

What's For English Wine in Easy English

What does Reserve mean, exactly?

You've seen these words: Reserve. Riserva. Reserva. Gran Reserva, Vintner's Reserve, Proprietor's Reserve, Single Vineyard Reserve.

This word shows up quite a lot. Quite obviously it means the wine is of higher quality and more difficult to obtain than non-reserves. But does "reserve" mean anything in particular? Not really. In any case, reserve is not a technical term - like barrel fermentation - and the word has a legal definition in only a few countries. When you get down to it, most wine producers make some wines for early release or more frequent drinking and they make some wines for longer aging or special occasions. The word "reserve" is one way to denote those special, premium wines.

Reserve means to hold something back. To hold something in reserve. As everyone knows, there are some wines that improve with age. So a wine labeled as a reserve is likely to be a wine with the potential to age.

The wine producer keeps it in reserve and releases it onto the market at a later date. In some cases, the wine producer is doing his customers a favor by holding on to that wine. The wine will mellow out and be more ready to drink on release. In other cases even though the producer has allowed that wine to age longer, it will still be far from ready to drink on release. In those cases, the winemakers are designating reserve wines as those wines they believe can age well in your cellar.

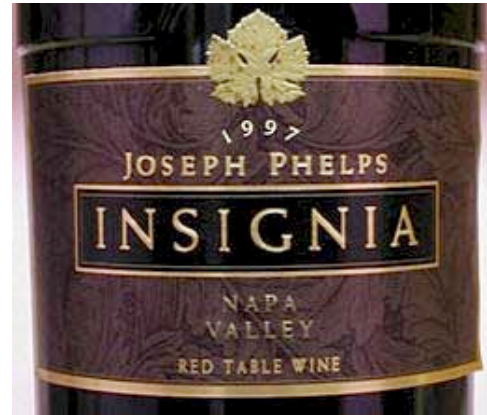
Normally, I'd probably begin a topic like this by looking at how the Europeans deal with it, and then I'd contrast the situation in California or Australia. But I think I'd like to begin in California.

In California, the word reserve is not defined by any law. So most wineries have their own particular formulas and goals for their reserve wines.



**Simi 1985 Reserve Cabernet
Sauvignon**

Many of the large and high-end California wineries make a “regular bottling” and a reserve. In most cases the total production of the reserve wines will be much much less than that of the regular bottlings. Some wineries will produce regular bottlings of a wide range of varietals but then concentrate on just a few for their reserves. Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are probably the most popular varietals for reserve wines.



Joseph Phelps Insignia 1997
(The label doesn't have to say
“Reserve”)

As the reserve wines are something special, the wineries will grow the grapes used in the reserve wine in special vineyards. In these vineyards, grape yields are probably much lower than in the winery's other vineyards. When vines struggle to produce grapes, the grapes should be more flavorful and expressive of the terroir. The soils may be rockier or the vines may be older. Or the vineyards are laid out on steep hillsides. The producers may also trim a few unripe bunches off the vines if they want to keep yields even lower. This is called green harvesting.

Because the grapes are special, the winemakers should be extra careful during the winemaking and give these grapes special treatment all the way. They'll probably hand harvest the grapes at just the right time - perhaps even risking the threat of a rainstorm rather than pick too early. Maybe they'll use a special yeast. Or maybe they'll ferment the wine on its natural yeast. Some winemakers will ferment their reserve wine in barrels or wooden tanks. (Even though there is nothing wrong or second-rate about using stainless steel for fermentation.) Most importantly, reserve wines are more likely to be aged in newer, smaller or better barrels. When the barrels are smaller, more of the wine will be in contact with the wood. And when new oak barrels are used, they can add a desirable oak character to the wine (as long as it does not overpower the actual fruit of the



Heitz Cabernet Sauvignon,
“Martha’s Vineyard”
(A California “premier cru”?)

wine). As reserve wines are almost certainly to be released later, they will age longer in barrels and in bottle.

In many cases, the word reserve does not appear on the special bottlings of California wineries. Some wineries prefer to produce single vineyard wines for their premium bottlings; Heitz Martha's Vineyard is an example. In this case the fruit from just one vineyard gets the special "reserve" treatment. Other wineries might create a reserve program under a proprietary name - such as "Insignia" by Joseph Phelps Winery. This winery blends grapes grown in its best vineyards located in various parts of the Napa Valley.

Some wineries use the word "Estate" to signify the wines made from vineyards they actually own, compared to the wines they make from purchased grapes.

Finally, though, in California, it really comes down to a case of "buyer beware" as the word "reserve" is frequently used in mass market wines that have no reserve characteristic about them at all. Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay is a good bargain at around 10 dollars a bottle. But it's a mass market brand with little in common with the more exclusive reserves.

Let's move on now and talk about the situation in France. Many French wine producers make both regular and premium bottlings, but you are not likely to see the word "reserve" used very often. And each region of France has its own way of dealing with or designating its best wines over their more regular wines.

In Champagne, you might notice a difference between some wines that have a vintage date on them and other wines that are non-vintage. Obviously, the vintage-dated wines are the more premium bottlings. That doesn't mean, of course, that all non-vintage Champagnes are no more than just ordinary wines. In fact, the art of Champagne making is to make a recognizable house style that remains consistent year after year. This is what you get in the non-vintage bottlings of Champagne. Vintage Champagne is made to reflect the special characteristics of a good year.

In most of France, high quality or premium wines are produced from high quality land or terroir. So the words Premier Cru or Grand Cru will designate wines made from special vineyards.

In Bordeaux at the big estates - in fact, at many, many of the Bordeaux estates - making a reserve or high-end, premium product is the default position. The "Grand Vin" -- the one with Chateau Margaux, Chateau

Montrose, Chateau Palmer on the label - is a reserve wine. They use the best vineyards. The vines should be older. The wine will be aged for 18 months or longer in oak barrels. (And depending on the winery, some proportion of the barrels - perhaps even all of them - will be new oak). These wines are made for aging in your own cellar and they'll continue to improve for 5, 10 - even 15 years or more after the vintage.

Most of the Bordeaux estates do make regular bottlings - but they are known as second labels. These wines are made to be released and drunk earlier than the grand vins.. They're made from younger vines and they won't be aged as long in barrel. Also, the wineries will use the older barrels that in previous vintages were used for aging the Grand Vins. Bordeaux second labels are cheaper than the Grand Vins, but you have to teach yourself to recognize them. Generally, they do not say "Chateau such and such" on the label. The name will somehow incorporate the name or part of the name of the Grand Vin. For example, the second wine of Chateau Margaux is called Pavillon Rouge de Margaux. Chateau Montrose makes "La Dame de Montrose." Once you are more familiar with the Bordeaux chateaus, you'll start to recognize the second labels. I did say the second labels are cheaper than the grand vins, but if the second label wine is from a very expensive or exclusive grand vin, even the second label is likely to be expensive.

In Italy, the word Riserva is quite common. It's used to denote the premium wines in many well-known Italian regions, including Barolo, Barbaresco, Chianti, Brunello. But as in California, the word has little meaning. Wines labeled Riserva should be a little higher in minimum alcoholic strength and they should be aged longer in the winery in either wood or bottle - but not necessarily both barrel and bottle. So it really depends on the individual wine producer to make a wine



Chateau Montrose
"Grand Vin" from Saint-Estephe



La Dame de Montrose
("Second Label" of Ch. Montrose)

worthy of the higher price. If it's a wine producer who really cares about their image, I'm sure they put in the effort to make sure their riservas stand out from their regular bottlings.

In Spain, on the other hand, there are two important terms: Reserva and Gran Reserva. These terms do have real meaning, and they reflect the fact that Spanish wine drinkers love smooth, well-aged wines. First of all, a Reserva is only made when the vintage is especially good. Reserva wines can only be sold in the fourth year after the vintage, and they spend that time aging in tanks, barrels and bottles. At least one year of aging must be in small barrels that impart the most oak influence onto the wine. Gran Reserva wines can be sold in the sixth year after the vintage. These wines require a minimum of two years aging in barrels and another three years in either tanks or bottles.

There is another term you may see on Spanish wines and that is Crianza. This is a category of wines aged less than the Reserva wines. They also require at least one year in oak casks, but they can be released onto the market three years after the vintage.

If you see a wine labeled "reserve" or in some other way is designated as a more premium product, you should understand that this is a wine that is going to be more expressive of the terroir. Probably its a product that the winemaker really cared about and wanted to use all the techniques available to him to make a special product.



Chianti Classico Riserva



Spanish Gran Reserva