

The Professional Palate

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Produced mostly for pleasure, the tasting of wine requires one to measure just how much pleasure is being provoked.

I have spent the majority of my time lecturing on the subject of wine appreciation to restaurateurs and serious wine lovers. I would like to enlighten you with some of the concerns a professional wine taster has to deal with on a daily basis.

Let me begin with the basic assumption that wine is a product, produced ultimately for the expressed purpose of "provoking pleasure." The tasting of wine requires an individual to attempt to measure just "how much" pleasure is being provoked, or not provoked, if that be the case.

In making an organoleptic quality judgment we use the senses of sight, smell and taste. Obviously we use the eyes, nose, and palate to make these assessments. However, there are a number of factors that can influence the quality of sensory responses that we receive. These must be understood and controlled for valid results.

TIME OF TASTING. Your ability to judge subtle differences between wines is directly proportional to your degree of hunger. Consequently, all professional tastings are conducted at 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. This time period is preferable prior to the dinner hour because the taster is less fatigued.

In order for tastings to be consistently valid, all of them must be conducted at precisely the same time in the morning; no wines are ever compared to each other if they were not tasted on the same day, at the same time.

SEQUENCE OF SAMPLES. The first wine tasted in any series of samples (assuming no wine was tasted previously), has a shock effect on the palate. Here, the astringent tannins, the sharp acidity, and the burning of alcohol all make their first impressions.

The second wine in the same series has a marked advantage over the first, due to the apparent aggressiveness of the first. In order to compensate for this, the taster should rinse the mouth with a similar wine to those being tasted for 30 seconds. This is called *la mise en bouche* and should be followed by a rest period of one to two minutes.

EFFECT OF TEMPERATURE. All wines to be sampled must be at exactly the temperature or results will not be valid. This must be verified with a just prior to the tasting.

Red wines should be tasted at a cool 66 to 68 degrees F. This is not room temperature! When red wines are served above this temperature, the coarseness of the tannins and the sharpness of the acidities work together to reinforce each other making a more intense palate impression than they should. On the other hand, if red wines are served too cold (below 55 degrees F.), the tannins will completely dominate the overall flavors, rendering wine out of balance!

Temperature also has an effect on ability to evaluate aromatics. If served too warm, the alcohol will become more volatile and give an ethery odor to the nose of the wine. Alcohol should serve as an aromatic support to the varietal fruitiness of a wine-as wine is swirled in a glass, alcohol evaporates and serves to enhance the delicate esters of a complex bouquet.

White wines are equally affected by temperature. When served too cold (below 50 degrees F.), the alcohol is inhibited from vaporizing and has trouble supporting the subtle aromatics that are present. Keeping a fine white wine at ice cold temperatures decreases your ability to truly experience flavors the wine is trying to express. Of course, this can be used to some advantage-as seen on certain labels that suggest "serve this wine well-chilled."

GLASSWARE. It is important that all wines be tasted in the same sized glasses. The same wine tasted in a larger glass will always have a significantly stronger aroma due to the fact that the alcohol can volatilize more quickly.

All glassware must be the same type. Thinner stems or lighter weight glasses will affect a taster's ability to perceive quality.

All samples to be tasted must be filled to the same level (preferably 30 cl.) A two ounce versus a three ounce sample of the same wine can easily be perceived as being different wines.

The taster must follow the same procedure with every wine being smelled. The nose should always be as close to the wine's surface as possible, with the nose well inside the bowl of the glass.

The first sniff of a wine will be the most accurate and should be done with the eyes closed for better concentration. Each sniff thereafter leads to olfactory adaption.

The sniffing should be done with a slight force being exerted; this serves to intensify the aromas. A conscientious effort must be made to exert the same sniffing force with each sample; if not controlled one wine might make a stronger impression, invalidating the results. It is a skill requiring practice.

LIGHTING. Wine's color should be evaluated under tungsten or sunlight to get the correct color. Wines should never be analyzed under florescent lighting; this makes the wines look considerably older.

Wines should be viewed over a flat, non-reflective white surface. The lighting source should be held up to the light, as the light source cannot be uniformly maintained.

Evidence proves that the same crisp white wines tasted in environments with pale blue and green table-cloths appear to be more acidic than when tasted over white tablecloths.

All efforts must be made to keep ambient noise from distracting the taster's attention. The biggest sources are vibrations, air conditioners, and, of course, table chatter.

Eighty percent of evaluating the flavor of a wine can be achieved by smelling the nose! If a taster perceives a subtle quality or fault, he should, after swallowing the wine, immediately exhale the aromas in the mouth back through the nose; this heightens a flavor sensation, (whether good or bad) and is referred to as "retro-nasal breathing."

Contrary to popular opinion, wine tasters do not need to cleanse their palate with pieces of bread, cheese, or water! If, while sampling several wines one introduces a biscuit between wines this severely alters the tactile impression in the mouth. The taster becomes distracted with the crumbs and the wine sample that follows suffers.

The proper method suggests simply waiting 15 to 20 seconds until the palate recovers from the flavors of the previous wine. A sip of sparkling water likewise

dilutes the first impression of the next wine. If you have some bottles of your favorite wine, that are just slightly over the hill, serve a nice triplecream cheese like St. Andre. It will coat the tongue splendidly, allowing you to slide the wine right by your guest's palates!

SYSTEMATIC APPROACH. In order to properly evaluate the overall flavor characteristics of each wine in a series, the taster must proceed systematically. Wine must be held in the mouth long enough to both taste and feel its overall flavor portfolio.

The three dominant flavors involved in a red wine are: sweetness, sourness, and bitterness. These flavors do not all occur at the same time, rather they occur in waves of flavors. Sweetness (due to sugar and alcohol) is perceived during the first one to two seconds. It is then replaced by sourness (acidity) in the following three to five seconds. Sourness begins to dissipate (due to the neutralizing effects of our alkaline saliva) and a final impression of bitterness stays with the taster for five seconds or more. This entire procedure takes from three to six+ seconds. Again, discipline must be applied to learn this tasting technique. It must be systematically applied to each wine in the series being tasted.

PERSONAL PREFERENCES. No two persons will have the same taste impression when sampling the same. This is due to the fact that each of us have our own unique "sensory awareness" levels (thresholds of perception) to the tastes of sweetness, sourness, and bitterness. Therefore, one taster's favorite choice could be another's last choice!

In Europe, every effort is made to group panels of tasters who exhibit homogenous tasting profiles-something not yet done in wine tastings in the U.S.

Who said that wine tasting was easy? As you have just seen, there's a lot to be considered on the professional level. As for us, wine is for fun. I see wines breaking down into three different categories. Each category has its own place in the life of any wine enthusiast.

Beverage Wines. These are jug wines that exist for the pleasure of everyday drinking. They are "simple" wines, most possessing neither vice nor virtue. They are intended to accompany foods as a beverage and are never to be served with assertive foods.

Better Wines. These wines are a step above beverage wines. Their outstanding feature is a certain "fruitiness," a concentration of flavors intense enough to give

each wine its own personality. These wines should be, consumed young: most of them will not improve with age. These are "varietal" wines (grape variety distinguishable).

They are best suited for restaurant consumption: their fruity character does not compete with food, rather it "partners up" to most foods. They are reasonably priced, falling in the range of an average entree on the menu. These wines are worthy of casual discussion.

Best Wines. These are wines of distinction, representing the epitome of what wine-making is all about. They require aging, and through the process they acquire a certain finesse that is difficult to describe to those who have never tasted one. These wines appeal to the experienced wine drinker, to those who recognize value in subtle differences and are willing to pay for excellence.