

Tasting terms

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The following alphabetical list is a guide to the words most commonly used by us professionals (often with a blithe lack of precision) in connection with both tastings and the dimensions of wine. Note how many different terms describe acidity and tannin, some of them complimentary, others critical, depending on the level of that particular dimension. Wines may be described variously as green, tart, crisp, fresh and flabby in descending order of acid level, for example, while tannic, hard, astringent, chewy, firm, smooth, supple, velvety and soft describe decreasing levels of tannins.

(B) bad - descriptive terms generally used to criticise wines.

(G) good - those that are usually used to praise wines.

ACETALDEHYDE, flat-tasting compound formed when alcohol is exposed to air. Marginally present in all wines but ideally noticeable only in flor sherries.

ACETIC, the most common volatile acid. Often found in cool-fermented white wines but a fault when present in excess.

AFTERTASTE, strictly the flavour(s) left after the wine is swallowed, although it is often used interchangeably with finish.

AROMA describes a simple, often fruity smell or flavour present in young wine (see bouquet). Wines with very strong smells are described as AROMATIC.

ASTRINGENT, critical term usually used for relatively tannic white wines. (B)

BALANCED, a wine in which all dimensions - acidity, sweetness, tannins, alcohol - make a harmonious whole (although tasters are indulgent about high tannin levels in young red wines). (G)

BLIND TASTING, an attempt to identify and/or assess wines without knowing their identity. Bottles, not humans, are masked.

BODY, important characteristic of a wine that is determined chiefly by its alcoholic strength, but also by its extract. The more body a wine has the less like water it tastes.

BOTTLE AGE, the mellowing effect of years spent inside a bottle. .

BOUQUET, the complex and multi-layered smells or flavours which develop as a result of ageing. See aroma.

CHEWY, some but not obtrusive tannins.

CLOSED, not very smelly, assumed because of its stage of maturity.

CONCENTRATED, good extract and/or intense flavour(s). (G)

CORKED, wine that has been spoilt and smells off-puttingly mouldy because the cork has been tainted by TCA. (very B)

CRISP, perceptible acidity. (G)

DRIED OUT, old wine in which the initial fruit has faded, diminishing flavour and extract. (B)

DUMB, not smelly.

ESTERS, compounds formed by acids and alcohols either during fermentation or ageing, often intensely aromatic (nail polish remover smells strongly ESTERIFIED).

EXTRACT, important dimension of a wine, the sum of its solids, including phenolics, sugars, minerals and glycerol, i.e. what would be left after boiling.

FINISH, the sensory impact of a wine after it has been swallowed (or spat). Wines can be said to have a long or short finish.

FIRM, with perceptible tannins. (G)

FLABBY, too low in acid. (B)

FLAVOUR, is really aroma.

FORWARD, having aged more rapidly than expected.

FRESH, attractively acid. (G)

FRUIT is the youthful combination of flavour (aroma) and body that derives from the grapes rather than the wine-making or ageing process.

FRUITY is used either to describe wines with good fruit or, often as white wine marketing speak, as a euphemism for slightly sweet.

FULL, or FULL-BODIED, wine with considerable body.

GLYCEROL, colourless, sweet-tasting substance which can add to the impression of body.

GREEN, too acid. (B)

HARD, too tannic. (B)

HORIZONTAL TASTING, a comparative tasting of different but related representatives of the same vintage.

HOLLOW, lacking fruit. (B)

HOT, too alcoholic, leaving a burning sensation on the palate. (B)

LEAN, lacking fruit but not acid. (B)

LEGS, see tears.

LENGTH, persistence of the tasting experience on olfactory area and mouth after swallowing. Such a wine may be called LONG. (G)

LIFT(ED), wine with a perceptible but not excessive level of volatility.

LIGHT, or LIGHT BODIED, with relatively little body.

MADERIZED, harmfully exposed to both oxygen and heat. (G for madeira but otherwise B)

MATURE, probably aged to its full potential. (G)

MELLOW, sometimes used in red wine marketing speak as a euphemism for sweet.

MIDDLE PALATE, jargon for the overall impact of a wine in the mouth as in 'There's not much fruit on the middle palate'.

MOUTH FEEL, the physical impact of a wine on the mouth, its texture. Tannins and body surely play a role here.

NOSE can be used as both noun and verb, as in 'It's a bit dumb on the nose' and 'Have you NOSED this one?'

OXIDIZED, harmfully exposed to oxygen. (B)

POWERFUL, high level of alcohol or extract. (G in this competitive day and age)

REDUCTIVE, REDUCED, having been stored in the absolute absence of oxygen, which can give the wine a sulphur- like odour or SLO (see below). The aroma might be said to be reductive. This reaction is the opposite of oxidation.

RICH, with some apparent sweetness; curiously, much more complimentary than 'sweet'. (G)

ROUND, good body and not too much tannin. (G)

SHORT, opposite of long. (B)

SLO, sulphur- like odours, often found on opening a wine, as a result of heavy- handed sulphur dioxide dosing at bottling or a screwcap's ability to provide a perfect seal to the bottle, which creates reductive conditions, or both. SLOs may be noticed as the full chemistry- lesson bad egg stink, or may merely be a whiff of cardboard or damp wool, which often dissipates.

SOFT, not much tannin.

SPRITZ(IG), slightly gassy.

SUPPLE, not too tannic. (G)

TANNIC, aggressive tannins. Ripeness and management of tannins is just as important as actual total tannin level. All young red wines destined for ageing are expected to have some tannins, but these should ideally be counterbalanced by fruit. (B, in excess)

TART, very acid. (B)

TCA, short for the mouldy- smelling compound trichloroanisole commonly associated with cork taint (see CORKED), although it can also be found in some wineries, unrelated to cork problems.

TEARS, the colourless streams left on the inside of a wine glass after a relatively alcoholic wine, more than about 12 per cent, has been swirled. They have nothing to do with glycerol.

VERTICAL TASTING, a comparative tasting of different vintages from the same provenance.

VOLATILE, a wine with such a high level of volatile, not particularly stable, acids that it smells almost vinegary. (B)