First choose your glass

31 Jan 2007 by JR

Wine is drunk out of glasses rather than teacups or silver goblets because glass is inert, relatively thin and allows full appreciation of a wine's appearance. The perfect wine glass has a stem and a bowl that goes in towards the rim, so that the aroma is caught within the glass for easy sniffing. It is also made of clear glass so that the wine's colour, an important element in assessing and enjoying wine to the full, can be appreciated.

Wine nuts also like to commune with their wine as physically closely as possible, which means that thin crystal is highly valued whereas thicker, patterned and cut glass are not.

So that wine can be swirled without losing any liquid and so that there is space for the precious aroma or bouquet to collect in the bowl, the glass should ideally fill no more than half the available volume of the glass. Not filling up a glass is sensible, not mean.

A stem means that you can hold and swirl the glass without affecting the temperature of the wine with your own body temperature.

There is no real need for a range of glasses of different sizes except that we tend to need smaller servings of sweet wines and fortified wines. It has always seemed unfair to me that white wines are conventionally served in smaller glasses than red wines.

Tumblers may be used in earthy and aspiringly earthy Italian restaurants, but the thickness of the glass and the difficulty of swirling the wine around in them makes them pleasure-killers for wine enthusiasts.

The almost spherical **'Paris goblet'** is one of the cheapest wine glasses available (four can be bought for the price of a bottle of very basic wine). It fulfils the criteria of having a stem and going in towards the rim, and is better than narrower 'tulip' shapes, but the glass is too thick to provide intimate or luxurious contact with the wine.

The **ISO tasting glass**, like a large tulip on a short stem, was designed in the 1970s by the International Standards Organization advised by a panel of professional wine tasters including Michael Broadbent MW. For a long time it was regarded as the standard professional wine glass. Machine-made versions are available and cost no more than the cheapest bottle of wine. Hunt around on the internet, as they're rarely available in wine shops, except around Christmas. It does the job but certainly wins no prizes for glamour and more and more professionals find it just too small and clunky.

Riedel

, a family company based in the Austrian Tyrol, is by far the most successful and admired producer of glassware specifically designed for wine drinkers. Working on the principle that how the liquid hits the tongue affects how it will taste, the Riedel family of Austria have developed slightly different glass designs for wine types. These include, for example, young and mature red bordeaux, non vintage and vintage champagne, vintage port and tawny port, Chianti Classico and Brunello di Montalcino etc. All of this is a bit much for most homes (including mine) but there are much more affordable, machine-made versions available which provide much more pleasure than the standard ISO glasses – and infinitely more than a Paris goblet. They recently launched and successfully created a fashion for a range of stemless glasses.

Riedel have now bought Reisenglas, since their main rival, although **Zwiesel** (owners of Schott Zwiesel

and Zwiesel 1872,

brands and formerly part of Schott) is independent of them. Now that wine is such a growth area, all manner of outfits such as Waterford are becoming interested in expensive crystal specially designed for wine. Cristal d'Arques dominates the French glass business with Baccarat at the top end.

The only non-standard glass shape you might think of investing in is a tall, thin glass for sparkling wines (often called a **flûte**), which allows minimal escape of the carbon dioxide dissolved in the wine which makes it sparkle, lets you see a long journey for each bubble, and is a suitably glamorous shape in itself. The old-fashioned **coupe**, supposedly modelled on Marie-Antoinette's breast, is easy to spill and encourages the precious carbon dioxide to escape as fast as possible. Riedel make a very versatile and inexpensive tulip-shaped champagne glass.

Specialist retailers of wine glasses in the UK include Around Wine

in London W1 and www.winegeeks.co.uk

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Glasses should be stored upright somewhere free from dust and strong smells. Aesthetically, glassware needs to be clean, and has the annoying habit of being extremely breakable and showing every speck and dribble. The important thing as far as the wine is concerned is that the glass smells of nothing – not washing up liquid (which can stop the formation of bubbles in fizzy wine), and certainly not dirty glass cloths. Many smart wine glasses, including the Riedel range, are happy in a domestic dishwasher and benefit from the high temperatures there. Water has to be soft, however, and there is no need for detergent. Hand washing glasses achieves best results if glasses are washed in very hot water, rinsed in cold, and polished with linen tea towels reserved for the purpose – I'm told. In an ideal world we would all have unlimited supplies of new, fine crystal glasses.