# What is wine?

## 7 Sep 2006 by JR

Wine is quite simply the most delicious, most varied and most complex drink on the planet. *I think.*

To me it is almost incredible that the fermented juice of a single fruit, the grape, can offer us so many different styles of liquid. From the tingly, zesty, water-white, light and lively to the rich, purple-black, mellow and full-bodied. It comes both still and fizzy and at all points in between. It can be bone dry or tooth-rottingly sweet.

The job of the wine producer is to ripen healthy grapes in the vineyard, full of grape sugar that can, by the action of yeast in the atmosphere, be fermented into alcohol. If all the grape sugar is fermented, the wine will be dry, and enlivened by the acidity that is naturally present in grapes. The more grape sugar fermented into alcohol, the more potent the wine will be. Wine can vary from less than 8 to more than 15% alcohol, with 13.5 being about average.

Perhaps wine's real distinguishing mark, the thing that sets it apart from other drinks, is the ability of the best wines to last for decades and sometimes centuries – not just lasting but improving. I have been lucky enough to taste wines up to 200 years old that were still totally thrilling and alive. Nothing else that we consume is capable of remaining healthy and evolving over such a long period.

But it's not just history that is important to wine. Geography is absolutely crucial. Wine is one of the very, very few things we can pluck off a shelf and know precisely which spot on the globe was responsible for it. Sometimes the label will carry the name of a fairly big region such as South Eastern Australia, or Bordeaux. But generally the smaller the area nominated, Barossa Valley, say, or Pauillac, the less likely the wine will be blended from lots of different vineyards and may well be the produce of a single vineyard.

More than that, it may well be the produce of a single person, whose name is also often on the label. So for the more artisanal wines produced today, there are strong parallels between books and wine – these are personally authored products.

I see many similarities between specialist bookshops and specialist wine stores too. They tend to be run by real enthusiasts who like nothing better than giving advice. If you want to learn more about wine, find a local retailer and tell them what sort of wine you think you like. It is in their interests to help you find more examples, perhaps suggesting something that is a little bit more exciting than what you are used to.

The articles which will follow provide a comprehensive guide to tasting, choosing, serving, storing and describing wine, getting the most from each bottle. I hope very much they will help you to enjoy wine even more – perhaps even as much as I do.