

RARE FORM LIMOUSINE

Wine Tasting like the Pros

You've seen it on television, maybe in person. Swishing and sniffing, peering and pursing, the wine connoisseur goes through a seemingly elaborate ritual of sampling an unknown wine. But what exactly is this connoisseur doing, and what is she accomplishing? There are three distinct parts to a wine tasting—the look, the smell, and the taste. Keep this article handy as your personal guide to the hows and whys of tasting wine like the pros.

LOOK

The best way to examine wine is over a neutral, preferably white, background, lit by natural light above. Pour wine into a suitable wine glass. The wine glass should not be overfilled, since it is best to tilt the glass to an approximate 45-degree angle over the background. Tilting the glass affords the best way to examine the edge, or disc of the wine in contrast to the robe, or body of the wine.

Take a good look at the wine. What color is it? Look beyond red, white, or blush. If it's a red wine, is the color maroon, purple, ruby, garnet, red, or even brownish? A red wine that is brightly colored with more red pigments is apt to be high in natural acidity. Red wines that are less brightly colored with more blue pigments will generally have less acidity. Red wines fade as they age, but young red wines that appear prematurely faded may be flawed or damaged.

If it's a white wine is it clear, straw-like, golden, light green, pale yellow, or brown in appearance? More golden color in a white wine usually indicates a fuller-body. A greenish tint indicates the wine was probably made with grapes picked before they were fully ripe. While not a flaw, green tinted white wines may have more acidity and more tartness on the palate. A brown, dull wine indicates oxidization and it may have gone bad. Whereas time improves many red wines, it ruins most white wines.

Move on to the wine's opacity. Is the wine clear, cloudy, transparent, or opaque? Tilt your glass a bit and give it a little swirl. Look again at color, clarity, and brilliance. Is there sediment? Are there pieces of cork or any other floating bits? An older red wine will be more translucent than younger red wines. You can guess the age of a red wine by observing its edge. Tilt the glass at a 45-degree angle and look at the edge of the wine. A purple tint may indicate youth while orange to brown indicates maturity.

SMELL

Your sense of smell is critical in properly analyzing a glass of wine. To get a good impression of a wine's aroma, gently swirl the glass. This will release the wine's natural aromas into the air directly above the wine in the glass. Take a very quick whiff to gain a first impression.

Now stick your nose down into the glass and deeply inhale through your nose. Spend at least 45 to 60 seconds smelling the wine before proceeding to taste. Some wines will change after repeated swirls, so spending time to note these changes is important. What are your second impressions? Do you smell oak, berry, flowers, vanilla, or citrus? A wine's aroma is an excellent indicator of its quality and unique characteristics. The key to the smell is to mentally link the recognizable aromas to specific grapes, wines, and regions. This is a memorization exercise, and the object of the exercise is to raise your "recognition threshold."

Often times the only way to differentiate two wines is by their smell, so if blind differentiation is your goal, you will want to spend a lot of time smelling and remembering what it is you smelled.

TASTE

Finally, take a taste. Start with a small sip and let it roll around your tongue. There are three stages of taste:

Initial Taste: Use your taste buds to focus on the structure and balance of a wine. The structure of a wine is defined by the overall weight/body of the wine combined with the presence of a substance called tannin. The balance of a wine is defined by the ratio of sweet to sour and whether a wine's base flavor is harmonious with all of its components. The weight/body of a wine is evident by the fullness, or lack of fullness in the mouth. Wines that seem "heavy" on the palate are illustrating a trait of full-bodied wines. The level of tannin in a wine is indicated by the presence of "bitterness" on the sides of the tongue. Tannin will give the impression of dryness in the mouth. Suck briefly on a used tea bag and you will know exactly what the sensation of tannin is like. For balance, look for the sensations of sweet and sour on the tongue. Some grapes have a greater potential for acidity, but that acidity is usually kept in check by a winemaker's ability to bring out either the natural fruit sweetness in the variety, or perhaps by leaving a small amount of residual sugar in the wine. Wines that are too sharp or wines that leave a cloying feeling on the palate illustrate wines that may be out of balance.

Taste: After gathering your initial impression of the wine, allow a small breath of air in through your pursed lips and allow the wine to bubble with the air, called mouth aeration. This will allow you to taste flavors more fully, using the passageways in the roof of your mouth that lead indirectly into the nasal passage. What do you taste? Reds will often have berry, woody, and bell pepper tastes. White wines will often have apple, floral, or citrus flavors associated with them.

Finish: The wine's finish is how long the flavor lasts after it is swallowed. Did it last several seconds? Was it light-bodied, like water, or full-bodied, like the consistency of milk?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

There is actually much more information regarding the tasting of and recognition of wines, but this primer will get you off to a wonderful start. After you have taken the time to taste your wine, you might record some of your impressions. Did you like the wine overall? Does it taste better with cheese, bread, or a heavy meal? Will you buy it again? If so, jot down the wine's name, producer, and year for future reference. If you are at a winery for the tasting, be sure to pick up a few bottles or a case of your favorites.

If you are going to taste a good number of wines, or will be taking a wine tasting tour, please be sure to have safe, comfortable transportation. Rare Form Limousine offers chauffeured transportation to and from your own private wine tasting event, and of course, we can coordinate a customized tour of the finest Washington wineries for you to explore.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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