Common wine aromas

29 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Here's a categorisation of some of the tasting terms I use most commonly for smells and flavours (you may have noticed that I have a somewhat limited wine vocabulary). I've put them into groups but their real use, I hope, is as a possible help in blind tasting (if a mature red wine smells strongly of strawberries, for example, chances are it's a traditional rioja) and a personal guide to developing a wine vocabulary of your own. None of us tastes in exactly the same way so your impressions and most obvious vocabulary are likely to be subtly different.

Not all of these terms are positive. I've marked negative attributes with an asterisk. In fact even the first attribute, butteriness, can be unattractive if present in excess - in wines subjected to clumsy malolactic fermentation, for example.

- **Microbiological**
  - Lactic
  - Buttery - rich Chardonnay, malolactic fermentation
  - Yeasty
    - Bread yeast - some champagne
    - Flor yeast - Manzanilla, Fino
- **Chemical**
  - Other
    - Acetaldehyde - sherry, oxidation*
    - Peardrops - Beaujolais Nouveau, carbonic maceration
  - Papery
    - Wet cardboard - dirty filter pads*
    - Dry cardboard - glasses from a cardboard box*
  - Sulphury
    - Struck match - free sulphur* (especially for asthmatics)
    - Rotten eggs - hydrogen sulphide/mercaptan* (aeration can help)
- **Mineral**
  - Flint - Pouilly-Fumé, Sancerre
  - Wet stones - Chablis
  - Petrol/kerosene - aged Riesling
- **Earthy**
  - Undergrowth - mature, full reds
  - Mould - TCA, 'corkiness' or other taint*
  - Dirty dishcloth - dirty glasses*
- **Woody**
  - Wet wood - dirty cooperage*
  - Oaky - any oaked wine, most obvious on Chardonnay
  - Cigar box - red bordeaux
  - Pencil shavings - Cabernet Franc
  - Pine - Retsina
- **Burnt**
  - Smoky - Alsace whites
  - Burning rubber - Syrah
  - Coffee - madeira, Banyuls, old reds
  - Burnt toast - old Hunter Valley Semillon
  - Toasted bread - fine oaked Chardonnay
- **Sweet**
  - Biscuit - old champagne
  - Honey - Chenin Blanc, Riesling

- Barleysugar - Sauternes
- Caramel - ripe reds
- Molasses - Piedmont reds
- Chocolate - Shiraz

Nutty

- Almondy
  - Almond - Soave
  - Marzipan - Marsanne
- Other
  - Coconut - American oak
  - Chestnut - Some Portuguese reds
  - Hazelnuts- white burgundy

Fruity

- Citrus
  - Lemon - acidified whites
  - Lime - Australian Riesling
  - Grapefruit - English wine, Scheurebe
  - Orange - marsala, sweet Italians
- Tropical
  - Pineapple - cool fermented whites
  - Melon - Mâcon Blanc
  - Banana - Beaujolais
  - Lychee - Gewürztraminer
- Tree
  - Peach - eastern European whites
  - Apricot - Viognier/Condrieu
  - Apple - young Chardonnay
  - Pear - Piedmont whites
  - Black cherry - mature Pinot Noir
- Berry
  - Mulberry - Shiraz
  - Blackberry - North Rhône
  - Raspberry - young Pinot Noir
  - Strawberry - red Rioja
  - Blackcurrant - Cabernet Sauvignon
  - Gooseberry - Sauvignon Blanc
  - Grape - Muscat
- Dried
  - Raisin - Banyuls, Liqueur Muscat
  - Prune - Recioto, concentrated reds
  - Fig - port

Vegetal

- Fresh
  - Grassy - Sauvignon, underripe grapes
  - Nettles - Sauvignon
  - Green pepper - less than ripe Cabernet
  - Eucalyptus - ripe Cabernet
  - Mint - New World Cabernet
  - Geranium leaves - sorbic acid*
  - Currant leaves - Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc
- Processed
  - Canned asparagus - New Zealand Sauvignon
  - Boiled cabbage - botrytis (noble rot)
- Dried
  - Tobacco - Châteauneuf-du-Pape
  - Straw - Chenin Blanc
  - Tea - young port

Floral

- Vaguely floral - Riesling and crosses
- Violet - top quality mature reds
- Elderflower - young, cool climate whites
- Rose - Nebbiolo, Muscat
- Orange blossom - Muscat

Spicy

- Spicy - Alsace whites, Southern Rhône reds
- Liquorice - dense red wines, especially Syrah
- Black pepper - Syrah
- Vanilla - American oak

Animal

- Raw
  - Cat's pee - Sauvignon Blanc
  - Mousey - Brettanomyces*
  - Meaty - Pomerol
  - Game - mature red burgundy, Rhône
- Processed
  - Bacon fat - ripe Alsace
  - Leather - wood-aged reds, especially Australian