

The Art of Speaking Wine

Since my childhood, the fascination with understanding my Uncle's language of the vine has truly haunted me. He was a simple man and his wines reflected that purity and devotion to his favorite pastime. My cousins and I would "crush" grapes and measure brix. We tasted juice, we tasted partially fermented must wine, we tasted finished wine. We learned the rhythm of the vineyards, the wines and our very own lives simply by being with such a gentle and learned man.

While waxing poetically about the art of milking cows (he was a dairy farmer by day), he would weave in tidbits of knowledge on all things wine. We simply could not get enough, flooding him with a myriad of questions, he would laugh heartily and declare let's taste some wine. As young as we were we didn't understand the more technical terms like say "phenolic bitterness" but we understood the sensation at the back of our tongues quite well. Spitting out wine was well necessary; it didn't exactly taste good to us. Now, our Grandmother considered that sacrilegious!

My uncle would carefully and patiently let us taste his wine and describe what we experienced. Everything was examined from the aromas to the tactile sensations in our mouths and magically he would explain each one and answer our endless "but why's". I now realize he was empowering us with the knowledge of varietal characteristics, vineyard and vinification practices the entire "sense of place" so important in quality wines.

The most impressive show was his incredible ability to take a glass of wine and describe it to us in terms we could understand. He never needed to display his advanced knowledge of wine with fanciful often-fluffy language, actually quite the opposite. When I innocently asked him his secret, he chuckled and in his thick French-Canadian accent he replied, "the secret is to listen to the wine, she will tell you who she is and from where she comes". At the time, I thought this just another fantastic mystery of the intoxicating love affair I was developing for wine.

My uncle has since passed and how I long to sit and enjoy a glass of his dandelion wine while listening intently to his stories of life. His legacy is as simple as the man, live life with three things, good food, good

wine and above all good friends. I will always remember the lessons he taught us about our food and wines, they are meant to be simple pleasures so keep it that way.

Today, as a Sommelier and Biologist I intimately understand every technical term he used and some he never knew existed. My admiration and respect for his teachings has only grown. While learning the art of blind tasting (that's another story), I discovered the truth in my childhood lesson. Let the wine speak to you, it is a reflection of its genetic make-up, geography, geology, climate and culture in which it became wine. It is not a collection of words that do not reflect the authentic living nature of itself, similar to us two legged oenophiles wouldn't you say?

As I work with people teaching them to appreciate the wine in their glass I am reminded of the lesson of simplicity I learned as a lad. We can only taste five things and only three occur in wine and regardless of our wine experience, we are all intimately familiar with those tactile experiences. So, we can start here and build on this expanding our senses and abilities with confidence to begin to truly let the wine speak to us. I understand that there is something like 36,000 terms used to describe wine, my uncle would laugh out loud at the absurdity of this fact.

So, this begs the question, "how do I learn to speak wine"? Simply, by being completely immersed in the delicious experience of tasting wines. Our sense of smell is directly related to our memory recall, this means to reacquaint ourselves with aromas and scents that are associated with wine. A trip to the local market to visit the produce section, baking spices aisle and the floral area will remind us of our connection to our foods and wines. Do be careful of the store staff though, some people find a person smelling everything a bit peculiar.

While we can have a library of up to 10,000 scents in our memory few if any ever attain this large of a database. Thank goodness! While being trained and mentored to become a Sommelier my three MS mentors always touched on simplifying and authenticating what I smelled and tasted in the glass of wine. In other words, you only need 3-5 consistent markers and a good profile of the wines structure to blind taste well.

Now, if some of the best noses in the wine world can name a wine with such little input that leaves hope that anyone can learn to speak, as well as appreciate wine like the professionals. Depending on where you

reside the local availability of large numbers of different varietals will be limited as a rule. So, unless becoming a MS or MW is your dream job learning the delicious attributes of your favorite wines are definitely within reach. So, as I was advised taste and drink more wine it is good for what ails you.