

Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

Examining your palate

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Ergo, the unexamined wine must not be worth drinking. As a wine lover, the more I learn, the more I value my passion. To appreciate is to love, and what makes a wine sing to me is important. As a wine seller and educator, I want to share that passion with others. Often people want to communicate what they like but are at a loss. The problem, I think, is when people get simultaneous sense perceptions confused.

While all five senses play a role in enjoying a wine, the two most valuable are our senses of smell and taste, and of these two, the nose's sense of smell is predominant. When eating or drinking, we smell twice. First, when we bring food or beverage near our nose and, second, when we put these in our mouth. The first is an olfactory aroma, the smell of that thing. The latter is a retronasal taste, a second smell. It enters our nasal cavities through the back door at the top of the throat and is influenced by the interaction with saliva and body chemistry.

The flavor of a wine is the sum of its olfactory aromas, retronasal tastes, tactile sensations and tongue perceptions—salty, sweet, sour, bitter and savory. Most people's like or dislike of a wine arises from the oral tactile and taste sensations, the "feel" that wine gives their mouth. Seldom does someone say that they hate the hint of blueberry or overwhelming whiff of cherries in a wine. They are quick to say that the wine was "too sharp," "had a bite," or was "too sweet." These are what make or break the deal. Here are the main sensations found in wine.

Acids are naturally occurring in all fruit. A grape's main acid, tartaric acid, is produced by few other fruits and does not greatly decrease in concentration as a grape ripens. These acids translate into the wine. Wine falls into a pH range of 2.5-4.5, somewhere between lemon juice and plain yogurt. Grapes grown in cooler regions have higher tartaric acids than those grown in warmer climes. Our palates experience acid as tartness or sourness through receptors on the tongue.

Tannins are polyphenols, complex chemical chains, found in grape seeds, skins, and stems. They give red wine its grippy, bitter notes and help to preserve the wine. Like acid, bitterness is one of the five taste sensations that tongue receptors discern chemically. Astringency is a mouthfeel akin to dryness or roughness. It is the result of the tannin molecules attaching to proteins in our saliva and creating a dry rough feel. Over-brewed tea and under-ripe bananas are great examples of tannin.

Sugar and yeast make wine. A wine grape is much smaller and sweeter than a table grape. A winemaker ferments by adding or allowing yeast to eat the sugar found in grapes. Yeast produces carbon dioxide and alcohol from this sugar. If all the sugar is consumed, the wine is dry. If there is sugar left, the wine has residual sugar (RS) and tastes sweet. Most wines are dry. Most quality wines do not have sugar added after fermentation. The exception is sparkling wine where a bit may be added to offset acidity.

These three compounds are what drive people to like or dislike a wine. People often get tannin and acid confused. To untangle them on your palate, here is a quick test. Taste the wine. Wait five seconds. 1) Are you still salivating? If so, that

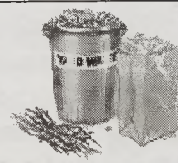
is acid. 2) Is your mouth drying out? Do your teeth, tongue, gums feel rough? That is tannin. If you think that a wine may be sweet, try this: taste and swallow the wine and count to five. Do you still sense sweetness? If you do not, the wine is dry and fruity, but it is not sweet. The sweetness/fruit distinction trips many people up.

Winemaking is a search for balance between these three elements. Tannin, acid, and sugar/fruit all play in tandem. Sometimes they accentuate, sometimes down play, each other. As you taste, notice these sensations and flavors. Ask yourself if the tannin, acid, sugar or fruit in a wine is low, medium or high. Soon you should see a pattern in your palate emerge. Tell your wine seller that you like low-acid wines with no astringency and high fruit. He or she will know what to suggest.

Learn what you love, how to define it, and how to describe it to others. It takes introspection, time, an open palate and an acquired vocabulary to untangle flavor sensations on your palate. If you examine the wine and determine you don't like it, then it is not worth your drinking. Your friends may enjoy it, all the same.

I wonder what review Socrates would have dictated to Plato about the hemlock. I bet he would have noted its bitter edge.

Brett Chappell is a Certified Sommelier and Wine Educator. He and his wife, Jen, a Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level Two, own MF Chappell Wine Merchant in Atlantic Beach. Their website is MFChappellWine.com and the phone number is 252-773-4016. They offer gourmet goods, cigars, wine tastings, and virtual wine classes along with their wine.



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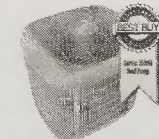
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