

Evaluating Wine



January 2020

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Introduction

There is a perception among those unfamiliar with wine that the process of evaluating the “nectar of the gods” is pretentious at best, if not downright snooty. It’s that whole swirling-sniffing-sighing thing...one does not do that for other beverages. Who are you trying to impress?

In a word, nobody. There are valid reasons for the proper evaluation of wine, none better than the pure pleasure it provides. Drinking wine like you would a glass of water is akin to ignoring a beautiful Arizona sunset or wolfing down a gourmet meal. You would be missing out on so much. Savoring the experience is what life is all about.

A proper evaluation will also tell you a lot about the wine, however, including whether it is drinkable. Making and storing wine is a delicate process. Many things can go wrong along the way, spoiling an otherwise great vintage. An evaluation will tell you in advance that something is amiss.

The following outlines how to properly evaluate wine, from the serving temperature to the progression. This may be a primer for some and a refresher for others, but hopefully everyone learns something new.

Salud!

Preparation

If you are at a restaurant or winery, this step will (hopefully) already have been done for you. But if you are at home, there are a few things you should do first before moving on to the tasting.

Serving Temperature

There is a popular adage that states we drink white wines too cold and red wines too warm. Unfortunately, this is true for many, if not most of us. We refrigerate whites and serve reds at room temperature. While most of us are aware there are defined temperature ranges for the various types of wines, it proves to be a cumbersome step we tend to avoid because, after all, what difference does it really make?

As it turns out, a lot. At warmer temperatures, there is a high sensitivity to acid and alcohol and a low sensitivity to tannins. The opposite is true at colder temperatures. Consequently, a white wine that is too cold is often called a “dumb” wine because you are unable to sense the acid or alcohol, muting the fruit. On the other hand, a white wine at room temperature will taste tart due to the pronounced sensitivity to the acid present.

Red wine suffers from temperature extremes as well. A red wine that is too warm softens the tannins considerably while the higher alcoholic content is more pronounced, making it appear flat and dull. Too cold and the tannins will be very astringent on the tongue, inhibiting aromas and flavors. As you can see, the serving temperature does impact the tasting experience.

The guide below identifies the serving temperature ranges for various wines. Note: TIF stands for Time in Fridge, how long to keep the bottle in the refrigerator in order to reach the desired temperature range.

Serving Temperatures

Type	Examples	Range	TIF	Notes
Sparkling Wines	Champagne, Cava, Prosecco	41 - 45°F	2 hours	Preserves the wine's effervescence and brings out the citrus notes and acidity
Light, Dry Whites	Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc, Riesling	45 - 50°F	1.5 hours	The lighter the wine is in color, the colder it should be
Rose'	Any blush varietal	48 - 53°F	1.5 hours	Slightly warmer due to complex fruit flavors and mild tannins
Late Harvest Wines	Auslese, Eiswein	48 - 53°F	1.5 hours	Sweet, low alcohol
Full-bodied Whites	Chardonnay, Viognier, Albarino	50 - 55°F	1 hour	Enhances the aromatic characteristics and rich flavors; the more oaky the wine is, the warmer it should be
Light- to Medium-Bodied Reds	Pinot Noir, Beaujolais, Sangiovese	55 - 60°F	45 min	Will taste tart and acidic if served too warm
Full-bodied Reds	Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, Syrah, Malbec	60 - 65°F	30 min	Lush mouthfeel, rounded tannins, balanced acidity
Fortified Wines	Port, Sherry	55 - 65°F	20 min	Tawny Ports and fino Sherries at the lower end; vintage ports at the upper end

Stemware

You might be surprised by the number of different glass shapes/sizes there are for the various types of wines. Below is a sample of what is available.



Cabernet

Moderates acidity by directing the wine to the center of the tongue.



Burgundy

Enhances acidity and intensity of full-bodied wine.



Bordeaux

Lets younger wines breathe, and the thin rim lets wine flow onto the tongue smoothly.



Zinfandel

Tempers the alcohol while also enhancing the fruit and spices in the wine.



Pinot Noir

Creates the perfect balance of highlighted sweetness, regulated acidity and alcohol suppression.



Chardonnay

Keeps young chardonnays tasting fresh, while enhancing a mature wine's spicy, nutty taste.



White

Goes with everything but is especially perfect with light, crisp white wines.



Champagne

Enhances the bouquet of champagne. Plus, it's fun to watch the bubbles rise to the top.

Each one is designed to highlight the characteristics of the intended varietal. Whether the right (or wrong) stemware will impact the experience is dependent upon the individual. The important thing is to ensure the glass is sufficiently sized and shaped to provide enough room to easily swirl and sniff a couple of ounces of wine. The smaller the glass, the more difficult it is to evaluate the wine properly.

Tasting Wine

The best way to learn about wine is to taste as many as you possibly can. There are five basic steps, often referred to as the Five S's. Before you begin, pour a couple of ounces of the wine into the appropriate stemware, if available. You don't want or need more than that to properly evaluate the wine.

Sight

Hold the wine glass on an angle against a white background, such as a napkin, table cloth, or sheet of paper. You are looking for two things – clarity and color. Filtering techniques and equipment have become so efficient that you will rarely encounter a cloudy wine. It is not impossible, however, especially for older red wines where sediment can be present. The wine should be crystal clear.

Color should be consistent with the type of grape and the age of the wine. Red wines lose color as they age, going from a deep purple to a muddy brown. White wines gain color as they age, progressing from pale yellow-green to brown. Unless you are in the habit of drinking wines 15 to 20 years old, the color should be appropriate for the grape(s). Any relatively young wine that is brown in color has been oxidized (overexposed to oxygen) and will have a nutty, sherry-like flavor.

Swirl

Oxygen combined with the esters, ethers, and aldehydes of a wine produce its bouquet. Swirling aerates the wine, which in turn releases its unique aromas. It may take some practice to find the right wrist motion, but you can always set the glass on a smooth surface and move it in a tight circle to generate the same effect.

It should be noted that you will skip this step for sparkling wines. The bubbles do a fine job of releasing the bouquet and swirling will only cause the sparkling wine to go flat faster.

Smell/Sniff

I would argue this is the most important step in evaluating wine. You can perceive four tastes – sweet, sour, bitter, and salty – but detect more than 2,000 scents. Now that you have released the wine’s bouquet, it is time to put your olfactory sense to work.

Place your nose inside the rim of the glass and inhale deeply. Try to identify individual scents if you can. You don’t have to use flowery words to describe what you smell, but you might be able to detect broad scents like citrus, flowers, earth, or mineral. Repeat the swirl/sniff steps two more times to determine what else might be present on the nose.

Some people are blessed with a finely-tuned sense of smell and can detect multiple distinct aromas. Personally, I’m lucky if I can discern two or three. How many you can smell is not as important as the attempt. You will get a good idea of how the wine will taste.

Over time, you will also begin to recognize the particular bouquets of the common varietals. When I took my Level 1 Sommelier test, I had to identify six varietals and their major growing region by taste and smell. The easiest one by far was a Sauvignon Blanc from the Marlborough region of New Zealand. I recognized that one by smell alone and didn’t even bother tasting it.

You may also begin to recognize wine flaws as well. The four most common are:

1. **Corked wine:** this does not mean you have bits of cork floating in your glass. “Corked” is a term used to describe a musty aroma in wine similar to wet or mildewed cardboard. It is caused by *trichloroanisole*, or TCA for short, that interacts with the cork and, ultimately, the wine.
2. **Sulfur:** all wines contain at least a small amount of sulfur because it is a by-product of fermentation. Sulfur dioxide is also used by many winemakers at various stages of winemaking because it is a natural antioxidant, preservative, and disinfectant. Too much sulfur will result in a burnt match smell, however.
3. **Brett:** most often found in red wines, Brett is short for *Brettanomyces*, a yeast that may grow in the winery, particularly on equipment and in barrels that have

not been carefully cleaned. It produces a barnyard aroma, like sweaty saddle or horse. It is not pleasant.

4. **Volatile Acidity:** while some level of VA is desirable in wines, it becomes a fault when a bacterium known as acetobacter goes to work. It produces vinegar and this is what the wine will smell like.

Sip

Now is the moment you have been waiting for – tasting the wine. As mentioned above, you are only able to discern four tastes: sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. Since there is no salt in wine, we're down to just three.

You are probably aware that these tastes are experienced on different parts of the tongue. Make sure you roll the wine around in your mouth to ensure it hits all receptors.

If there is any sweetness, you will experience it right away. If not, the wine's acidity will become immediately evident. You are looking for balance between that and the fruit level.

The next thing you will notice is the alcohol and any tannins that are present. They give the wine body.

Savor

To fully appreciate and enjoy the wine, take a minute or two to savor the experience. Think about the balance of acid and fruit, the body, and the lingering finish. What did you like and/or dislike? It should be like wandering around a museum or art gallery. Don't be in a big hurry to rush through it. Take time to appreciate and enjoy.

Wine Progressions

If you plan to taste a number of wines in one sitting or meal, there is a progression to follow that will ensure the previous wine doesn't adversely impact the taste of the succeeding one. There are only three basic rules to follow:

1. Dry to sweet
2. Acidic to tannic
3. Light-bodied to full-bodied

You will note that "white to red" is not one of the rules. While it may generally be true, it isn't always. A late harvest wine made from white grapes (Auslese, for instance, which is made from late harvest Riesling grapes) would be served after a robust Bordeaux. A very oaky Chardonnay could possibly be served after a Beaujolais (Gamay grape).

By following the rules above, you will ensure one wine doesn't step over the next.

In Summary

- There are valid reasons to perform a proper evaluation of wine
- Take the time to chill the wine to its optimal serving temperature; it does matter
- Make sure the stemware is large enough to swirl and sniff a couple of ounces of wine
- Follow the Five S's to evaluate the wine (Sight, Swirl, Sniff, Sip, Savor)
- Follow the three basic rules of wine progression if tasting more than one wine in a sitting