

THE TAKE ON TANNIN

By Lauren Maines, What's Wine Is Yours

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Undoubtedly, if you enjoy wine (which you obviously do since you are reading this fabulous magazine) you are familiar with the word “tannin.” Recently, while leading an extremely lively and inquisitive tasting party, a participant posed the following question: “What’s the deal with tannins - What exactly are tannins?” This is quite the loaded question because the topic of tannin is one of the most complex, intriguing and misunderstood topics in the world of wine.

The goal of my business, “What’s Wine Is Yours” is to enhance your *appreciation* of wine in a fun and approachable manner. Wine should not be scary or intimidating. It is very easy to get overwhelmed and confused with the various facets of wine: vineyard management, production techniques, maturation vessels, and the list goes on... Rather than providing the tasting group with a detailed chemical analysis that would flash them back to chemistry class, I focused on the *concept* of tannin and how it specifically relates to red wine. (White wines and oak can also be included in the discussion. However, for the sake of this article, we will focus on tannins in red wine.) The aforementioned tasting experience ultimately provided a fun and interactive opportunity to examine a specific element of a wine (i.e. tannin) in an approachable manner. As a result, the guests increased their appreciation for the character and quality of the featured wines.

Learning Activity (hands on is always best!):

Materials Needed: Black Grapes

Carefully peel the skin away from the pulp of a black grape.

- Taste the pulp (inside) of the grape. What did you taste & experience?

You will notice that the pulp of the grape tastes sweet and your mouth begins to water. Sugar and acid are components located in the pulp of the grape. Acid causes salivation!

- Now, taste the skin of the grape. What did you taste & experience?

You will notice that the skin tastes bitter and your mouth becomes dry or astringent.

Congratulations... You just experienced the sensory impact of tannin!

First Things First: White Wine Production vs. Red Wine Production

There is one significant difference between the production of white wine and red wine that is important to understand when talking about tannin: White wine is (typically) fermented without grape skin contact and red wine is fermented while the juice is in contact with the skins, seeds, and even stems of the grapes. This process is referred to as, maceration. Why is this important? Tannins are naturally occurring chemical compounds found in the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes. During red wine fermentation, color and tannin are released and absorbed into the juice, thus giving red wine color, structure and complexity.

What Exactly Are “Tannins”? Jancis Robinson, author of, “The Oxford Companion to Wine” defines tannin as a, “diverse and complex group of chemical compounds that occur in the bark of many trees and in fruits, including the grape. Strictly speaking, a tannin is a compound that is capable of interacting with proteins and precipitating them...” OK, stay with me...

In a conceptual nutshell:

- Tannins are chemical compounds (found in grape skins, seeds, and stems) that attach to proteins...
- Proteins are elements in human saliva that provide lubrication in our mouths...
- When tannins from wine come in contact with proteins in saliva, the tannins attach to the proteins and separate from the saliva...
- When this separation occurs, human saliva cannot lubricate the mouth effectively. As a result, we experience the tactile sensation of astringency (dry-mouth).

What Are Tannins Important? Remember when you ate the grape skin and it tasted bitter and your mouth felt like it was drying out? Tannin is responsible for the bitter taste as well as the astringency oftentimes experienced when enjoying red wine. Tannic wines leave a “gripping” sensation in your mouth and on your teeth and gums. This tactile sensation is important because it contributes to the “mouth-feel,” complexity & personality of the wine. If you have ever enjoyed a young Barolo, you will know what I mean!

In addition to sensory enjoyment, tannin is also an

important element in the aging process of a wine. If you have been fortunate enough to enjoy bottles of both young and aged red Bordeaux wines (for example), you will have noticed that the aged wine has a softer and smoother “mouth-feel”. The tannin in the younger wine may be referred to as “grippy,” noticeable but not overly obtrusive. However, the tannin descriptors for the aged wine may include “velvety” or “plush.” Why? In short, when aging a high tannic wine in a bottle, chemical compounds are constantly reacting together. When these compounds reach a certain size, they fall out of the solution as sediment, leaving a wine with softer characteristics...and a hefty price tag!

Tannin Levels in Specific Grapes For those who prefer a wine with a softer “mouth-feel,” I would recommend Pinot Noir from Burgundy, France. These grapes have thinner skins, thus lower levels of tannin. Examples of grapes naturally high in tannin include: Cabernet Sauvignon and Nebbiolo. I recommend trying Barolo from the Piedmont region of Italy made with Nebbiolo grapes or, as mentioned above, a red Bordeaux, primarily Cabernet Sauvignon.

My Final Take On Tannin For those readers who have been guests at any of my tasting events, you will have heard me say, “The most important thing you need to know about the wine that is in your glass is...whether you like it or not!” Wine is all about appreciation: Appreciation for the grapevine that produced the fruit; Appreciation for the brilliant minds that created the juice, Appreciation for the individuals with whom you are sharing the bottle. My hope is that you now have a greater appreciation for tannin and what it brings to the wine that you are enjoying in your next glass. “Cheers!”

What’s In My Glass?

Chateau Dauzac, Margaux, 2008

I have a special treat in my glass today! I am enjoying a Bordeaux from Margaux: 58% Cabernet Sauvignon, 37% Merlot, 5% Cab Franc. This wine is deep garnet in color. The nose has intoxicating scents of dark berries, vanilla and sweet pipe tobacco. But, the most intriguing element of the aroma is the light scent of floral perfume. Let’s talk tannins...the tannins were “gripping” even though there is 11 years of age on this wine. That tells me that the bottle that remains in my cellar can still benefit from aging. My cellar note says to drink in 2023. The palate showed deep dark berries (black berries and black cherry) with lovely hints of tobacco and vanilla.