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Celebrating Love and Lost Ones With Wine That Was in Waiting

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"I can only express one regret. Had we found an occasion last year to open this great 'gift of the grape,' my bride of over 50 years could have been present to enjoy this event in person rather than in spirit only."

-- John Watson of Maple Glen, Pa.

"We rocked in a hammock under the trees and stars, enjoying a wonderful bottle of wine. Even better, we had great conversation and got reacquainted with what it is we love about each other."

-- Tyler and Stacey Allerton Firth of Plymouth, Mich.

"Suddenly, the entire house shook, accompanied by a loud noise. Yale ran to the back of the house to discover that a large oak tree had fallen onto the house and deck. 'What are we going to do now?' asked Yale, shaken by the thunderous arrival of Hurricane Floyd.

'We are going to open the wine,' answered Ilene."

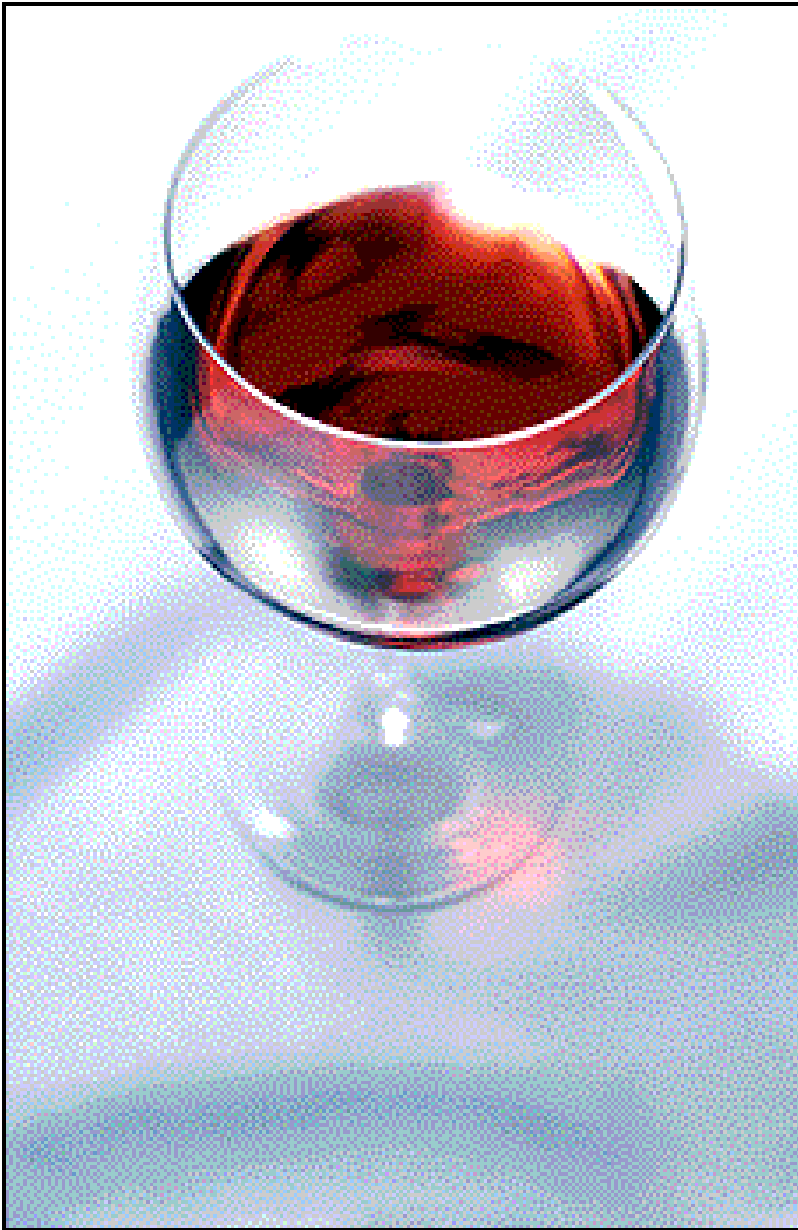
-- Yale and Ilene Richmond of Hampton, N.J.

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That's exactly what thousands of readers, from all over the world, did on the evening of Sept. 18. It was "Open That Bottle Night," when we urged you to open the wine you've been saving for a special occasion, and make the bottle itself the reason for a celebration.

The response was overwhelming. People drank special old wines and special young wines, wines they saved from their weddings 50 years ago and wines they made themselves last year. They drank expensive Bordeaux and Nebraska Chardonnay, and they drank while watching a football game on television and a sunset in Maui. Many of the wines were valuable, but many

more were priceless, especially the ones used to toast and remember a departed father, mother-in-law or child.



Many people created an occasion around the event, a time to commune with friends and family -- sometimes in person, sometimes by speakerphone and sometimes just by thought. We received nearly 1,000 letters detailing remarkable nights of wine, food and memories. The letters were sometimes funny and often moving, notably rich in romance and notably lacking in cynicism or snobbery. We laughed when we read some, cried when we read others, savored the menus and could almost taste the wine. The message in these bottles was clear: There's more to every wine than an alcoholic beverage. As letter after letter pointed out, wine can conjure up memories in a way that few other things can.

In fact, few readers found the bottle of wine itself to be some transcendent experience. In most cases, it was the story behind the bottle that they wanted to share.

"After my father died in 1990, my mother decided to sell the house they had shared for more than 40 years and where they had raised their three children. In the basement she found one bottle of 1962 Chateau Canon in a cabinet next to my father's workbench.

"Why he had purchased a grand cru Bordeaux is a mystery. Such was not his normal fare Knowing him, Dad likely had second thoughts about such a purchase and put the bottle away for some truly special occasion. At some point, I imagine he just forgot about it.

"Last Saturday night, my mother, together with my family, gathered around our kitchen table to 'open that bottle.' I told all not to get their hopes up since I researched the vintage and saw that 1962 was a pretty mediocre year. And then I opened the bottle. We knew in an instant that the wine was still good. It was then that I sensed that there may indeed have been a purpose why my father hadn't opened that bottle all those years before. He had left it for us -- in its fading beauty -- to remember him by."

-- Bruce Angiolillo of Old Greenwich, Conn.

Some wines brought back recollections of a dear friend, a trip to Provence, a lost love. For Jeffrey Smith, of Atlanta, a special bottle reminded him of the young woman he met a dozen years ago, when they were both just out of college, and both neophyte wine buffs. After a brief romance, he was transferred across the country, but before he left, he gave her a bottle of Burgundy from her birth year, 1964. They drifted apart for more than a decade, while he worked abroad.

Two years ago, he came back to the U.S. He found her, romanced her and, late last year, married her. "Johnna still had that old bottle of wine," he wrote. For Open That Bottle Night, they shared it.

There were all kinds of things to commemorate: weddings, anniversaries, a friend's successful knee replacement, a 77th birthday. Michelle and Alan Morris from Mebane, N.C., drank a bottle of Black Dog semi-dry red wine from Chateau Morrisette Winery in Virginia, in tribute to their "beloved Black Labrador Retriever, Angus," who passed away in July.

Others decided there was no reason to wait for a special occasion. While living in Italy in 1973, Carol Perkin Barsin of Charlotte, N.C., bought 12 cases of Grignolino shortly after the birth of her son, hoping to drink them one day at his wedding. "Now, 26 years and four houses later,

I've decided not to wait for my son's wedding," she wrote. "After all, he's not even dating and I'm not getting any younger." (The wine was "superb," she added. "Heck, who cares if my son ever gets married? I could finish all 12 cases on my own.")

Where people drank their wine was almost as interesting as what they drank. David and Kay Walters had a 1993 Nuits St. Georges on their veranda in Thailand. Sunny and Natasha Mahajan drank a 1985 Chateau Meyney -- from plastic cups -- on a gondola ride in Venice. A surprising number of you drank wine in hot tubs.

Paul Foley of Woodcliff Lake, N.J., set up a conference call with a cousin, Jay Lawrence, of Guthrie, Okla., during which they both drank well-aged German wines and talked about old times. Michael and Renay Fanelli, of San Anselmo, Calif., tipped their glasses after a 25-kilometer trek through the high Sierras. "When not gasping for oxygen, or concentrating on the ability to stay vertical, thoughts constantly drifted to the evening's reward," Mr. Fanelli wrote. The payoff: a Martinelli 1997 Russian River Valley Jackass Hill Zinfandel.

The payoff for Michelle L. Russey was even greater. She and her boyfriend prepared a meal together to go with their bottle. "It was a lovely, crisp evening in Chicago, so we had a fire going in the fireplace, along with candles and fresh flowers. Dinner was wonderful, and the 1996 DeLoach Zinfandel was every bit as smooth and flavorful as I hoped it would be.

"Well, the evening turned out to be more special than I had anticipated. After we finished eating, but were still savoring the last drops of our wine, Bob proposed to me." Michelle said yes.

While we love all romantic stories, we felt special empathy for couples who have difficulty finding the time and the energy for romance after having children -- or, as William N. Evans of McLean, Va., put it: "A special dinner at home with my wife faces three obstacles -- Conor (age 9), Brendan (6) and Patrick (2). Thankfully, Sept. 18 was the first day of the fall soccer season, so our two oldest collapsed early, allowing us to have a peaceful and relaxing dinner."

In the old days, before kids, Bill and Ellen Pullin of Evanston, Ill., used to have special nights when he would buy Brie and she would make "Harvest Grape Loaf, a beautiful and delicious homemade-bread creation, delicately seasoned with cardamom and Grand Marnier, and made in the shape of a bunch of grapes with its leaves." On Open That Bottle Night, they decided to open "our treasured 1970 Chateau Palmer." He surprised Ellen with a wedge of triple-cream Brie -- "and Ellen surprised me by making a Harvest Grape Loaf."

As it turned out, food often seemed to play a bigger part in readers' evenings than wine did. We were impressed by the detailed menus readers sent in. Some even enclosed recipes and snapshots of the meals they made.

Readers prepared elaborate meals of caviar, Oysters Rockefeller and filet mignon. Lamb seemed to be a popular choice -- lamb stew, rack of lamb, lamb salad and even lamb fries, which Ronald A. White of Tulsa, Okla., informed us "are thinly-sliced sheep testicles, slightly breaded and then sauteed or fried."

One reader started with gator, while another opened his bottle at a wiener roast. ("The wine's label suggested it would go well with roasts, so we continued to roast hot dogs as we drank the wine.") Mario and Marilyn Ruiz, of Miramar, Fla., drank their Chateau Latour 1986 with pizza -- fetched from a sentimental-favorite pizzeria, Sir Pizza, after a two-hour-and-15-minute round trip. "The pizza was great," wrote Mr. Ruiz. "The Chateau Latour was good, not great. But it got better toward the end of our meal, and much better as we entered the Jacuzzi with Mr. Barry White in the background."

The special wines readers opened came in all price ranges. Many, like the Ruizes, drank fine "first growths" from Bordeaux. From the U.S., Silver Oak and Jordan Cabernet Sauvignons were a common treat.

Joan and Phil Huff of Louisville, Ky., finally opened a bottle of their homemade "Spanish Red" from 1970. "Yes, it was past its prime (if it ever had one)," they wrote, "but it was still palatable and, most important, it was 1970 once again!" Some wines turned out to be just too precious: When push came to shove, Robert and Norma Trojan, of Caledonia, Ill., simply couldn't stand to open their 1958 Chateau Haut-Brion. They drank beer instead.

One of the oldest wines we heard about was opened by assistant principal oboe player Alexander Miller and violist Mary Jane Slawinski, of the Grand Rapids Symphony in Grand Rapids, Mich. They were "stuck playing Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony on Sept. 18," Mr. Miller says, then came home and drank a Madeira from 1827. "It is incomprehensible to us how something 172 years old can still taste so alive, so full of tangy fruit, with aromas of lime blossoms, caramel, coffee... and be even a little sassy!"

Kenneth Giniger of New York City opened an 1830 Morgador Port. He and his guests found it "delightful," he wrote, while noting they had no standard of comparison -- "none of us having ever tasted a 169-year-old wine of any kind before."

To be sure, there were disappointments. Victor Bonomo of Wilton, Conn., opened a treasured bottle of 1961 Chateau Haut-Brion. "The wine was badly over the hill," he wrote. "The good news is that after 50 years of marriage, the romance is still there." After opening a bottle of 1978 Chateau Margaux, Timothy Paul Brausen of Minneapolis thought it was a letdown. "Like seeing the Rolling Stones in concert these past few years, the myth seemed to exceed reality." Some old wines had turned to vinegar. A special Champagne was flat. Many bottles had crumbling corks, prompting industrious drinkers to decant them using all sorts of devices: a coffee filter, a bandana, a Gatorade bottle.

Readers bore the disasters with exceptional good humor. In Scotland, Humphrey Drummond retrieved a 1932 Chateau Margaux from the cellar of Megginch Castle -- and *dropped* it. "All I could do was to soak as much as I could into my handkerchief and suck away the heavenly juice," he wrote.

Todd Buonocore, of Kennett Square, Pa., saw his plans for a romantic evening smashed. The flowers were arranged, the house was neat, and the flank steak was marinating. Then his date called to say she was running late. When he went to pick her up, he says, he found out why: "She was drunk! Seems she was at Oktoberfest with some of her girlfriends," he explains.

Since he'd already opened his special bottle of 1992 Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon at home to allow it to breathe, he went ahead with his date. "The evening was going well," he wrote, "the wine was vibrant, the mouthfeel luscious," until his woozy dinner companion reached for another glass -- and spilled the rest of the red wine onto the floor. "Know anyone who is shopping for peach carpeting with shades of rust?" Mr. Buonocore asked.

Covert Harris of Clifton Park, N.Y., had better luck with his date -- if not his bottle.

"I came home from work on Sept. 18 and left my white shirt on -- even kept it buttoned at the collar. 1985 Cheval Blanc is nothing to take casually. I snuck into the basement and came up with the hallowed bottle I thought I would never drink. My wife had on her apron and was facing the sink, with her back to me. She had no idea what I was about to do."

But he struggled to open the bottle, causing "a fire-hose blast of wine" to come shooting out. "The amber liquid covered my face, hair, white shirt and about half of the kitchen.

"For a moment I was really angry. But then, this most magnificent bouquet and glow came over the whole kitchen. In its presence, my wife turned to face the source with an expression of

wonder and awe. *"It's Cheyval Blanc," I said. My wife instantly perceived the situation and asked only, "How much is left?"*

"Enough," I said, and we sat down at the kitchen table and drank the wondrous bottle.

Why are all of these old wines still sitting around? Some of them evoked such powerful memories that no occasion seemed big enough. Many were like the 1974 Brunello di Montalcino drunk by Elizabeth and Patrick Schirmer of Seattle, as the sun set over the Olympic Mountains. "We received it from a friend when we were married in 1985," they wrote. "He told us to save it for a special night. We immediately became afraid of it, and it has been gathering dust ever since." As Dave Wible and Mary Cusick of Columbus, Ohio, aptly put it about a 1971 Kenwood Cabernet Sauvignon, "We promptly stored the wine in our cellar, which is tantamount to a life sentence in jail."

On Open That Bottle Night, those special wines were freed, and lifted in toasts of all kinds. James W. Kairies, a Vietnam veteran from Dallas, opened a bottle he bought during an emotional visit to World War II battlegrounds in France. "My family and I opened that bottle and toasted the courage of paratroopers everywhere, and especially the incredible heroism of those young boys who dropped into occupied France that cold June night and saved the world."

Thomas McGill, of North Caldwell, N.J., opened a 1927 dessert wine from Cyprus given to him by his mother-in-law, who died on Aug. 23 at the age of 89. "So here's to you, Mom Olson," he wrote. "Thanks for the wine and for the many fond memories."

For Mark and Linda Madsen of Goffstown, N.H., the wine became a reason to celebrate the short life of their son Craig, who died two years ago. They began drinking good wine after he was diagnosed on his first birthday, Nov. 24, 1993, with fatal Tay-Sachs disease.

"To help ease our pain and allow us to enjoy the short time we would have with Craig, we decided we would bring the world to us instead of going out to visit the world. So we started our travels and went around the world trying different wines from every corner of the globe.

"The wine I selected for Open That Bottle Night was a 1994 Conn Creek Anthology from Napa Valley. I selected this wine because it was purchased on the first anniversary of Craig's passing, which was early morning of Easter Sunday, March 30, 1997.

"In Craig's memory, we toasted him and his healthy younger brother, two-year-old Peter Craig (who was toasting with milk), and enjoyed our bottle Thanks for giving us another reason

to celebrate our son's short life and remember the good things God has granted each of us."

Peter A.S. Pfeiffer, of Alpharetta, Ga., was also thinking about the important things in life.

"Christmas 1984, my father (who was my best friend) presented to his three sons a bottle of cognac to save for a 'special occasion.' Dad couldn't afford much, but he really wanted us to remember him as we opened these bottles. Well, my two brothers finished the stuff within a week. I decided to wait

"Dad always wanted me to have a son. He never saw the day. You see, we lost several babies. Ten miscarriages and a stillborn. But we persevered through the years. I came close to opening the bottle to have a lonely one with Dad in his spirit many times, but I held off We were blessed with a beautiful girl who we loved dearly and were thankful for.

"[Then on] 3 September we were told to go to the hospital as our 13th pregnancy looked to be in danger. We had a C-section and out came a healthy baby boy. My 40th birthday was two weeks later, 17 September.

"I opened the bottle of cognac -- finally. After 15 years.

"I can afford some of the finer things in life. I never could share them with Dad; he died before I started to peak. But while my wife was still in the hospital recovering, and my daughter was tucked in to bed, I closed the office door at home, played some soft music, dimmed the lights, put up a framed picture of my Dad and me together at the beach, sat in my leather chair, and had a toast (with this newly opened cognac) to my new son -- for Dad. I know he was with me that night in spirit.

"I cried so hard, but I was so happy. This night was one that I'll never forget."

What did we drink? Four vintages of Chateau Musar, the famous red wine of Lebanon. We love Musar -- in fact, we love it so much that we tend to buy it and then never drink it. Open That Bottle Night gave us the impetus to share the 1982, '85, '86 and '91 with our cousins Jon and Wendy Smith. For the big night, Dottie prepared her famous roast duck, with sweet potato-pineapple parfait, asparagus and cranberry sauce. How were our wines? Fascinating. They grew and changed all night -- sometimes getting better, sometimes not. Most important, we enjoyed the evening as well as the wine.

Good times should be savored as often as possible; they heal and help make us whole. "Thanks for the encouragement to make life itself the reason to celebrate!" wrote Joe and Pamela

Hodonsky of Stanwood, Wash. And Diane Kopsick of Lewis Center, Ohio, said succinctly, "Drink it, don't revere it! That's what we learned."

The lesson here, then, is pretty simple: What are you waiting for?

Perhaps readers Maryanne and Ray Bunch, of Exton, Pa., said it best: "With our first sip, we realized many things about ourselves. Like the wine, we managed to survive the changing climates and conditions. Although not as vibrant as we once were, we have mellowed and matured with age and our marriage still retains a very special flavor. We toasted a breathtaking sunset, wine lovers everywhere, and, of course, each other."