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How to taste wine

INTRODUCTION

Wine tasting refers to the process of its analysis according to a specific system as well as the assessment of the quality level. For beginners, wine tasting can seem like a difficult task, as all wines may seem very similar to each other. Special preparation is required to distinguish one wine from another, and most importantly, to determine the quality level of a sample; this can be gained under the guidance of an experienced mentor.



It takes years, even decades, of regular tasting to master tasting technique. To learn how to determine the quality level of a wine, you should taste different wines, both premium and entry level, as well as [faulty wines](#). This is the only way that you'll begin to understand the difference.

The role of an experienced mentor while learning tasting technique cannot be overestimated. Their task is to help calibrate your sensory organs responsible for tasting (sight, smell and taste buds). Your mentor will also help identify possible [faults in wines](#) and explain how to define them.

Independent wine tasting without the correct preparation and training can have unfortunate consequences and may lead to self-deception; it's very easy to set off in the wrong direction and be tasting in the wrong way.

The biggest problem, in my opinion, is that a significant number of tasters do not understand [wine faults](#) and often try to pass them off as something positive. There are also tasters who are not sensitive to certain [wine faults](#) thanks to their physiological characteristics.

I have tasted with people who enjoy [faulty wines](#) and I feel rather sorry for them, because they don't understand what these wines would be like were they not faulty.

TASTING PREPARATION

Wine tasting is, primarily, systematic. You should break each wine down into its constituent parts, evaluate them, determine the quality level of the sample



and then make a final assessment.

At a professional tasting, you should avoid evaluating the wine according to the principle of "this is a good quality wine, because I like it and I can drink a lot of it.". Moreover, during a professional tasting, nobody cares if you like the wine or not. Tasters should use a systematic approach when evaluating a sample and aim to be as objective and impartial as possible.

The best time for a professional tasting is in the morning when you have more energy. The taster should feel alert, rested and healthy. One approach is to taste 10-12 samples and then take a ten-minute break. A normal number of wines tasted per day for an experienced wine expert is considered to be 45–70 samples.

You should not overeat before a professional tasting, as you will feel less energetic and sluggish, which will, in turn, influence your effectiveness. You should not eat onions, garlic or spicy food, chew gum or brush your teeth with toothpaste immediately before tasting. Your oral cavity and taste buds should be free from foreign flavours.

You should also refrain from smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, as these also lead to a decrease in the sensitivity of your taste buds.

Moreover, do not apply perfume before tasting, as it will dull your sense of smell.

The tasting room should be well ventilated and have good lighting, preferably



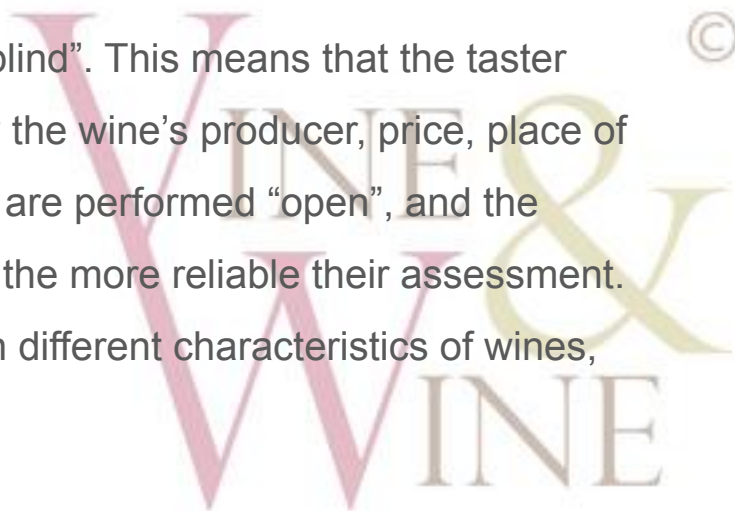
natural. The ideal temperature for a tasting room is 18–20°C.

You should use special glasses (ISO 3591: 1977) for tasting. If none are available, tulip-shaped glasses are suitable, as they retain the wine's aromas well. The Institute of Masters of Wine recommends Riedel Chianti glasses for multipurpose tastings. It is advisable to use a clean glass for each wine. If this is not possible, you can wash out your glass with a small amount of the wine you are tasting.

A tasting sample is 50-75 ml, not more. You should not drink (swallow) wine while tasting, because when alcohol gets into your blood, it reduces the sensitivity of your organs involved in the tasting and anaesthetises your taste buds. You should prepare special containers such as spittoon (spit buckets) or large plastic glasses where you can spit out the wine. Also make sure you drink plenty of water, because you consume saliva as you spit, and tannic wines will dry out your mouth.

The best temperature for the wine depends on its colour and style. Sparkling wines should be served at 8-10°C, white and rosé wines at 10-12°C and red wines at 15-18°C. However, it is worth noting that [wine faults](#) are most easily recognised at room temperature.

The most objective tasting is performed “blind”. This means that the taster does not see the label and does not know the wine's producer, price, place of origin and so on. However, many tastings are performed “open”, and the higher the professional level of the taster, the more reliable their assessment. If you want to learn to distinguish between different characteristics of wines,



varietal characteristics, styles and quality levels, you of course need to start tasting wine “open” and practicing comparative or homogeneous tastings. The main thing is to be honest and impartial while tasting.

Make sure you record the results of each tasting and write tasting notes. Thus, you can keep a record of the wines you’ve tasted and also monitor your development as a professional taster.

Professional wine tasting is a very difficult job!

TASTING

Wine tasting is an assessment of its three main components: appearance, nose and palate.

Appearance

Any tasting begins with an assessment of the wine’s appearance. This requires a white surface, such as a sheet of A4 paper. First of all, pay attention to the following visual characteristics:

Clarity, i.e. whether the wine is clear or cloudy. Excessive cloudiness may indicate the result of microbiological activity in wine and is considered a [fault](#).

Colour intensity, in other words, how rich in colour is the wine. The colour intensity can be estimated by holding the glass at a 45-degree angle.



In the case of white wines, if you can see a wide transparent rim, then the wine is characterised as having low colour intensity. If the colour pigments almost reach the edge of the rim, then the wine has deep colour intensity.

Red wines: if you can't see your fingers or the base of the stem of the glass when you are looking through the wine from above, it has deep colour intensity. If everything is clearly visible, then the wine is characterised as having low colour intensity.

In a "blind" tasting, the colour intensity may lead us to consider the possible grape variety. For example, the black grape varieties [Tannat](#), [Malbec](#) and [Negroamaro](#) are deep in colour, while [Gamay](#), [Nebbiolo](#) and [Pinot Noir](#) have low colour intensity.

The wine's colour can give information about its age, the possible grape variety or the amount of [oxidation](#).

White wines are usually lemon in colour in their youth, while with age, the colour changes to gold, amber or brown. White wines aged in oak also gain a gold hue.

Rosé wines are subdivided according to colour into pink or salmon. Orange hues may also be observed or may dominate, and wines may also be the colour of onion skin.

Red wines, as a rule, are purple or ruby in colour when youthful, which becomes pomegranate or brick red with age.



[Oxidation](#) appears as an amber or brown colour.

All wines have so-called “legs”. After you have swirled the glass, a colourless liquid in the form of “legs” slowly flows down its sides. The higher the content of residual sugar and/or alcohol in the wine, the wider and more viscous the “legs”.

When tasting sparkling wines, you should pay attention to *perlage* (bubbles). High-quality sparkling wines have a stable *perlage* with small and medium-sized bubbles.

When assessing the appearance of a wine to determine its quality level, the key criteria are clarity and the absence of traces of [oxidation](#), with the exception of certain fortified wines, such as Madeira, which are oxidative in style.

Nose

Next, we move on to evaluating the wine’s nose, namely, its aromatic characteristics. Swirl the glass to help release the aromas.

The first thing to consider is the condition of the nose, namely whether it is clean or [faulty](#). Remember that wine is, primarily, pleasant aromas, conjuring up positive associations and emotions. Unpleasant odours may indicate [faults in the wine](#).



Common wine faults include:

- cork taint - TCA (2,4,6-trichloroanisole), characterised by odours of mould and wet cardboard;
- reduction, characterised by the smell of burnt rubber, sewage, rotten eggs or garlic;
- oxidation, characterised by the smell of caramel, burnt sugar, paper, fried onions or rotten apples;
- Brettanomyces, characterised by a farmyard smell, animal notes (horse sweat, a mousy smell) or a medical patch;
- volatile acidity, characterised by an intense smell of vinegar or nail polish remover;
- sulphur dioxide, characterised by an excessive pungent odour of a lit match.

Aroma intensity. To determine the level of aroma intensity, bring the glass towards your nose, sniffing at various distances. If you sense the wine's aroma of wine from fairly far away, the wine has pronounced aroma intensity. If you lower your nose completely into the glass and can barely sense the aroma, then such a wine is characterised as having light aroma intensity. Something average is considered moderate intensity.

The aroma intensity may point us towards the possible grape variety (for example, the white Pinot Blanc variety has light aroma intensity while Gewurztraminer has pronounced aroma intensity).

The aromas of wine can also indicate the possible grape variety (for example, the white Viognier variety has a distinct peach aroma), the climate



of its place of growth (for example, cool climate wines have aromas of green fruits and red berries), wine technology, the wine's age and, of course, its quality level. Determine which aromas you can identify in the wine. Do not make anything up, only say what you can smell!

All aromas in wine can be divided into three groups: primary, secondary and tertiary.

- Primary - aromas associated with grape variety and alcoholic fermentation (aromas of flowers, fruits, minerality).
- Secondary - aromas that appear as a result of winemaking processes after alcoholic fermentation. For example, malolactic fermentation gives aromas of butter, cream and yoghurt. Wine aged in oak is characterised by aromas of vanilla, coconut, smoke, cinnamon and toasted bread. Ageing on lees gives aromas of brioche, bread dough and biscuits.
- Tertiary - aromas of a wine's evolution during ageing in bottle. White wines exhibit tertiary aromas such as marmalade, notes of petrol, porcini mushrooms, honey and hay, while red wines demonstrate aromas of leather, undergrowth, tobacco, game and spice.

The more aromas a wine demonstrates (both from one group or from several), the more complex its nose. If only one or several flavours dominate, then the wine has a simple nose.

Identifying aromas is not an easy task; however, the more you train your nose and your sense of smell, the faster you will learn to identify them.



Important criteria when determining the nose's quality are the absence of [faults](#), aromas demonstrating varietal typicity, intensity (depending on grape variety) and complexity, i.e. the presence of a variety of aromas belonging to one or several groups.

Palate

Finally, let's move on to assessing the wine's palate. To do this, take a sip and play with the wine in your mouth. Breathe in while you do so to help the wine's flavour components open up.

Sweetness. First, determine the wine's degree of sweetness, i.e. how much you taste the residual sugar. Answer the following question. Is the wine dry, medium-dry, medium-sweet or sweet? Dry refers to wine in which you can't taste any sweetness at all. Wine is considered sweet when the sweetness is clearly felt and is its main taste characteristic. Something average, when you can taste gentle sweetness, refers to medium-dry, and slightly above average to medium-sweet wines.

Acidity. Next, determine the level of acidity. The higher the acidity, the stronger and longer the salivation and tingling sensation persists in the mouth. The acidity level may indicate the climate where the grapes were grown (for example, wines from a cool climate have high levels of acidity, while wines from a hot climate have low levels), or the possible variety (e.g. varieties like [Sauvignon Blanc](#) and [Cortese](#) tend to have high acidity).

Tannins. This is a group of chemical compounds contained in the grape

skins, stems and seeds, which are extracted during the vinification of red, and occasionally white, wines and give the wine a feeling of astringency and viscosity.

Determine the quantity and quality of tannins. The more intense the feeling of astringency and viscosity, the higher the tannin level. Unripe tannins are more astringent and aggressive, and often have a bitter or "green" flavour, while ripe tannins are silkier and more voluminous. They give a rich, soft and "round" taste.

Tannins may indicate the possible grape variety (e.g. as a rule, the black [Cabernet Sauvignon](#) variety has a high level of tannins), winemaking technique (the level of tannins in wine also depends on the duration of maceration - the contact of wine with pulp), the age of the wine (the level of tannins decreases over time and they round out) or the level of ripeness of the grapes (unripe grapes will give wine with "green" and astringent tannins).

Alcohol. This is shown by a feeling of warmth or burning in the mouth. The alcohol level may indicate a grape variety (for example, the white [Assyrtiko](#) variety typically has high alcohol), climate (as a general rule, the hotter the climate, the higher the alcohol level in wine) or the style of wine (such as fortified).

Body is the sensation of the volume and weight of the wine on the palate due to the combination of its structural elements, such as alcohol, acidity, tannins, fruit concentration and amount of residual sugar.



Full-bodied means wines with high alcohol, intense fruit, moderate acidity and ripe, plentiful tannins (in the case of red wines) (e.g. wines from the black [Monastrell](#) variety).

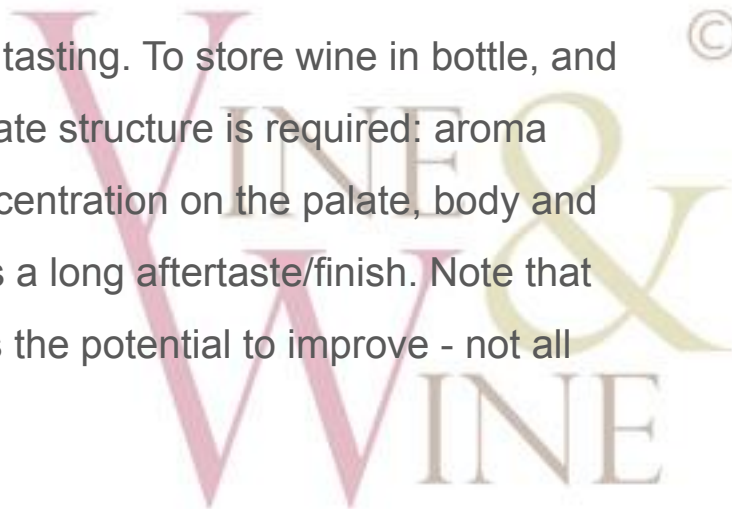
Light-bodied wines have high acidity, low alcohol, tannins (for red wines) and delicate fruit intensity (e.g. wines made from the white [Riesling](#) grape variety).

The flavour intensity is the degree of concentration of taste, an important criterion for wine quality. High fruit concentration indicates a premium quality wine, while low concentration and wateriness the opposite.

The finish or aftertaste is how long you can taste the wine after swallowing or spitting. The longer this lasts, the higher the wine quality. A short finish disappears within a few seconds, while a long finish can last over a minute.

Balance. The level of balance of sweetness, acidity, alcohol and tannins is of great importance for wine quality. A wine can be called balanced when all of these components are in harmony with each other, do not stand out and do not dominate.

The wine's potential for aging in bottle is determined based on its structure and degree of development at the time of tasting. To store wine in bottle, and for it to develop and improve, an appropriate structure is required: aroma complexity, adequate acidity and fruit concentration on the palate, body and tannins (concerning red wines), as well as a long aftertaste/finish. Note that wine should be aged in bottle only if it has the potential to improve - not all wines are suitable for bottle ageing.



CONCLUSION

After you finish tasting, you can come to a conclusion about its quality and determine its further ageing potential by evaluating all the components of the wine together.

The most important elements to consider are its complexity, intensity and aroma typicity, balance and fruit concentration on the palate, integration of oak ageing characteristics (if any), finish and potential for further ageing in bottle.

When evaluating wine, try to ignore your personal preferences and be as objective as possible. You may not like a particular grape variety or wine style (e.g. sparkling, sweet, fortified, aromatic, tannic, etc), but this does not indicate a low quality level.

Drink only quality wines, thereby encouraging conscientious winemakers!

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