

AN INTRODUCTION TO WINE TASTING

by Robert L. Cunningham

I. General.

“Drinking” wine is easy: pour the wine, take the glass, tilt it and swallow. Learning to “taste” wine is more challenging, requiring:

- a proper environment,
- proper glasses, spit buckets, drinking water and other tasting tools,
- an understanding of the elements of technique,
- development of tasting vocabulary,
- focus and concentration,
- a desire to learn,
- an open mind,
- creativity and imagination,
- an effort at memory,
- the ability to build on experience.

Tasting wine involves effort, and is an act both of learning and of passion.

Wine tasting is also a catalyst between people, and the act of tasting, comparing notes and learning with others creates a common experience that builds bonds between people.

II. The Goals of Tasting.

Is the goal of wine tasting to be able to beat your competition in specifically identifying an unknown wine served at room temperature in a black glass, where even the color cannot be determined?

No! Virtually no human being can do that, and most people in that circumstance can't even tell if the wine is white or red, much less identify the varietal, region, producer, specific wine and vintage.

Harry Waugh, an English wine expert who had been tasting wines for nearly 80 years, was once asked if he had ever mistaken Burgundy for Bordeaux. “Not since lunch,” he replied.

So the goal, first of all, is to forsake pretense, and to admit and accept that we are all, for the rest of our lives, merely learning about a subject that by its very nature changes constantly.

Your efforts should be more toward understanding a particular wine in the context of wines in general, and less toward unmasking it.

Your goal should further be to remember the experience in order to be able to draw on it in the future, and to make a mental note of the foods with which a particular wine will pair well.

The more you do it the easier it becomes and the better you are at it.

Remember that most wine produced in the world today does not merit serious attention and effort-it is simply to be consumed.

Remember also that wine exists primarily for food, not as food.

That message has been lost to a great extent in the US and Australia, where the concept of wine as a cocktail or aperitif is still far too prevalent, and people often don't remember that to combine a balanced, complex wine in the mouth with their food can create the most enjoyable manifestation of both.

That concept of wine as a stand-alone beverage, combined with the American and Australian tendency to favor gargantuan, "fruit-bomb" style wines that are often more powerful than complex, and overpower many foods that might accompany them, means that we have not yet fully appreciated the elegance, complexity and richness that can be at the heart of the enjoyment of wine, and of wine and food as a natural pairing.

III. The Principal Rules.

As Matt Kramer points out in *Making Sense of Wine*: "The single greatest standard used in assessing the quality of wine is complexity. The more times you can return to a glass of wine and find something different in it--in the bouquet, in the taste--the more complex the wine."

I would add that of almost equal importance is the ability of a wine to present its innate complexity throughout our experience of it--in the nose, in the front, mid and back palate, as well as throughout a long "finish." That ability determines the depth and duration of our experience of its complexity.

There are no "rights" and "wrongs" in determining a wine that you like--your taste is unique to you, and while the opinions of others may be instructive, a wine that pleases your palate at a particular moment in time is, for you, a "good" wine, and a wine that does not please your palate at a particular moment in time is, for you, a "bad" wine.

Remember that what pleases your palate today may not please it tomorrow. Remain open-minded.

Tasting is not an exact science.

Remember that individual sensitivity to the flavors and aromas of wine vary tremendously--both physiologically (from "non-tasters" to "normal tasters" to "super tasters") and culturally.

Also remember that the majority of “super tasters” in the world (people with an extraordinary ability to analyze and recognize the sensory elements in wine) are women. I have the joy of being married to one of them.

IV. The Appropriate Setting and Controls.

- (A) Room, Lighting and Background. Many professional wine tasters prefer a somewhat sterile, bright, day-lit, odor-free room (no perfume, cigarette smoke or other odors) with white backgrounds and white tablecloths or tabletops, so that the wines can easily be viewed in the clearest possible relief without distractions.
- (B) A less formal context. With friends, however, conduct your tasting at an informal get-together or dinner party with comfortable surroundings, enjoyable music, warm but sufficient light and excellent food so that your friends can enjoy the wines, and the wines can present themselves, in an open and informal atmosphere.
- (C) Proper Tasting Tools and Rules.
1. **Proper Glasses.** One element in particular can destroy or enhance the experience of a fine wine—the glass in which it is served. Choose well, for there are many poor choices available.
 2. **Proper Opening and Pouring Techniques.**
 - Allow wines to “settle” before the tasting.
 - Avoid shaking bottles or stirring up sediment
 - Cut capsules off
 - Wipe the bottle neck free of mold and residue
 - Extract the cork gently
 - Decant if appropriate (see below)
 - Consider need for aeration to soften tannins
 3. **Aeration.** Consider the need for aeration, whether to soften and integrate tannins in younger wines, to eliminate bottle stink in some older wines, or to artificially “age” wines by oxidation, and promote integration. This is very subjective, and experience is the only teacher of when aeration is appropriate, and how much is needed. Widely differing views on aeration.
 - Use one of two systems:
 - Vinturi or similar aeration system if decanting time is not available.

- Decanter.
4. **Wine Temperature.** It is critical to serve wines at the appropriate temperature for the varietal involved. Note that normal room temperature will result in warming of wines in the glass. Note also that Americans almost universally serve white wines far too cold.
 - Sweet white wines: 40 to 50 degrees (chilled to avoid over accentuating the sweetness)
 - Dry white wines: 45 to 50 degrees
 - Light bodied and younger reds: 55 to 60 degrees
 - Medium to full bodied and mature reds: 60 to 65 degrees (to avoid accentuating the astringency (if below 60° F) or the alcohol (if above 65° F))
 - Heat accentuates alcohol and sweetness
 - Cold accentuates bitterness and astringency and, particularly in whites, oak
 - French enologist Emile Peynaud notes that “the same red wine will seem thin and hot at 72° F, supple and fluid at 64°, full and astringent at 50°.
 5. **Room Temperature.** The tasting room should be on the cooler side so that the wines and the participants do not overheat.
 6. **Spit Buckets.** At larger tastings, spitting is a must. Easy access to a container is essential.
 7. **Tasting Sheet or Note Pad.** Taking notes is one of the best ways to formulate your thoughts and enhance your memory of the tasting experience.

V. The Basic Techniques.

The basic techniques of wine tasting tonight will enhance your ability to perceive and understand wine clearly.

The techniques are simple, logical and effective.

Some elements that initially may seem, awkward or pretentious have a very rational basis and have evolved over time to achieve specific goals.

With some practice, these techniques become automatic and will reward your efforts.

VI. The Language of Wine Tasting

As you will hopefully discover, there are perhaps 10,000 elements of smell that humans can detect, and we already have words for most of them.

The difficulty is that we associate a visual image with a particular smell, and a glass of wine is generally not that visual image.

So we have a simple chart to guide us first to category and then to a word that generates the visual image to which our sense of smell can relate.

Most of us also develop our own vocabulary to make our experience and memory of a wine meaningful to us. Only you can know what words or “tasting vocabulary” will permit your mental and written notes to bring back your memory and experience of the taste and aromas of a particular wine.

VII. Taking Notes.

The act of writing down your impressions will both sharpen your analytical skills and improve your memory of those impressions.

VIII. The Stages of Wine Tasting

(A) Looking at the Wine.

1. Initial Impressions. The initial impression in the examination of wine is visual.
2. Fill. The glass should be about one-third full, never more than half-full.
3. Hold. Pick the glass up by the stem, since holding the glass by the base is awkward and holding the glass by the bowl hides the wine from view; fingerprint smudges blur its color and clarity; and your body heat increases the wine’s temperature
4. Focus on:
 - a. Hue (color), from anthocyanins in the grape skins, which is best observed by tilting the glass and looking at the wine through the rim, to see the variation in tint from the deepest part of the liquid to its edges. Hue can help you determine:
 - Variety (Pinot Noir is typically lighter-hued garnet; Petite Syrah almost inky black)
 - Fermentation techniques (extent of extraction/maceration, etc.)

- Maturity/Age (typically deep purple or garnet color/rim for younger wines vs. brick or amber for mature wines vs. brown for over-the-hill wines)
- b. Intensity, which can best be judged by looking straight down through the wine from above, to judge the depth of the wine, with particular focus on the rim of the liquid. Intensity may help indicate:
- Variety (Pinot Noir is typically transparent; Petite Syrah is opaque)
 - Weather conditions during growing season and harvest (rain, particularly at harvest, decreases intensity)
 - Fermentation techniques (extent and style of maceration)
 - Maturity/Age (wines typically lose intensity with age)
- c. Clarity (brilliance vs. cloudiness), which is determined best when light is shining sideways through the glass. Clarity helps you to assess:
- Manner in which the wine was made (filtered or unfiltered; fined or unfined)
 - Whether a wine with sediment or particulate has been at rest or disturbed
 - Age (thin color together with clumped or precipitated particulate often indicates a wine is over the hill)
5. Note the relevance of each of these elements to different aspects of a wine's quality, age and character.

(B) Preparation for Smelling and Tasting.

1. Swirl. You can't smell a liquid-only vapor. Swirling vastly increases the surface area of the wine and promotes the release of its aroma and bouquet.

A hint-it is virtually impossible to spill wine if you swirl it in a circular motion with the base resting flat on a table top-not so if you hold the glass off of the surface of the table to swirl it. The swirling wine should climb almost to the rim of the glass.

2. Note that when you stop swirling, the wine will settle to the bottom of the glass, the settling liquid may form a "sheet" on the inside of the bowl,

concentrating into channels that are the wine's "legs", an indication of the amount of alcohol in the wine and the degree of its viscous feel in the mouth: the more alcohol, the more legs and viscosity.

(C) Smelling the Wine.

1. Second Impression. The second impression in the examination of wine is smell, and the "aroma" and "bouquet" of wine are its most complex elements.
2. The Elements:
 - a. **Aroma:** the aromatic components of wine naturally produced by the grapes (by varietal) or introduced as part of the winemaking process (yeast, sulfur, oak)
 - Grape varietal-fruity cassis or black cherries (Cabernet Sauvignon) vs. barnyard earthiness (Pinot Noir) vs. black pepper spiciness (Zinfandel)
 - Yeast-creaminess and richness
 - Oak-vanilla and caramel
 - Sulfur-an unfortunate element
 - b. **Bouquet:** the result of the aging process in bottle-the evolution of the elements of aroma over time.
 - Integration of elements
 - Softening of elements
 - Development of elegance
 - Mystery of evolution
3. Inhale. When you stop swirling, the rate of vaporization of the wine is at its peak. Bring the rim of the glass to your upper lip, just under the nose, and tilt the glass and inhale as though "drinking" the vapors in through your nostrils.
4. Method. There is no consensus about the best smelling technique-one deep draw, or several light inhalations. Choose the method that maximizes your personal appreciation.
5. The Primacy of Sight. Sight is for most people the dominant sense, overriding all other senses.

To fully experience their other senses, people compensate by closing their eyes to suppress sight-when they smell a rose, listen intensely to music, or kiss.

Your appreciation of the aromas, tastes and feel of wine will be enhanced by closing your eyes.

6. The Power of Smell. Smell is one of the most powerful of human senses.

Most of what we call “taste” is actually “smell.” Note that if you have a cold, you can still “taste” the wine but you may not be able to “smell” it since the olfactory mucosa which hold the olfactory bulbs may be blocked. However, your experience of the wine will be extraordinarily limited.

While our taste is limited to four primal elements: sweet, salt, sour and bitter, our olfactory system is extremely sensitive, permitting us the ability to analyze and identify up to 10,000 different elements.

Wine, perhaps more than any other liquid on earth, contains an astonishing number and variety of elements that our sense of smell can detect and identify, many of which are more commonly associated with other objects in our daily lives-violets, cherries, vanilla, cedar, tobacco, bell peppers, horse sweat, etc.

One of the great joys in tasting wine is rediscovering in these wines the smells that recall other moments and emotions in our own lives and the memories they bring to us.

(D) “Tasting” and “Feeling” the Wine.

1. Third and Fourth Impressions. The third and fourth impressions in the examination of wine are taste and “feel”.
2. Sip. With the aromas still fresh in your senses, take a moderate sip of wine-enough to fully engage your sense of taste but not so much that you feel forced to swallow quickly.
3. Roll and Draw. To engage all tasting areas of your mouth and to aerate the wine in your mouth, gently roll the wine in the mouth, slosh the wine around and over the tongue, and purse your lips and draw air gently through the wine. Notice the extraordinary laughter you are provoking in your friends.
4. Explore the tastes for 5 to 15 seconds at least, combining them with the aromas you continue to smell and the “feel” of the wine on your palate.
5. Sensitivity is by location. Different areas of the mouth experience different aspects of a wine’s character – sweet on the front of the tongue;

astringency or bitterness of tannins on the inner cheeks; the heat and dryness of alcohol in the back of the throat.

6. Taste Clues. Taste and feel can indicate:

- Varietal (intensity of tannins, acidity, sugar, alcohol levels, body)
- Vinification techniques (astringency indicates extended maceration, new oak barrel aging; buttery soft texture indicates malolactic fermentation)
- Age (harshness, high tannin levels, lack of integration indicate youth; softness of tannins, complexity, smoothness and increased integration of elements indicate maturity)
- Quality (are the elements of greatness present, even if the wine is unintegrated?)

7. Explore the finish.

The finish of a wine can be a great moment, and a long one. After you swallow, exhale gently and slowly through the nose but allow the vapors of the wine in your throat to circulate in the mouth as well.

In the retronasal passage, which connects the nose to the throat, wine aromas can linger long after the wine is finally swallowed, yielding what is called a “long finish” and one of the defining tests of a great wine--the better the wine, the more enduring, complex and intense the residual aromas will be.

In a great wine, the finish can last a minute or more, creating a unique and defining experience.

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