

Raise Your Glass If You're Sure

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Pan to this scene: you're on a first date, you order a bottle of expensive red hoping it'll impress your date, and it arrives smelling...not right. You're no wine expert, but you've definitely downed enough bottles of the stuff to tell a decent bottle from the swill you used to drink in high school. In other words, you can generally distinguish between a bottle of decent Napa Cab and Night Train. And right now, you're pretty sure this wine isn't up to standard. In other words, this bottle is bad. Or is it? Cut to mid-date despair.

If you've ever experienced this sort of vinous calamity, you're not alone. It turns out that wine taint is something that happens all too often due to a variety of factors, not the least of which--poor storage--is avoidable. And, unless you're a seasoned sommelier or hard-core recreational drinker (read: wine snob), you probably don't have a clue how to put your finger on the fault plaguing your latest bottle. Good news is here, however, in the form of the following catalog of the most common faults found in wine and how to identify them:

Cork Taint

What it is - Caused by the foul-smelling compound trichloroanisole, or TCA, this is the most common fault found in wine. It occurs when a bottle's cork has become tainted with TCA during the cork harvesting and treatment process. Cork taint is not a fault of the winemaker but rather a chance occurrence resulting from cork's natural susceptibility to TCA. The high incidence of cork taint in the late 90s was a major catalyst for the switch to alternatives such as synthetic corks and screw caps.

How to identify it – Corked wines generally smell musty or like damp cardboard, lack fruit on the palate and have a very short finish. The bad aromas intensify as a wine is left open, making corked wines extremely unpleasant. Send these back.

Sulfur Dioxide

What it is –Sulfur is used in various forms throughout the winemaking process as a preservative and disinfectant and is usually undetectable in the finished product. Sulfur dioxide is applied when making sweet and semi-sweet wines to prevent them from refermenting once they're in the bottle (the presence of residual sugar, which lends these wines their sweetness, makes them particularly susceptible to refermentation). As a result, sweet wines are the most likely to exhibit lingering sulfur dioxide.

How to identify it - The unpleasant aroma of a struck match is the best way to describe a wine suffering from excessive sulfur dioxide. Happily, you can usually make the bad smell "blow off" by swirling the wine in your glass.

Mercaptans

What it is – The extreme state of hydrogen sulfide, which itself lends tainted wines the smell of rotten eggs, the compound mercaptans has been accurately

described as smelling of raw sewage or skunk. This fault is most common in red wines made in hot climates like Australia without enough access to oxygen. How to identify it – You’ll know it when you smell it, believe me. In milder forms it can be subdued by swirling the wine in your glass or by dropping a copper coin into the wine (don’t ask). In extreme manifestations, the wine’s simply undrinkable.

Brettanomyces

What it is – Often described as “horsey,” Brettanomyces or “Brett” enjoys a love-hate relationship with many wine drinkers. Some describe this harmless fault as lending a European complexity (read: barnyard smell) to wines, while others describe it with a host of scatological terms of dis-endearment. The source of Brett’s controversial smell is bacteria found in old wood or unclean cellars. Sometimes, winemakers intentionally induce Brett in an effort to lend “complexity” to red wines.

How to identify it – When present in small amounts Brett can be difficult to identify in a wine, and it is at this stage that it is often mistakenly attributed to a manifestation of a wine’s complexity. At higher levels, Brett exhibits an unpleasant mousey flavor, especially at the back of the throat after swallowing.

Oxidation

What it is – Oxygen is generally an enemy to wine, and as a result oxidation occurs when a wine has been exposed to the air for too long. Some fortified wines such as Sherry and Madeira are made deliberately oxidized, although the process is almost always avoided in making other wines. In an extreme state, oxidized wines turn to vinegar. Whites are more susceptible to oxidation than are reds, although it can affect any wine left exposed to oxygen for too long. Poor storage and faulty corks are the main causes of oxidation.

How to identify it – Oxidation causes all wines to smell flat and lifeless and whites to turn brown in hue, a tell-tale sign. Obviously, any wine smelling of vinegar has completely oxidized, and should be thrown out.

Volatile Acidity

What it is – Not technically a fault but certainly unpleasant, volatile acidity can be off-putting when pronounced and is found in high alcohol wines like port and Australian Shiraz as well as some older reds. Oftentimes dubbed “VA” by professional tasters, volatile acidity gives the sensation that too many aromas are being given off by a glass at once.

How to identify it – Wines exhibiting volatile acidity give off a heady aroma most readily compared to nail polish or varnish. VA will not improve with aeration.

Other “Faults”

Cloudiness/Sediment - Cloudiness in a wine comes from over activity of yeast or bacteria, and is one of the most easily recognizable wine faults. Sediment is frequently present in older reds and some whites including German Riesling, and is almost always harmless.

Bubbles – In still white wines, the presence of some bubbles is the natural and harmless result of residual carbon dioxide left in the wine for what winemakers

like to call “prickle.” In still red wines bubbles are a bad sign, usually indicating an unintentional re-fermentation of the wine in bottle.

Sommelier Service With a Smile

At the end of the day, distinguishing between the many wine faults catalogued here can be understandably daunting. For example, a wine afflicted by hydrogen sulfide and smelling of rotten eggs can be subtly transformed by the acquisition of an additional element to take on the sewage-like Mercaptans compound. Even sommeliers get confused by all the faults and variations on faults, so don't despair if you can't pinpoint whether your bottle's suffering from H₂S or mercaptans. In a restaurant setting, simply expressing to your waiter or sommelier a suspicion that the wine is bad should be enough to have your bottle replaced. It's the sommelier's job, after all, to order, care for and serve good wine, and as such the responsibility lies with him to graciously replace your tainted bottle with a good one. Most sommeliers are honest folks who actually enjoy their jobs, and the good ones will take back your bottle with little friction. Now: Resume successful date.