

# Top Wine Faults & How To Deal

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We've all been there before: The wine you've ordered arrives at your table at the *chichi* restaurant and smells...wrong. You're not sure what's behind the malodorous scent, but you're quite sure it smacks of your Aunt Edna's moldy attic. You're desperate to send it back, but nervous the "dirty attic" excuse will come off as uninformed, inadequate and pathetically incorrect all at once. But take heart, worrisome wino: there *is* a

method to the madness of decoding wine faults (as usual, we've got you covered).

Because no one - your Aunt Edna perhaps excluded - should have to suffer through the unpleasantness of a mold-imbued wine.

## **Trichloroanisole (AKA "TCA")**

This icky wine fault - one of the most common - is caused by chlorine-contaminated cork bark or wood, which in turn leads to what we know as "cork taint" or "corked" wines. Affected wines smell of moldy or wet cardboard (or a musty attic, if that's your interpretation), lack fruit intensity on the palate and are destined to grow more intensely foul-smelling as the problem persists. Remedy: send these bottles back, as this is a fault that most definitely won't "blow over."

## **Brettanomyces (AKA "Brett")**

Caused by the spoilage yeast *Brettanomyces*, "Brett" - as this fault is most often called - leads affected wines to smell like a host of unpleasant descriptors (barnyard, sweaty saddle, chicken coop and wet dog are some of the more colorful ways it's been characterized). In low concentrations a "hint of Brett" can be interpreted by some tasters as pleasant, but if it overwhelms, ask to try a different wine (additional bottles of the same wine are likely to be affected, too).

## **Volatile Acidity (AKA "VA")**

The result of the overproduction of acetic acid and ethyl acetate in wine, this fairly common wine fault causes its vinous victims to smell of "high-toned" aromas including nail polish remover, vinegar and paint thinner. In its most intense incarnations, wines with excessive VA come across simply as vinegar both in aroma and taste - and should be sent back right away as a result.

## **Oxidation**

Occasionally described as "maderization," this fault occurs in table wines that have been needlessly exposed to oxygen through poor handling or rapid temperature changes (most often heat-related) during their life in the winery or in the bottle. Affected wines will turn brown in color - a defect most apparent in whites - and taste stale, flat or generally lifeless. Send these back, too!

## **Mercaptans**

Caused by the improper handling of sulphur compounds in the winery, this fault results in wines that smell unappetizingly like skunks or rotten eggs. ; Easily one of the most unpleasant wine faults in terms of off-scents it produces, mercaptans is thankfully encountered rather infrequently; if you DO come across one of its victims, send the bottle back - a quick sniff by your server will confirm the issue.

## **Cloudiness / Haziness**

Cloudiness in a wine is a visual flaw that most often does NOT indicate a serious problem unless the cloudiness is excessive. Unfiltered wines are known for being a bit more opaque than their crystal-clear, filtered cousins, though this is not technically a flaw; if your wine resembles a something seriously murky, however, it could be mycoderma, a yeast-related fault that merits a bottle refusal.

## **Tartrate Crystals**

Perhaps the most visually shocking of all wine "faults," tartrate crystals resemble tiny shards of glass in the bottom of some white wine bottles - but are in fact harmless. Known to present in wines that have not been cold stabilized (as is often the case with many European whites), tartrate crystals are formed from solidified potassium or calcium and present zero threat to imbibers.

## **Sediment**

As it ages, red wine is known to develop a heterogeneous mixture of deposits known collectively as sediment that appear as residue in the bottom, neck or shoulder of a bottle. Altogether, sediment is absolutely harmless, though special care (decanting) should be taken when serving a bottle that has developed it over time. Today, most wines are thoroughly clarified, stabilized and filtered to prevent the development of sediment, as drinkers often mistake it for a fault.

## **Herbaciousness**

Also not a fault, herbaciousness or a "green" aroma or flavor in a wine is sometimes mistaken for an error in the winemaking process, when in fact some wines simply present herbaciousness as part of their natural varietal profile (Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc come readily to mind). And though early picking or harvesting from young vines can also present green flavors, these phenomena are also far from faults. ; Pair these with herbed foods for best fit.

## **Bubbles**

Occasionally we find ourselves uncorking a so-called "still wine" that boasts a few or a lot of bubbles in its midst. What's the deal? When seen in young white wines -



particularly off-dry (read: slightly sweet) versions - this is often intentional, as a touch of CO<sub>2</sub> is known to make these wines taste light and refreshing. In an older red, however, bubbles signal an unintentional secondary fermentation in the bottle, and are most definitely a fault. New bottle, please!