



An Introduction to Wine-Tasting

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One of the great things about wine is that like art and music, we don't have to know anything about it to enjoy it. We can simply take a sip and decide whether we like it or not. Beyond that we really don't have to give it another thought. But, again like art and music, we do have the option of pursuing the subject on a different level. For example, we may be indifferent to a piece of music which we hear as background sound, but that same piece may be capable of giving us far greater pleasure if we give it our full attention. It's the same with a bottle of good wine. If we give it some time and attention, we are much more likely to appreciate it beyond the simple pleasure of its tasting good. Given the opportunity, even a modest wine can reveal character and uniqueness that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

So let's start with the tasting of wine. At one level we can just put it in our mouths and swallow. In so doing the most we can expect to learn is whether or not we like the wine. Maybe that's all we care to know. Fair enough. Tasting wine, on the other hand, is different because we may be able to discern the difference between a good wine and a better one, and to decide for ourselves if an expensive wine is worth the money. For many of us, the idea of acquiring "tasting skills" is quite daunting. Wine sometimes evokes such a sense of awe that we might believe that tasting wine takes special powers or knowledge or even that it is a sort of dark art revealed only to chosen initiates. But anyone can learn to taste wine. Sure, there are procedures to learn but then it is a case of just practice, practice and more practice. The only secret about the process is concentration. Concentrating on the wine being tasted is what separates the good tasters from all others.

When tasting wines our main focus will be on the senses of sight, smell and taste. So let's take each of these in turn.

Sight

When we look at a wine, we need to turn the glass on its side. This will spread the wine out and give you a better perspective. When we look at a wine, we should think about two things: colour and clarity. Our first look at the wine may give us the first inkling that there is a problem about the wine. For example, if a wine is brown in colour and if it is, say, a Chardonnay or a Riesling, then there may be a problem. However, it is worth remembering that white wine does darken with age. The darker the colour in all wines, the more intense the wine. Red wine, as it gets older, does develop a tawny hue. Similarly white wines will darken as they oxidise (like a sliced apple). However, if the wine has a brownish colour, and the label says it is only one or two years old, then there could be a problem!

Most wines these days are bright and clear but occasionally something may appear in your glass that will get your attention. The first thing to remember is that nothing in the wine will harm you if ingested. The issue is one of aesthetics. You may see bits of cork floating in the wine (possibly due to an old or crumbly cork or, more likely, due to operator error!) If it's off-putting simply decant the wine into a clean glass. Sometimes tartrate crystals can appear on the end of the cork or collect at the bottom of the bottle - these crystals are odourless, colourless and tasteless and will not harm you in any way. Sediment in red wines is probably the most likely source of cloudiness in a wine.

Older wines often throw such a sediment. A small amount is no big deal, but lots of the stuff can make the wine look murky and unattractive. If a wine has severe sediment (to check, simply hold the bottle up to the light) stand it up before opening to let the bits settle on the bottom of the bottle. Once it has settled, it's best to decant into a different receptacle, leaving the sediment and a small amount of the wine in the bottle.

Smell

Smell is the most important sense we use when analysing wines. If you have suspicions that the wine is faulty (from its appearance), then confirmation will come as soon as you sniff the wine. If it smells of wet cardboard or mustiness, then it probably is indeed faulty! Wines smell like other things, which is a great help when describing them. They can smell like flowers, fruits, herbs, spices, and oak. White and red wines each have their own particular set of smells. The floral smell in white wines is often of blossoms; fruity aromas often resemble melons, stone fruits, pears or apples. For red wines, the smell of flowers may be of roses or violets, and the fruity aromas may be of red fruits (cherries, strawberries and raspberries) or black fruits (blackberries or currants.)

To get all the aromas the wine has to offer, swirl the glass before you sniff. This agitates the wine and causes it to release aromas. Now draw in a long, deep sniff, and concentrate on what it is you smell.

Taste

We have four tastes. On the tip of the tongue we perceive sweetness. Midway back on the side of the tongue we taste acidity/sourness and salt. On the back of the tongue bitterness is detected. We experience three phases of taste when we put wine in our mouths. They are "attack", "evolution" and "finish". The "attack" is the initial impact of the components of acid, sugar, tannin and alcohol on your palate - it lasts only two or three seconds. "Evolution" is when flavours begin to develop and that's the time when you consider what flavours the wine is showing. The "finish" is the flavour that lingers after the wine has been spit out or swallowed. After spitting or swallowing, breathe out slowly through your nose with your mouth closed. You'll taste the wine on the back of your palate. Sometimes it may be a "short finish" but sometimes it will be a "long finish" which would indicate some degree of quality in the wine.

To get the most out of the wine-tasting, it is important to be aware of the right temperature for the wine. A wine that is too cold will be tight and closed in, and unable to release its aromas and flavours. Wine that is too warm will be too powerful and seem overly alcoholic. Often white wines are served too cold and reds too warm. White wines should be refreshingly cool but not icy; reds should be cool and refreshing in the mouth. The phrase "serve at room temperature" originates from the time when central heating was not common! Roughly speaking, whites should be in the region of 8 - 12 degrees C; reds about 13 - 17 C. Sweet wines and sparkling wines should be served more chilled than dry ones.

As mentioned earlier, concentration and practice are required to gain experience (and expertise) in wine tasting. Some people like to keep notes of their tasting sessions. Not only does this aid concentration but also acts as a record of what has been liked or not liked.

We all develop our preferences for different types of wine. Often this equates to the type of grape variety that is preferred. As a simple guide, the following are some of the characteristics of a few of the main grapes that are most common. (There are hundreds and hundreds of different grapes grown around the world, so this is perforce a very abbreviated summary.

White grapes

Chardonnay - descriptors: green or yellow apple, tropical fruits (banana, pineapple etc.)

Sauvignon Blanc - lime, grapefruit, gooseberry, asparagus, mineral

Chenin Blanc - apple, melon, pear

Pinot Gris (Pinot Grigio) - pear, melon

Riesling - apple, lemon, peach, apricot, honey, floral

Red grapes

Cabernet Sauvignon - cassis, green olive, bell pepper, chocolate, coffee

Merlot - plum, cassis, cherry

Pinot Noir - cherry clove, cinnamon, black pepper

Syrah (Shiraz) - black pepper, white pepper, blackberry, clove, dark chocolate

Sangiovese - cherry, currants.

The vast majority of wine drinkers stick to a very limited range of wines - maybe one that they deem to like. However, one of the great pleasures of wine is to discover new, off-beat and unusual ones. The wider the range of grapes, countries, vintages, the more discerning your palate will become. Enjoy!