quickly. As it warms, the wine in the bottle expands and can push against the cork causing the manifestation of one, some, or all of the telltales noted above. Wines that show these signs are the obvious victims of heat damage.

The less obvious victims are the larger problem. These are wines that got warm, often slowly, and cooled back down – again, often slowly - and so show little or no physical signs of heat damage. They can be identified by a muted or even missing fruit component, general closed character, and sometimes a sense that they have been nudged out of balance. They can taste both bland and acidified at the same time. It is hard to positively identify these wines unless you know the taste of an undamaged version of the same wine. Nevertheless, when you taste these wines, you know the wine isn't very good and it is easy to suspect that something may be wrong. After you have experienced tasting a few confirmed heat damaged wines, you will begin to pick up on the signs, even if there is no visible mark.



I replied, “Dude it’s summer up here and in any case, the wine has to cross the equator. Ship it in a reefer. We’re paying for it.”

Last Tuesday, a salesman came in with twelve bottles for me to taste. Eleven of them were heat damaged. Only four showed physical signs but they all showed it in the taste. I spoke

with his boss who pulled more samples of the same wines out of their temperature-controlled warehouse. When tasted, they showed heat damage as well. Some of these wines came from Europe and some from California so the wholesaler now knows they have a problem on at least two big shipments of wine.

A few years back, we had a whole container of mostly Bordeaux (some high end) arrive in our warehouse (also temperature controlled) which had obviously gotten hot (the container, not the warehouse). The purchase orders and even the bill of lading all specified reefer but the container was just a standard ocean freight “dry box.” Our warehouse manager checked numerous bottles with a laser thermometer and found several with temperatures in excess of 120°F. We filed an insurance claim and then waited with the wine sitting in our warehouse segregated on wrapped pallets. The day the insurance company agreed to settle the claim, I got offers from two different brokers trying to sell us the same wine that was sitting in our warehouse! They each said the wine was a shipment that an east coast wholesaler had been financially unable to take. It was our exact inventory list from the hot container. That’s why we only buy wine from primary sources.

So did this bottle I had in San Diego – Rodney Strong Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2008 - suffer from heat damage? I don’t think so. When I tasted it and realized it wasn’t what I expected, I went through a sort of mental checklist. It didn’t taste cooked and it had no flaws (TCA, TBA, oxidation, sulfur, mustiness, volatile acidity, etc.) I could detect. And it wasn’t bad; it was just different. But it did not taste as good as I had expected so I pondered on it. The best that I can come up with is that the winery either had multiple bottlings of this wine (same vintage and appellation) or possibly the bottles I have bought and drunk in Houston (all consistently good) were from one end of the bottling run and the bottle I bought at Ralph’s in San Diego came from the other. I’m not sure if this is the case and don’t have a good way to really find out – but it is a scenario that fits the situation. I really think the wine I have been drinking in Houston is from one bottling run and the wine in San Diego was from another.

A lot of wines which are otherwise identical are often bottled in two or three or more runs sometimes months apart. An extra two or three months of tank aging between bottling runs certainly can make the wine taste different. That’s a variable the winery can control by bottling all of each wine at the same time. What is more difficult is controlling the variation between wine bottled at the front end of a large bottling run and that at the back end. Most wineries don’t have a single tank big enough to hold the whole blend so they blend several tanks and the blend those tanks with each other to get a more homogenous result. They don’t want to over blend because then they are risking oxidation or at least chewing the wine up with excessive pumping. So variation remains a possibility. Either scenario could explain the “other-than-expected” taste of my bottle of Rodney Strong Cabernet.

As a natural agricultural product, wine is subject to variation. Some of the variables you (the consumer) can control and some of the variables we (the distribution chain) can control. Some variables are in the winery’s control and some, like the weather, are beyond human control. If you drink wine, you will at least on occasion, run into this.

And I thought database development was complex. ✨