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Guide To Tasting Wine

By Ben Bicaais

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The basics of tasting wine are relatively simple to learn. Once the fundamentals are mastered, the nuances and details can be enhanced over a lifetime. Like any other skill, tasting wine requires practice, and consistency is probably the most important factor.

One helpful strategy an aspiring wine taster can pursue is tasting with a friend that has superior knowledge. Questions can be addressed, and you will quickly become comfortable with this unnecessarily intimidating subject.

Another important strategy for a beginning wine taster is to taste several wines side-by-side that share at least one common variable. This could be the varietal, style, AVA of origin, or any combination of the three.

Tasting blind will minimize any prior opinions or stereotypes. You may be surprised to discover that less-expensive wines are more pleasing to you.

The Essentials of Tasting Wine

It is imperative that you taste in spotlessly clean glasses. The most common contaminants in unclean glasses are invisible molecules left behind by cleaning products. Even high-end restaurants can be guilty of this faux pas. It is best to thoroughly hand wash glasses with unabrasive soaps and hot water.

It is beneficial, but not necessary to use varietal-specific glasses when tasting wine. Research has shown that the shape of glasses really does make a difference in the sensory experience.

Overview of the Tasting Process

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Wine tasting employs much more than just the taste buds, although they are very important. Your palate is a term for how taste buds on your tongue translate particular flavors to your brain. The palate can perceive only four basic flavors: sweetness, sourness, saltiness, and bitterness. Most of the subtle flavor components of wine are actually picked up by one's sense of smell.

Although many of our daily perceptions are unconscious, making a concerted effort to pay attention to several things makes the tasting process more educational and rewarding. Despite the mystique that surrounds many wine "experts", tasting wine can be broken into simple steps. Wine knowledge usually stems from practice and confidence, not any inherent superiority.

Of course, some people have more developed senses than others. An extreme example is Robert Parker, widely regarded as the most influential wine critic in the world. Mr. Parker's tasting ability is derived from his natural ability to be keenly aware of his senses.

It is within the grasp of the vast majority of people to confidently differentiate varietals, styles, flavor profiles, and flaws when tasting wine. Tasting wine requires not only a grasp of your senses, but also the ability to articulate (with the proper vernacular) your thoughts about a particular wine.

Relevance of Sight in Tasting Wine

Your sense of sight will reveal a lot about a particular wine before smelling and tasting it. Immediately after pouring, check to see how clear the wine is. While haziness may simply indicate a full-bodied, unfiltered red wine, in any other style it is usually cause for concern. Wines will often taste the way that they look (an unrefined look may indicate a clumsy, unfocused wine).

Viewing the color of the edge of a wine in a glass will give you an indication of its maturity (or lack thereof). Mature, aged-worthy reds will have a deep crimson, or even brownish look. Too much brown usually means that the wine is past its prime. The rim of a white wine will generally be light yellow in youth, and progress to an amber color with age.

After your initial visual impressions, swirl the wine in your glass. While this may be tricky at first, you will pick it up quickly. This reveals the "legs". The more wine sticks to the side of a glass, the higher the alcohol content.

The Role of the Sense of Smell During Wine Tasting

As mentioned earlier, many of the subtle "tastes" of wine are actually perceived by your sense of smell. While there are only four perceptible tastes, there are thousands of different scents. Revealingly, sinus congestion will stop even the most experienced and accomplished wine taster in his/her tracks. Smell is perceived through the upper nose as well as through the back of the throat. Molecules of different scents are registered by the olfactory bulb in the sinuses.

Before smelling a wine, swirl the glass again to reveal the aroma. When smelling a wine, attempt to put any familiar aromas into the context of previous tastings. This is the fundamental basis for increasing your knowledge of tasting wine.

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After smelling the wine, the majority of registered perceptions occur very quickly. Sense of smell is very delicate and easily overwhelmed. Smelling the same thing repeatedly becomes less and less revelatory in rapid succession. If you do not immediately pick out the array of aromas in a wine, relax for a minute or two, then try again.

The Actual Tasting Begins

After experiencing the aroma of a wine, it is logically time to taste. Swirl the wine once more, and then swallow a small sip. After your initial impression, take a slightly larger sip and make an effort to coat your entire mouth. This is called, "chewing" the wine. Before swallowing, aerate the wine in your mouth. While this makes a slightly strange sound, the enhanced flavors and aromas that are released are more than worth it.

Another important component in the tasting process is touch, or how the wine feels in your mouth. Major variables to be aware of are the body of the wine, serving temperature, and astringency. The body of a wine includes the depth of flavor and alcohol content. If these components are underrepresented, a wine will taste diluted.

Serving temperature is an important variable that mainly hinges on the varietal(s) that compose a particular wine. A crisp Sauvignon Blanc will taste flat at room temperature, and should be chilled. On the contrary, a well-aged Cabernet Sauvignon will not reveal its true complexity when served too cold. The incorrect serving temperature for a wine will adversely affect both the aroma and flavor.

Astringency is basically a synonym for bitterness, and is caused by excessive or unmellowed tannins. Great red wines often taste astringent in their youth, but develop into opulent masterpieces when mature.

I hope that you believe that proper wine tasting skills are within your reach; because they certainly are. Mankind's ancient enjoyment of wine is largely derived from the fact that our senses, feelings, and preferences are the basic components of what makes us human.

Ben Bicais lives in the Napa Valley and is the webmaster of

Enjoy A Day Of Wine Tasting

By Triston Huntsmin

My wife and I and our close friends recently discovered wine tasting. We had never thought to spend a day touring the many vineyards that surround our home town. Recently, however, when some friends came in from out of town and suggested that they might like to go wine tasting we made the arrangements and set off for a day of unknown adventure.

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I enjoy an occasional glass of wine, but I had no idea how fun it would be to tour vineyards and get to taste a variety of wines. I quickly realized during our day of wine tasting that my preferences in wine had been set only out of my ignorance. I found that the more varieties of wine I sampled, the more refined my taste became and the more particular I became about what I wanted in future wines. I had no idea one could become picky because of wine tasting, but I definitely did. In fact, each of the six of us that went wine tasting that day came out with new favorites and new least favorites.

One of the things I liked most about going wine tasting was what a unique and enjoyable way it was to spend an afternoon. Typically we spend time with our friends boating or shopping in quaint shops. Taking them wine tasting felt like a refreshing change of pace. I'd encourage anyone that lives near a vineyard or two to plan a visit with some of their friends or family. Wine tasting truly was an experience that I will never forget and that I doubt will be matched as my wife and I try to host guests in the future.

Another great thing about wine tasting is that it is completely relaxing. One of the things I hate most about being entertained or about entertaining others is the level of stress that seems to inevitably follow. There is nothing worse than running around trying to prepare your house, prepare great food, and come up with great activities as well. Going wine tasting allowed my wife and I to be completely stress free and just enjoy time and good conversation with our friends.

Each of the vineyards we visited on our wine tasting tour was absolutely beautiful. We walked away from each vineyard with new knowledge about wine, about vineyards, and about the lovely area we call home. It was so fun to be able to learn new things as we enjoyed a leisurely afternoon.

If you're looking for a great and relaxing way to spend an afternoon with friends or family, look no further than to a wine tasting tour at vineyards near you.

Triston Huntsmin loves taking out of town guests on wine tasting tours. He thinks it is the best way to spend an afternoon. See more at

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