How to become a wine taster

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All you need to be a wine taster is a glass and a moment's attention. A lot of unnecessary fuss is made about extraneous smells (taking that argument to its logical conclusion we'd never serve food with wine) and about the condition of the palate. Some foods seriously distract from the taste of wine but a mouthful of water or neutral food such as bread is usually enough to neutralise the palate after all but the fiercest chilli. A more serious enemy to wine is toothpaste; many's the glass of champagne that has been wasted because of tooth brushing immediately before drinking it. Non-minty mouthwashes can freshen the palate without immobilising it.

Step 1

Looking at a wine is the least important (and least pleasurable) part of wine tasting - although it can be immensely useful to someone trying to guess the identity of a mystery wine, so-called ‘blind tasting’. Tilting the glass away from you, preferably against a white background, exposes the different shades of colour (the more the better), especially at the rim where the age of a wine tends to show. The browner a wine the older it usually is. Red wines tend to go from deep purple to pale tawny while whites go from pale greenish yellow to deep gold. In very general terms, the best wines actually have a luscious sheen to them, while commercial, heavily treated ones can look dull and monotone. Note: some wine professionals hold wine glasses by the base but holding them by the stem is much easier and keeps the wine equally unaffected by your body heat.

Step 2

The importance of smelling the wine is outlined in The Sense of Taste. Since a wine's flavour molecules are given off only on the liquid's surface, they can be seriously encouraged by maximizing the wine's surface area. This is done by swirling the wine round in a glass, ideally with a stem so that a graceful movement, which has no effect on the wine's temperature, can be achieved, preferably no more than half-full so that no wine is spilt. The ideal wine glass goes in towards the rim so that swirled wine tends to stay in the glass and so does the heady vapour above it. Just one short sniff while you concentrate is enough. Notice whether the smell is clean and attractive (if not, either reject the wine as faulty, or deliberately avoid smelling it as you drink!); how intense the smell is; and what the smell reminds you of. Grapes contain thousands of compounds, many of which are also found in other familiar substances. Furthermore, the processes of fermentation and maturation can add their own layers of flavour as different compounds interact. The aroma from the grape is known as a primary aroma, that from the winemaking secondary and those aromas associated with the ageing process are called tertiary.

It is not surprising, in the light of all the influences on the aroma of a wine, that words are poor descriptors of something as subtle, subjective and private as smell perceptions. The best we can do to describe the smell, or flavour, of a wine is list those things of which it reminds us, but there may be many thousands of other substances in wine which have no direct counterpart elsewhere, or which are too obscure to have their own name. Flavour compounds - the monoterpenes found in florally aromatic grapes and the green pepper-like methoxypyrazine found in Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon, for example – are being energetically researched by the wine industry. They could in theory be created artificially and added to cheaper wines. See Tasting Terms for some more guidance on how to apply words to the very varied smells of different wines.

Step 3

Take a mouthful of wine and try to ensure that all of the palate, or at least all of the tongue, is exposed to the liquid, the better to gauge the dimensions that can be sensed in the mouth. Notice how sweet, sour/acid, bitter, tannic/astringent, alcoholic and gassy the wine is, as explained in The Sense of Taste. Try to gauge the wine's body i.e. how unlike water it is. It also helps draw vapour up the retro-nasal passage that links the back of the mouth with the nose if a little air is taken in to the mouth at the same time (which is why professional wine tasters can look and sound so disgusting). Try also to note a wine’s overall impact on the inside of the mouth. Some people use the term ‘mouth feel’ for sensations of varying intensity which may be rasping, gripping or satin smooth. Then comes the great divide between tasting for work or play: workers (who may have to taste 100 wines a day) spit while players, thank goodness, swallow.

Step 4

Now is the moment to try to assess the wine as a whole. Were the dimensions of sweetness, acidity, alcohol and the possible elements of bitterness, tannin and gassiness in balance, or did one of them obtrude? In young red wines, for example, tannin often dominates, while young whites are often very acid. This lack of balance would be a fault in an older wine. Was the sweetness counterbalanced by acidity or did it taste sickly? The other great indicator of quality is length - how long did the impact of the wine last after you swallowed it? Many a mediocre wine leaves no trace either on the palate or in the olfactory area, whereas a mouthful of really fine wine can continue to reverberate for 30 seconds or more after it disappeared down the throat.

Some tasting exercises

Put a clothes peg or diving clip on your nose, and see whether you can tell black coffee from black tea. Blindfold, you probably couldn't tell milk chocolate from cheddar cheese. All of this demonstrates just how important the nose is in identifying flavour.

To work out how your palate reacts to acidity, smell and then taste lemon juice or vinegar. It takes only a smell to make the sides of my tongue start to crinkle up, but different tasters react differently. Acid also tends to make the mouth water.

To identify tannin in wine, rinse a mouthful of cold black tea round your palate and notice which parts of your mouth react most dramatically. The insides of my cheeks pucker up. (Notice how you can't smell tannin, or sugar, however.)

To get some idea of body as it relates to wine, notice the difference in palate impact between a light-bodied Mosel (German wine in a tall green bottle) with an alcohol content of less than 10 per cent and a full-bodied Chardonnay or white Rhône wine with an alcohol content of more than 13.5 per cent. Notice in particular how unlike water the latter is, and how it may leave a hot, sweet sensation on the palate (alcohol often tastes sweet).

Becoming a wine taster

I believe that anyone with a sense of smell and an interest in wine can become a wine taster, and that it takes hardly any time at all. I am bolstered in this belief by years of listening to professionals trying to describe the same wines and doing it with completely different and even contradictory words. In practice, applying words to wine is a complete free-for-all.

No one other than you can know exactly how a wine strikes your senses. There are no rights or wrongs in wine appreciation and no absolutes when it comes to tasting terms, so the opinion of the novice is every bit as valuable as that of the expert. The only difference is that the expert has been allowed to gain self-confidence, so we propound our theories rather more loudly than most newcomers.

In fact I often find that novice tasters are much better at coming up with the perfect word to describe a wine flavour than we professionals who used up our tasting vocabulary years ago. (Débutantes can even be better at blind tasting than professionals, partly because they have tasted fewer confusing exceptions to the rule, and also because less is expected of them.) Wine tasting is the definitive subjective sport. Once you have consciously tasted a few wines, you can build on that experience by starting to notice the common characteristics of the wines you like. Putting that together with the profiles of different grape varieties (in most cases the dominant factor in shaping how a wine tastes) should help you pick out the sort of wines that happen to appeal to your palate.

A few clues from tasting

General:
• Colourless streams after swirling – high alcohol and therefore very rich grapes which means either a hot climate or else an exceptionally hot summer in a cooler region.
• Slight fizz – could be a New World wine that is naturally slightly low in acidity and has been pepped up by retaining a bit of carbon dioxide in solution. If a supposedly still wine is visibly foaming at the edge this could be a second fermentation in bottle – a fault.

Reds:
• Deep colour – warm summer, Cabernet, Syrah/Shiraz, Nebbiolo, or long maceration.
• Pale – cool climate, Beaujolais, Pinot Noir.

• Purple – young.
• Brick rim – old.

Whites:
• Light body – cool climate or very high yields, German if aromatic to boot.
• Full body, pale colour – barrel fermentation?
Brownish tinge – old, oxidized or barrel matured after protective winemaking.

And if the wine smells plain horrid...
• Wines that have been affected by an off-puttingly mouldy smell caused by a chlorine compound called TCA and are often described as corked because tainted corks are the most common cause. The longer the wine is exposed to the air, the stronger the smell gets, and the wine usually tastes rather nasty and un-fruity too. The only thing worth doing with a corked wine is to return it to the supplier, who should provide a substitute. TCA can also develop in a contaminated winery. It was winemakers' frustration at the increasing incidence of tainted natural corks that precipitated the increasing incidence of alternative stoppers such as screwcaps. The incidence of this sort of taint is currently put at between one bottle in 15 and one in 100. This wide disparity is because, as with all compounds, we vary in our sensitivity to TCA. In a sense, those of us with a high TCA threshold are the lucky ones.

Scoring wine

Professional wine judges often give wines points out of 100, 20 or 10 because they are expected to come up with a ranking of how a group of wines showed on a given day. It might amuse you to keep written notes and to append scores to them. For my own interest I try to make a record of a wine's state of maturity, using arrows in different directions for their likely future – or giving a suggested period during which I think the wine will be at its best ("Drink 2010-18", for instance, is the sort of suggestion I give, with my scores out of 20, with all my thousands of tasting notes).

Many wine critics and wine publications publish wine scores, which can be useful summaries of how the particular bottles tasted showed to that particular taster on the day of the tasting. Wine changes so unpredictably, however (and different casks and even bottles vary), and wine preferences are so subjective, that it is important not to be mesmerised by the apparent precision of these ratings. Find a wine critic whose taste you share and follow his or her recommendations, but not slavishly, please. Always remember that wine critics tend to taste dozens of wine at a time, so the flashy ones get the highest scores. The saddest thing I ever heard was when my most intelligent, wine-loving friend reported, crestfallen, about a wine tasted the previous evening, "I really enjoyed it, but I looked it up in Parker [the powerful American wine critic] and he only gave it an 83." Have confidence in your own judgments. They are the only ones that need matter to you.