



Tasting Wines

by Christine Millar, HCMG

Check the label. Is it one variety or a blend? What region does the wine come from? What is the classification (AC, Vin de Pays, etc.). What is the name and address of the producer? What is the alcohol level?

Removing the cork Good quality cork wood is expensive and producers are turning to synthetic corks and screw caps for the more inexpensive wines. Time will tell whether these alternatives will hold up in aged wines, however, for wines meant to be drunk early they are efficient.

Looking at the wine The color and depth of the wine can often tell you whether the grapes come from a cool region or a hot one. Wines from cooler areas tend to be paler in color. The color can also indicate the age of the wine. Young red wines will often be a dense red color whereas an aged wine will have more of an orange-red color and be more translucent. Aged whites will often be a deeper straw yellow color than the young whites.

Swirling the wine Gently swirl the wine to release the volatile aromas as it mixes with air. Sometimes the wine needs to oxidize a little longer and is said to be "tightly wound". This is often why it is suggested that you remove the cork from a bottle of red wine for a period of time before you serve it so that it has time to mix with air and "unwind".

Smelling the wine Most of what we perceive as taste is, in fact, smell. Swirl the glass gently and then take a good steady sniff. Familiar and unfamiliar smells will be revealed. Try to put those smells into your own words. Another person may interpret the smells differently.

Taking a mouthful Take a reasonable mouthful, about 1/3 full. The whole objective is to get the fumes of the wine to rise up into your nasal cavity. Suck in a little air into your mouth and chew on the mouthful of wine while you count to 15 and breathe out through your nose.

Assessing the wine What comes to mind as you swish the wine around in your mouth? Cherries, citrus, cigarettes, leather, coffee? Is the acidity pleasant? Does it make your mouth tingle nicely (balanced), is it flat (too little acidity) or make you salivate (too much acidity)? Does it coat your mouth as you swirl it around?

Swallow or spit If you are sampling a lot of wines and want to remain standing then spit the wine out. Swallowing is more appropriate for most social occasions. How long does the taste of the wine remain in your mouth after swallowing? This is termed the "finish". If the flavor lingers in your mouth then it is a sign of quality and the wine may be a good prospect for ageing.

Understanding faults If the wine smells and tastes flat or stale then it has been exposed to oxygen for too long and eventually will smell and taste like vinegar. The cork may have failed and allowed too much oxygen to enter the bottle. If the wine smells or taste of mold or mildew, or stale, then it is "corked". This is caused by a bacterial infection in the cork wood. It is not harmful to drink, but it is unpleasant. "Dirty" tasting wine can come from dirty barrels. Too much sulfur smells like spent matches. If the wine fizzes or has a yeasty smell then it may be fermenting again. If it is hazy then there may be a chemical problem. However, fine wines will often have sediment if it is mature. It is best to see what it tastes like.

White Varietals: **Chardonnay** - Clean, crisp, well balanced with big flavors of citrus and oak. Oak-aged is good with beef in cream sauces, smoked chicken. Unoaked with lobster and veal. **Blanc du Bois** - Light, fresh-finished with notes of grapefruit and apples. Good with fish with lemon butter sauce, pasta Alfredo and pineapple chicken. **Pinot Grigio** - Creamy, slightly perfumed with rich color and a fresh palate. Good with TexMex, gulf fried shrimp and oysters. It prefers cool nights. **Viognier** - Intense, slightly spicy with floral, peach and apricot notes. Good with lettuce wraps, white fish with mango salsa and paella. **Reisling** - Crisp, unobtrusive accented by rich, fruit flavors and a floral bouquet. Good with Indian cuisine, greed salad and Jamaican pork. **Sauvignon Blanc** - Silky smooth with floral, grassy and delicate herbal properties. Good with fish, shrimp, cream soups and veggies. This is often over-oaked. **Chenin Blanc** - Delicate, floral with a dry, well-balanced finish. Good with cheese crepes, quiche and Waldorf salad. **Orange Muscat** - Fruity, sweet with notes of gooseberry and orange peel. Good with ice cream, dark chocolate and smoked salmon. **Muscat Blanc** - Light, fragrant accented coriander, peach and citrus flavors. Good with fish, pasta, raw vegetables and soups. **Muscat canelli** - fresh, fruity retaining the zesty flavors of the grape. Good with chocolate, fresh fruit, fish and pasta. **Gewurtztraminer** - Full-bodied pungent characterized by fruity, nutty flavors. Good with BBQ, sushi and blackened fish. Best in areas with cool nights. **Semillon** - Bold and oaky with hints of honey and figs. Good with fried catfish, olive tapenade and fried chicken, blue cheese and crême brulee. Needs a lot of care to produce a good wine in this area.