Sniffing stones and other tasting notes

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Those of us who taste wine for a living are well aware of how ill suited words are to describe the sensory impressions of our favourite drink with any useful accuracy and without making us seem extremely silly.

As someone who has been writing and reading tasting notes for many decades, I am intrigued by how flexible the language of wine tasting is, and by how tasting terms come and go. I remember so well when I first started reading wine columns in the 1970s how impressed I used to be when the then wine correspondent of *The Times* described a wine as 'four square'. But now I wonder what exactly did Pamela Vandyke Price mean?

Then from the late 1970s and all the way through the 1980s the term 'oaky' was used often and approvingly. Small oak barrels were highly fashionable and, for a wine producer, particularly for a wine producer outside France, a symbol of aspiring to belong to the fine wine club of which French wine was the undisputed president. But by the turn of the century oaky had become a pejorative term and winemakers now go to considerable lengths to ensure that their wines do not smell of oak.

We tasters are always trying to find flavours in wine that can be easily identified with other, more familiar objects. In my experience Californians in particular find reassurance in a long list of easily assimilable descriptors. Seeking an example of this, I went to the website of the first Napa Valley winery I happened to think of, Beringer, and clicked on the first wine mentioned to find these tasting notes from the winemaker: 'The 2008 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon shows youthful characters of fresh blackberry, black cherry and blueberry, and has bright characteristics of blackberry and blueberry aromas, accented by notes of toast, graphite, cedar and brown spices. The palette is rich and supple with seamless, mouth-coating tannins. The rich, juicy fruit core is highlighted by flavors of cassis, blackberry, sweet cocoa and a light savory note.'

Ignoring the customary confusion between a palate, palette and sometimes even pallet, I suppose we can be reasonably confident that this wine tastes of blackberries because we are told so no fewer than three times. But then, even counting the decidedly vague 'brown spices' as one flavour only, at least nine different flavours are identified in the wine which I for one find rather intimidating. And I would imagine that any newcomer to wine would feel woefully inadequate if they were able to find fewer than five of these.

The fact that different aromas are found in the same wine in different countries suggests that the business of attaching flavour descriptors to tasting notes may not be 100 per cent objective. Berries and cherries tend to dominate American tasting notes while South Africans in my experience are the only ones routinely to find guava in white wines. Meanwhile many Asian tasters are completely flummoxed by a high proportion of western tasting notes - because they are exposed to a quite different range of fruits.

Some common tasting terms have evolved as a sort of sloppy tautologous shorthand. 'Spicy', for instance, is a term we tasters often apply not just to red wines that remind us vaguely of some spice (brown or not) but routinely to wines made from the headily scented Gewurztraminer grape (which actually smells rather like lychees and sometimes rose petals). This is presumably because, as German speakers know, *gewürz* means 'spiced' and basically all this tasting note is saying is that the Gewurztraminer in question smells like - Gewurztraminer.

Fashions in tasting terms can sometimes be traced to a single source. 'Blockbuster' used to be a term of approbation in a wine review but no longer. The powerful American wine critic Robert Parker was frequently associated with the 'gobs of fruit' he noted in some of his favourite wines, while I think it was in a review written by another American, James Suckling when he wrote for *Wine Spectator*, that I first read that a wine was 'focused'. I often read that a wine is 'sexy' but, a bit like 'focused', I'm not at all sure that I know what it means, though I'm pretty sure a wine could not be both focused and sexy. I'm also certain that male wine critics are more likely to describe wines as sexy than female.

One tasting term that seems to me increasingly fashionable can, I think, be traced to the late Len Evans, the Welshman who turned Australia on to wine. As far as I can make out, 'line' is a complimentary description of the linear impact of a wine on the palate, the opposite of a wine that is big and broad, and I see it slowly seeping into tasting notes written by Brits if not Americans.

But there is one relatively recent and extremely popular wine tasting term that excites an enormous amount of comment: 'minerality'. A recent post entitled 'Minerality in Wine: Fact, Fun or Fiction?' in our Purple Pages online forum quickly notched up 60 posts and 111 responses to a questionnaire in its first four days. For many tasters, 'minerality' in a wine is a sensation that seems derived less from anything animal, fruity or vegetal and is more reminiscent of something stony, especially wet stones, or redolent of something once smelt in a chemistry lab. Scientists scotch the attractive but simplistic idea that such a wine might be expressing the minerals present in the soil in which the vines were grown, pointing to a difference between rocks and the sort of mineral nutrients a plant is capable of absorbing. And anyway, the vine then does all sorts of things to those minerals; it certainly doesn't act as a passive conduit of them into the grapes.

Some point out that this elusive character goes with relatively high acidity - which I think is true in white wines (think Chablis, Pouilly Fumé, Saar Rieslings) but then there are very rich, full-bodied reds such as those from Priorat in Spanish Catalonia where there is a particular sort of schist they call *llicorella* together with a very particular 'mineral' sort of taste to the wines. Indeed schist, also found in north west Spain, some parts of Roussillon in southern France and Côte Rôtie in the northern Rhône valley, seems to me to be associated with a notably strong 'mineral' imprint on the wines made there.

One thing is sure: whatever minerality is, it is extremely modish.

SOME SUPERIOR 'MINERAL' WINES

Clos du Caillou, Les Quartz Châteauneuf-du-Pape

Coume del Mas, Les Schistes Collioure

Domaine de l'Ecu, Expression de Gneiss 2009 Muscadet

Dom Patrick Javillier, Cuvée Oligocène Bourgogne Blanc

Mullineux, Granite Syrah Swartland

Nittnaus, Kalk und Schiefer Blaufränkisch Burgenland

Torzi Matthews, Schist Rock Shiraz

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