



BITE by BITE

Conquering My Culinary
Bucket List One Dish at a Time
By Emily Banks Wooten



Food, fun and friends

Candied Bacon Crackers

From southernliving.com

- 32 rectangular buttery crackers (such as Club) (from 1 13.7-oz. package)
- 10-12 center-cut bacon slices, cut into 3/4- to 3/2-in. pieces
- 3 tablespoons pure maple syrup, divided
- Freshly ground pepper (optional)

- Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Arrange crackers on an oven-safe wire rack fitted over a large rimmed baking sheet lined with aluminum foil.
- Arrange bacon pieces evenly over crackers lengthwise, and carefully tuck any overhang under cracker edges (bacon will shrink when cooked).
- Brush 2 tablespoons of the maple syrup evenly over bacon.
- Bake in preheated oven until browned and crispy, 40-45 minutes. Remove from oven; carefully brush evenly with remaining 1 tablespoon syrup, and let cool on wire rack for 5 minutes.
- Transfer to a serving platter. Serve warm with a few grinds of pepper, if desired.

Andra's Black Pepper Cheeseball

- 1 8-oz. package cream cheese
- 1 package ranch salad dressing mix or ranch dip mix
- Lawrey's seasoned pepper

- Mix first two ingredients together and form into a ball and then roll in the pepper. Andra usually doubles this, as do I. Serve with the crackers of your choice.

Kelli's Caprese Salad Skewers

- Grape tomatoes
- Fresh basil leaves
- Mozzarella cheese, cut into small cubes
- Olive Oil
- Kosher salt
- Fresh ground black pepper

- Thread a grape tomato, a fresh basil leaf and a cube of mozzarella cheese onto a toothpick. Make as many as desired.
- Place the skewers on a platter and drizzle the olive oil all over them. Top with kosher salt and several grinds of fresh ground black pepper.



Enjoying a birthday celebration

We recently had a fun, full weekend in which my siblings and all my nieces, nephews and great nephews came to town and we gathered a few close friends together and celebrated my mother's 80th birthday. We ordered two large grazing boards from Classy Tastings, a couple of local ladies with a side gig in which they assemble absolutely beautiful boards. The boards offer a dizzying variety of colorful sweet and savory items of different textures and flavors. The beautiful grazing boards served as the stars of the show and we proceeded to cobble together an array of finger foods that were served with the choice of wine, beer or cold water served with fresh lime slices.

Daughter made her Deviled Eggs. Andra, my sister-in-law, made her famous Black Pepper Cheeseball accompanied by crackers. Our nephew James made his famous Crack Cake. Niece Katie ordered a beautiful cake from Williams-Sonoma. There was a platter of cookies from my friend Rachel. And I rounded it all off with a platter of my friend Kelli's Caprese Salad Skewers and a platter of Candied Bacon Crackers. All of the food was good and our guests really seemed to enjoy all of it. ■

*"You don't get older,
you get better."*

— SHIRLEY BASSEY

Storing wine - the short and long of it

How long can you store a bottle of unopened wine? Like most wine questions, the answer is complicated ... that's why wine is so interesting.

First, the short of it. Ninety-nine percent of the wine you buy today is meant to be enjoyed now – within six months or a year. Can it be stored longer without going bad? That depends. Bold, red wines will last longer in your rack because they contain more of key ingredients that slow down the breakdown of wine, notably tannins, acids and sugar – they are made that way. White wines are meant to be enjoyed sooner rather than later. Why? Because they don't have the same high levels of these ingredients and they have some of their own. Rose wines are made for drinking soon in order to preserve that fresh, spring-like taste. There are exceptions, but that is a good guideline. How long your wines last depends also on your dining room or living room climate. Do you keep the temp at 80 or 65 degrees or do you keep it at 75 during the day and turn it down to 65 at night? Does the sun shine in or is it dark? Does your house have a more or less constant humidity? These are the factors that will affect how long your wine stays good.

What about a wine cooler or wine fridge (different names, same thing)? Good idea – wine is ideally kept at a constant temperature in the 50s or 60s. That's what wine coolers are for. They are a convenient place to store your 15 or 30 bottles and they can also



provide a place to store other beverages. And, they are fashionable. How is this for style? Our grandson, three years out of Baylor, just rented a midrange apartment in Dallas that comes with a built-in wine cooler!

Want to get your own wine cooler? If you enjoy wine, the odds are that you either have a wine cooler or have thought about getting one. All the big box retailers (Lowe's, Home Depot, et. al.) offer them in store or online at sizes and prices all over the lot.

Now about long-term wine storage. Once you get set up with your wine cooler and start stocking it, inevitably you begin to think ... wouldn't it be fun to "age" some wine. All the restaurants and TV shows that mention wine brag about their wine that has been aged ... for five years, or 10, or 20. Our advice ... don't try it on your own ... we did, having no clue what we were doing. Here is our story.

About 20 years ago we were (legally) given a gift certificate at Specs Warehouse for \$1,500. To me that was "found money," a chance to buy some pricey wine (\$30+ per bottle in 2003) and store in my wine cooler for 10

or 20 years. So, we bought a half dozen bottles of really nice wine. I won't list them, all reds, mostly French from well-known vineyards – even to us! We dutifully placed these in the bottom shelves of my wine cooler and patiently waited. Why did we wait 20 years? One reason is that we weren't knowledgeable enough wine drinkers to think we could appreciate the wines, and we didn't have any friends who were either. So, we waited; and waited and waited. Recently, a wine-drinking neighbor brought her very savvy wine-drinking daughter by one evening for a glass of wine. How wine savvy? She had been to France half a dozen times and as much to California! She knows wine. The perfect occasion to try my "wine cellar."

We opened two bottles. The first was brown and smelled awful. Painfully, we poured it out and turned to the second bottle; the cork looked good and it took some doing to remove, but we were hopeful as we poured a little in our glasses. The wine was a little off color but still red; it had almost no "nose" or aroma in the glass. So, we tasted. How was it? Not vinegar, but not really good either. My guest suggested that we should refrigerate the wine in a decanter and test again tomorrow. "Sometimes aged wines need lots of time to open up," she said. Next night ... well, it was drinkable, but still had no aroma and very little taste. We drank a glass out of respect for what the wine had been, and poured the rest out. And I still

have four bottles to go.

Little did I know those 20 years ago that wines that age well even under good conditions are few and far between. Proper aging requires climate control – a constant 55 degree temperature, humidity and a dark, still (no vibrations) place. No wonder they call it a "wine cellar." During our storage, we had Hurricane Rita and eight days without electricity. Another time my cooler "went out." Why, I don't know, but was out for a month or so before I realized it. Then one time I moved all the wine and the cooler to another room.

People who have heard my story said, "Oh, how sad." But to us, it really wasn't sad ... disappointing maybe, but it was an adventure. After all, we hadn't missed the "found money." It was a conversation piece with friends and family. It provided lots of hope and reason to learn about wine. What had I hoped? As one connoisseur wrote, "Some wines have the magical ability to improve with age, which is practically non-existent ... in nature." Which gets us to de gustibus ... what had we hoped? Aging affects color, aroma, flavor and texture. Color fades, aroma becomes more complex, the flavor softens over time and the texture can be more delicate and refined in the mouth.

Is my story unusual? As it happens, no. Stories abound and wine drinkers love to tell them. One story I heard was of a lady with \$30K worth of wines in her cellar. After 15 years her tastes had

changed and she wouldn't drink it. Another was a person with a 1500-bottle wine collection in a specially designed "wine cellar" who moved from Europe to the U.S. seven years later. The movers assured that the wines would be treated "right." They might have been, but they arrived in the U.S. to be stored in a warehouse with no climate control ... they all went bad. And the stories go on!

In our search for the perfect "cellar" we came across a company in Houston, AOC Wine Selections, that seems to fit the bill. AOC sells wine and will advise and educate drinkers through classes and provides wine storage in a climate controlled facility with generator backup. You can lease a wine locker there (if available). The smallest (2x4x8) that holds about 400-500 bottles, available 24/7. All for \$390/month, their smallest locker. Although \$390/month takes some getting used to, if you have 400 bottles of \$100/bottle that you want to age for 10 years, that's only \$12 per bottle per year. If you have chosen well, you should have some great wine in a decade, probably worth a lot more than you paid! And in the meantime, you'll get invited to some fun wine events and meet some other wine lovers. Email Liz Palmer at liz.palmer@Artofcellaring.com.

So, you see, wine storage really is complicated. Remember our motto: De Gustibus non disputandum est – there is no accounting for taste! Comments? degustibus@livingston.net.