

## WINE

TASTINGS by Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

## An Evening to Uncork Memories

How you can give that special bottle a special opening

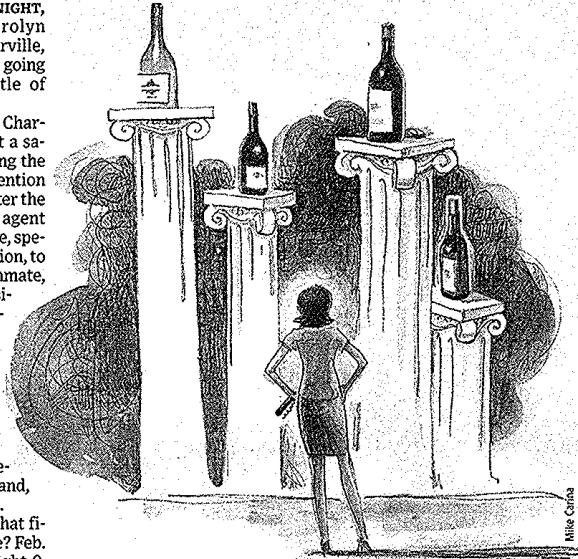
**O**N SATURDAY NIGHT, Feb. 23, Carolyn Pearce of Kerrville, Texas, is finally going to open a bottle of wine she calls "Nancy."

It's a Corbett Canyon Chardonnay that was served at a salute to Nancy Reagan during the Republican National Convention in New Orleans in 1988. After the event, a Secret Service agent gave two bottles of the wine, specially marked for the occasion, to his girlfriend and her roommate, who were both medical residents at the time. The girlfriend soon opened the wine and forgot it, but the roommate, Dr. Pearce, saved it. And saved it. And saved it. Next month, Dr. Pearce and her husband will open the wine to have with Caesar salad, scallop risotto—and, if needed, a backup bottle.

After all these years, what finally has moved Dr. Pearce? Feb. 23 is Open That Bottle Night 9, when all of us, world-wide, finally uncork our own "Nancy" wines and celebrate the memories that flow from these cherished bottles that have always seemed too precious to drink.

Imagine if an evil genie took some of your very best memories and hid them in a wine bottle. That's what so many of us do to ourselves. These dear bottles have a special way of retrieving warm and often-forgotten memories, but you have to pop the cork to release them. That's why we invented Open That Bottle Night. So very many of us have that special bottle—from a departed loved one, from a visit to a winery, from a vacation—that we're always going to open for just the right moment, but, of course, that moment never comes. So the wine sits and sits and becomes more and more precious, so it sits and sits some more.

From the casual wine drinker with a single bottle in the house to wine lovers with massive cellars, this pretty much happens to everybody. Bruce and Birgit Anderson own a winery themselves—Sunset Winery in Burleson, Texas—but this has happened to them. Their special bottle is from a 2002 visit to a winery in Bordeaux. "By any standard it



was a small winery, producing at most 12 barrels—300 cases—in a bountiful year," Mr. Anderson told us. They bought a bottle of the 1995 despite the misgivings of the chateau's gracious owner, who worried that her American visitors would not appreciate a bottle with, as she put it, "things in it." Mr. Anderson vowed that they will celebrate OTBN—"sediment and all"—by opening that bottle.

Even wine writers have this dilemma. We can never decide until the last minute what we'll open because we have so many precious bottles, though, with Dr. Pearce in mind, we do have our own "Bill and Hillary" bottle, but we'll get back to that. Dan and Krista Stockman, who write the wine column for the Journal Gazette in Fort Wayne, Ind., plan to open a bottle "from the first batch of Dan's homemade wine, which he made from a kit in 2003." Jerry Shriver, the wine writer for USA Today, will fly to Florida with a bottle of 1990 Dom Pérignon Champagne to visit his father and stepmother and toast the memory of his brother, who died of cancer last year. Gil Kulers, the wine writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Golf Digest Index, isn't

sure what wine he will open, but he knows he's inviting friends including two pastors of his church to join him for OTBN.

Indeed, OTBN has become a time to gather family and friends all over the world. Arne Kalm of Arcadia, Calif., is inviting six long-time friends to help him open at least three bottles of 1973 California Cabernet Sauvignon. He bought the wines when he had a business in Napa in the 1970s. Why hasn't he opened them until now? "In the early years I was trying to put some age on them and then later there was never an occasion to open them," he told us. We know, we know.

So what will we open? We've had our eyes on a special bottle of bubbly, L'Ermitage Brut 1991 from Roederer Estate in California. In 1998, we wrote a column about the wines that the Clinton White House served to visiting dignitaries and we bought a couple of bottles of each from the wineries so we could taste them. When we received the bubbly, we were surprised that it included this special label: "Prepared as Extra Dry especially for the White House." That's right: The Clinton White House had a double dosage of sugary mixture added to its Brut sparkling wine to make it

**1 Choose the setting.** We usually celebrate OTBN alone because we enjoy discussing the very special, intimate memories that the bottles offer. But many people have dinner parties and others take their bottles to restaurants that allow BYOB (and some restaurants have special OTBN promotions; if you know one that does, drop us a note). It's time to start planning. As Karen Stearns of Houston put it: "We love OTBN because it's an excuse to open those killer bottles we've been saving, but also because we spend days and days with our foodie friends pulling out our most complicated recipes and staging the dinner that will accompany them. It's the production and the anticipation we love, and then ultimately dragging out the evening into a four-hour dinner. That's the best!"

**2 Select the bottle.** A huge part of the fun for us is choosing the bottle, pulling out these revered wines and remembering when, where and why we bought them. Each has a story. The point is not to show off with a great bottle or necessarily open the most prestigious bottle in the house, but to uncork a wine that holds cherished memories, the bottle that—admit it—you will never open otherwise. This is one case where it really is all about you, what the wine means to you, and not necessarily about its taste. We sometimes hear from people who don't have a bottle that they've been meaning to open. In that case, we'd urge you to buy a bottle of wine that has special significance for you, but that you don't often drink. For instance, Taittinger Champagne is important to us because it was our wedding bubbly. While we

have tasted it many times over the years for this column, we can't remember the last time we simply opened a bottle for fun. So on New Year's Eve, John bought one and as we enjoyed it we talked about our wedding and our years together, past and future. That's a good option on OTBN.

**3 Stand it up.** If you are going to open an older bottle, stand it up (away from light and heat, of course) for a few days before you plan to open it—say, on Wednesday. This will allow the sediment, if there is some, to sink to the bottom of the bottle.

**4 Beware of the temperature.** Both reds and whites are often better somewhere closer to cellar temperature (around 55 degrees) than today's room temperature. Don't overchill the white, and think about putting the red in the refrigerator for an hour or two before opening it if you've been keeping it in a warm house.

**5 Practice your technique.** With an older bottle, the cork may break easily. The best opener for a cork like that is one with two prongs, but it requires some skill. You have time to practice using one. Be prepared for the possibility that a fragile cork may fall apart with a regular corkscrew. If that happens, have a carafe and a coffee filter handy. Just pour enough through the coffee filter to catch the cork's fragments.

**6 Otherwise, do not decant.** We're assuming these are old and fragile wines. Air could quickly dispel what's left of them. If the wine does need to breathe, you should have plenty of time for that to happen as you drink it throughout the evening.

**7 Have a backup wine ready for your special meal, in case your old wine really has gone bad.** Dr.

Pearce and her husband will have a 2001 Rombauer Chardonnay from California standing by. That's bound to create some pretty delicious memories of its own.

**8 Share.** If you are having an OTBN party, ask everyone to say a few words about the significance of the wine they brought. This really is what OTBN is all about.

**9 Serve dinner.** Open the wine and immediately take a sip. If it's truly, irrevocably bad—we mean vinegar—you will know it right away. But even if the wine doesn't taste good at first, don't rush to the sink to pour it out. Every year, we hear from people who were amazed how a wine became more delicious as the night wore on. Is it the air changing the wine or the company changing the mood? Who cares?

**10 Enjoy the wine for what it is, not what it might someday be or might once have been.** This is critical. We know that many OTBN wines are old and tired—we wouldn't bet a lot of money on Dr. Pearce's 1985 Corbett Canyon Chardonnay, for instance. But this isn't about delicious wine, ultimately, but about delicious memories.

**11 Let us know.** Drop us a note at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com) about your evening. Be sure to include your name, city and phone number, in case we need to contact you so that we can share your account with other readers.

**12 See us online.** This year, for the first time, OTBN will be featured at [wsj.com](http://wsj.com), on the new Food and Drink page. You can check in—and, we hope, contribute—at [wsj.com/otbn](http://wsj.com/otbn). Take a look.

## Open That Bottle Night Primer

If you plan to participate, here is a mixed case of advice:

sweeter (Extra Dry is sweeter than Brut). As you can imagine, this is a bottle we could never stand to open, but maybe now, with the confluence of OTBN 9 and election season, is just the right time.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).

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Watch Dottie and John share stories of past Open That Bottle Nights, plus tell us your plans for this year's event, at [WSJ.com/OTBN](http://WSJ.com/OTBN).