

How To Taste: A Guide to Tasting Like a Sommelier

Introduction

This guide contains detailed information on preparing for a wine tasting, with attention paid to details such as environment and lighting, stemware, and order of tasting. If you wish to skip ahead to the tasting section, turn to page 10, where you'll find just that.

Getting Started

One of my favorite things about wine is that it is one of civilization's most complex beverages, having inspired kings, intellectuals, artists, and even ordinary people like you and me to wax poetic on its life-enhancing qualities. Wine not only inspires the mind, but it apparently nourishes the body as well, if you buy into the 1990s "discovery" that red wine is good for the heart.

Regardless of the veracity of that pronouncement, wine certainly does seem to have a restorative quality. Until the 20th century, red wine was prescribed to the ill as one of Western physicians' main medicines against maladies of all sorts. No one's sure if it really worked, but it certainly couldn't have hurt yesterday's ill to have a refreshing glass of Claret--what the British call Bordeaux--amidst the gloom of being sick.

Even today in our technologically and medicinally advanced society wine retains an allure of the mystical. To wine enthusiasts the world over it is somehow more than just a beverage, more than just an accompaniment to food or afternoon aperitif. Wine, when at its best, can transport you back in time to the first time you tried a particular bottle, or the first time you smelled an aroma it recalls. And because wine is so often enjoyed with family and friends, it is closely linked to a sense of community and well-being. Personally, I can recall few fonder memories than those involving my father, a huge wine fan and my initial inspiration to dig deeper into the world of wine, my family, a delicious home-cooked meal and a great bottle of California Pinot Noir.

The Power of Scent

One of the reasons wine triggers such powerful recollections of earlier experiences is that it is comprised of volatile elements that give off complex aromas during the tasting experience. Our sense of smell is that most closely related to our capacity for memory, with its neurological receptor located adjacent to that of memory in the brain.

This is probably why wine tasting is so often dubbed an “intellectual” pursuit: decoding and interpreting its many aromas is enough to keep even the most fastidious individuals on their toes. Luckily, wine tasting doesn’t have to be a laborious pursuit. For those of us more inclined to enjoy our wine than to deconstruct it, wine also allows us to do just that.

And so wine, although the progeny of little more than fruit juice and the yeasts that transform its sugar into alcohol, is capable of emitting many and complex aromas. The aromas that wine gives off vary from sweet to spicy, musty to floral fresh, herbal to meaty, and everything in between. Certainly, this veritable cacophony of scents coming from one drink can mislead people to believe that ingredients other than grape juice go into the mix.

I will never forget when my college roommate, an extremely bright girl who’s about to begin studying at Harvard Business School, asked me quite seriously if the winemaker had actually added strawberries to the wine we were quaffing. Now that I better understand wine’s uniquely pungent nature, her question doesn’t seem so strange.

Linked: Scent and Taste

Now that we know about wine's penchant for emitting a collection of scents larger than the number of paintings in the Louvre, let's touch on the tastes wine can provoke. Surprisingly, the human tasting apparatus, comprised of our tongues and the walls of our mouths, can only perceive four tastes: sweet, salty, bitter and sour.

The complex "tastes" that we believe we perceive when tasting, it turns out, are actually vaporized aromas that pass through the retro nasal passage at the back of our throats when drinking. These aromas, in concert with those we initially sense when nosing the wine, comprise our overall perception of a wine's flavor profile. We truly "smell" a wine's flavors more than we actually "taste" them.

Tasting wine, then, is a process involving much more than simply drinking the stuff. The act of tasting wine, hereafter referred to in this tutorial as "evaluating" wine, actually incorporates three key observations. First, you will learn to evaluate the appearance of the wine in the glass.

Next, you will learn to evaluate the wine's numerous aromas, together referred to as its "nose." And finally, you will learn how to identify and describe a wine's flavor profile and structure as perceived in your mouth, or, as they say in the wine world, on your palate. Before we delve into all of this, however, let's take a few minutes to review the conditions under which tasting is done most successfully, so that you'll get the most from your oenophilic adventures.

Lighting and Environment

Wine comes in many shades besides your everyday red and white. In addition to these two common descriptors, wine may be characterized as nearly translucent, straw-colored, green-yellow, golden, amber, garnet, ruby, purple, inky black and, you guessed it, everything in between. That's why evaluating wine against a white background and with adequate lighting is so important.

If you plan on discerning the subtleties between a pale straw-colored wine and a medium straw-colored wine—a difference that can actually contain vital clues to the wines' identity in blind tasting scenarios—you will need these basic environmental conditions. And although you probably don't plan on attempting blind tasting just yet, observing the subtle nuances of a wine's color profile will only enhance your overall tasting experience.

A white napkin or plate will do the trick for the white background, and natural lighting is best for observing a wine's appearance, although an artificially well-lit room will do just fine as well. Besides good lighting and a white background, noise control is also critical for focused evaluation.

Now, I know that more often than not wine is consumed in a social environment. It's imperative to note, however, that in order to truly evaluate a wine in all of its aesthetic complexity, you require, well, peace and quiet. And while you're watching the noise, go easy on colognes and perfumes and try to keep other scents in your tasting environment to a minimum. Just as poor lighting will mask a wine's true color profile, excessive scents will get in the way of a wine's natural aromas.

Serving Temperatures

Wine, when served at its correct temperature, will reveal its complex aromas and flavors to the observant taster. When served at anything other than at its ideal temperature, however, wine will necessarily lose some of its awesome aesthetic transmission power. The reason for this is simply that wine is a finicky beverage. In fact, you might say that wine is as finicky as it is complex.

As a result, I recommend trying to serve wine at as close to its optimal temperature as sanely possible. For those of you with state-of-the-art dual temperature-controlled wine refrigerators, this will be easy. For the rest of us, just do as best you can to serve wine according to the following guidelines:

Champagne & Sparkling Wines: 450F

Still Whites: 500F to 550F

Dessert Wines: 580F to 620F

Still Reds: 600F to 650F

Dry Sherry: 550F

Port & Other Sherry: 620F to 650F

Practical tip: If you wish to keep all of your wines at a single temperature, opt for the lowest temperature required and allow those best served at higher temperatures to warm up a bit in the glass before drinking. Most home refrigerators are kept at 400F or below, making your fridge an adequate storage place for your wine. You can easily warm a wine by setting it out before serving, or cupping your hands around the bowl of your glass for a few minutes.

Stemware, Corkscrew & Other Tools

Possessing the proper stemware and wine tasting accessories will enhance your wine experience, but are certainly not mission critical. At minimum, I suggest you use traditional wine glasses, comprised of a base, stem and bowl, and clear in color. You should hold the wine glass by its stem, as holding it by the bowl will inadvertently warm the wine, distancing it from its ideal service temperature.

Some connoisseurs hold the glass by its base, but I find this difficult to pull off and a bit stuffy-looking. As you become more invested in wine evaluation, you may wish to purchase some thin crystal-based glasses such as those made by celebrated wine glass producer Riedel.

Ideally, you would use a new glass for each wine that you evaluate, a practice that would in all likelihood lead you to amass a ridiculously large amount of glasses to wash following the exercise. To avoid this, simply have a supply of water nearby during wine evaluations with which to rinse out your glass between wines. You should also have a spittoon, or “spit bucket”, on-hand for collecting whatever you don’t drink or choose to expiate (read: spit out).

Any run-of-the-mill corkscrew will do for most bottles you’ll be consuming, although for difficult-to-open, mostly older bottles you may wish to invest in a two-pronged corkscrew commonly referred to as the Ah-So corkscrew. See Chapter 7 for purchase information.

Other tools worth mentioning:

Foil cutter

Bottle coaster

Vacu-vin wine preservers

Champagne preservers

Sleeves and other cooling devices

Order of Tasting

Different wines, when consumed together, should be consumed in the order that best shows each wine's attributes. This is usually in order of body, or weight, of the wines: as a rule of thumb, those lightest in body should be consumed before those heavier in body. More often than not, white wines are lighter in body than reds, and table wines are lighter in body than fortified wines like port and sherry. Champagne and other sparkling wines are usually the lightest in body and accordingly served first. Body is principally determined by alcohol strength.

This strategy ensures that lighter-bodied wines' subtle flavors and aromas are not overpowered by those of bigger-bodied wines, whose more pronounced qualities, had they been evaluated prior, would necessarily overshadow those of their lighter-bodied counterparts.

An exception to the body rule is that of age. When a particularly old wine, such as 40-year-old Bordeaux from a good producer, is being served, it should be consumed before most young wines, regardless of color or weight. This is because a good quality wine's aromas and flavors become not only more complex but also more delicate as the wine ages, and as a result are at risk of being overpowered by younger wines' less subtle qualities.

You might compare the phenomenon to that of the evolution of color in a well-preserved painting: the colors in a 100-year-old Monet are certainly less pronounced, although almost unequivocally more interesting, than those in a contemporary painting by an average artist. An exception to the age rule would be for particularly light-bodied wines: it's still ok to serve a light-bodied, young white wine before a fine aged red, so long as the first wine is sufficiently subtle in character.

Role of Food and Water

Most foods cover the palate with a filmy coating that interferes with your ability to perceive wine's flavors, and as such consuming food immediately before and during tastings should be avoided. Furthermore, most foods give off some sort of aroma, which can wreak havoc on your ability to correctly identify a wine's aroma profile. In certain cases, however, some foods can aid your palate in returning to a neutral condition following the ingestion of a particularly potent wine.

Examples of such foods include plain water crackers and most simple breads. Indeed, consuming some food during a wine tasting can help ensure that you balance your alcohol intake with that of food, a good idea when you are tasting several wines at once or drinking over a prolonged period.

Water is a benevolent addition to every wine evaluation exercise. Because alcohol is a diuretic agent, meaning that it interferes with the body's natural ability to stay hydrated, water should be consumed before, during and after drinking wine in order to maintain your body's ideal fluid level.

Pacing Yourself

Perhaps it goes without saying, but as a wine writer I've got to say it all the same: be sure to pace yourself when drinking wine. Because wine does not contain concentrated spirit—its alcohol is not nearly as potent as that of, say, vodka or gin—some drinkers are misled to believe it's not as risky to drink wine as it is to drink spirits. To the contrary: wine contains alcohol, on average about 12% by volume, more than twice that of beer, and as a result should be consumed moderately. Alternating a glass of water with each glass of wine is a good strategy for keeping yourself hydrated and for moderating your alcohol intake.

So long as you use good judgment, enjoying wine can be one of life's most pleasant and rewarding experiences. Santé!

How to Taste

Just three things - seeing, smelling and tasting – are the activities from which all wine tasting spring.

See: Wine comes in many shades besides your everyday red and white. In addition to these two common descriptors, wine may be characterized as nearly translucent, straw-colored, green-yellow, golden, amber, garnet, ruby, purple, inky black and, you guessed it, everything in between.

Tilt your glass slightly and hold it against the white background. Look for differences between the color in the middle of the glass (the core) and that at the edge (the rim).

Smell: Now, swirl the wine in the glass – this will stir up its aromas and allow you to get a good whiff. Stick your nose in the glass and inhale deeply. What do you smell? The human nose can detect as many as 10,000 different scents, and wine is chock full of interesting aromas. This is totally subjective, so there's no wrong answer.

Taste: Now, the good part. Take a sip of the wine and swish it around in your mouth, pausing for a moment before swallowing. This will allow the wine to coat all the surfaces of your mouth.

What do you taste? Some things to look for are fruit flavors (reds tend to have red berry fruits like strawberry and cherry, while whites have citrus fruit flavors like lemon and tropical fruit flavors such as banana). You might also taste spice, coffee, leather, or herbs, depending on what's in your glass.

The best wines are what's called "balanced", meaning that their building blocks, comprised of tannin (the component in red wines that makes your mouth feel chalky and can leave a dark stain on your teeth), acidity, and alcohol level are in synch, with no one thing overwhelming the others.

Finally, take a minute to decide what you think about the wine. Did you like it? Would you have it again? Did you think there were lots of flavors and scents, or was it fairly one-dimensional?

The more you taste wine, the more you'll begin to notice these things. So, next time you open a bottle take a few minutes to see, smell and taste the wine slowly – you may very well find things in there you'd never noticed before.

Note: "Taste Like a Pro" appeared in the Visalia Times-Delta January 18, 2006. This tutorial includes portions of the article.