

Cellar Hand interview questions

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What to expect

Cellar Hand interviews focus on your practical winery experience, your approach to safety and hygiene, and how you handle the pace and pressure of vintage. Employers want to know you can follow direction, work in a team, and keep quality high when things get busy.

- **Process:** Questions about how you carry out routine tasks like cleaning, racking or fermentation monitoring.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking you to describe a past situation, often about teamwork, safety or problem solving.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement, such as a temperature spike or equipment failure.
- **Technical:** Questions about your knowledge of winery equipment, yeast additions, or barrel operations.
- **Safety:** Questions about chemical handling, confined space entry and general WHS compliance.

Typically a single interview with a winemaker or cellar supervisor, sometimes followed by a practical trial or site walk-through. You may be asked to demonstrate equipment operation or complete a safety induction as part of the process.

1. Walk me through how you clean and sanitise a tank before a new batch.

Why they ask

This is a core task for cellar hands, and the interviewer wants to see that you understand the steps and can work without constant supervision.

How to structure your answer

Sequence: start with the reason for each step, then describe the order you follow. Mention the chemicals or methods you use, how you check the tank is clean, and how you record the clean.

Example answer

"I start by isolating the tank and checking it's empty. I rinse with water to remove solids, then apply the appropriate cleaning chemical, usually caustic, through a spray ball or manually, depending on the tank. I let it contact for the required time, then rinse thoroughly. After that I sanitise with a no-rinse sanitiser or steam, and I visually inspect and take a swab if required. I record the clean in the batch sheet or Vintrace, noting the date, time and chemicals used. I always follow the winery's SOP and wear the right PPE."

2. Tell me about a time you noticed a fermentation issue and what you did.

Why they ask

Fermentation problems can ruin a batch, so interviewers want evidence you are observant and act quickly.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Example answer

"During a busy vintage, I was monitoring a red ferment and noticed the temperature was climbing faster than usual. I checked the density and saw it had dropped more than expected. I immediately told the winemaker and we decided to cool the tank and adjust the pump-over schedule. I stayed on it, taking readings every two hours until it stabilised. The batch finished cleanly and the winemaker

was happy with the result.”

3. You're monitoring fermentation and the temperature is rising faster than expected. What do you do?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your judgement under pressure and your ability to follow safety and quality protocols.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: stay calm, assess, act within your authority, escalate if needed.

Example answer

“First I'd confirm the reading is accurate by checking the probe and taking a manual temperature. If it's genuinely rising, I'd check the density to see how far along fermentation is. I'd then alert the winemaker immediately, because temperature spikes can kill the yeast or change the wine's style. Depending on the winery's procedures, I might start cooling the tank or adjust the cap management. I'd keep monitoring and document everything. I wouldn't make major changes without approval, but I would act quickly to prevent damage.”

4. What experience do you have with wine pumps, forklifts or tank temperature control systems?

Why they ask

The role requires operating specific equipment, so the interviewer needs to know you are competent and safe.

How to structure your answer

Direct answer: list the equipment, your licence or training, and a brief example of how you've used it.

Example answer

“I hold a current forklift licence and have used forklifts to move barrels and pallets in a cellar. I've operated wine pumps for racking and transfers, including peristaltic and centrifugal pumps, and I'm comfortable setting up hoses and valves. I've also worked with tank temperature control systems, setting cooling and heating as directed and monitoring temperatures during fermentation. I always complete pre-start checks and follow safe work procedures.”

5. How do you ensure safety when working with chemicals or entering a tank?

Why they ask

Cellar work involves confined spaces and hazardous chemicals, so safety awareness is critical.

How to structure your answer

Risk assessment, procedures, PPE, and emergency response.

Example answer

“Before any chemical task, I check the SDS and make sure I have the right PPE, like gloves, goggles and a respirator if needed. I follow the winery's SOP for mixing and applying chemicals. For tank entry, I never enter alone: I use a confined space permit, test the atmosphere, have a spotter and a rescue plan in place. I also make sure I understand the emergency procedures. Safety is not optional, and I'd rather ask questions than take a shortcut.”

6. Describe a time you had to work long shifts during vintage and keep quality high.

Why they ask

Vintage is intense, so employers want to know you can handle the hours without letting standards slip.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Example answer

“During my last vintage, we had a run of 12-hour shifts for two weeks. I was tired, but I knew the wine depended on us staying sharp. I made sure I took my breaks, stayed hydrated, and double-checked every addition and reading before recording it. I also helped newer crew members stay focused. We got through the peak without any batch errors, and the winemaker thanked us for keeping quality up.”