

## *Nectar of the Gods 101...the Palate Pleasures of Wine*

By Dave Preston – Guru of the Goodlife®

**H**emmingway once wrote, “Wine is the most civilized thing in the world.” And tasting wine is supposed to be an art, but I’ve always found it to be liquid enjoyment! Yes, to be a professional wine taster, you have to have an “educated palate”, but for most of us, it’s a way to have a good time with good friends. And those with the “educated palates” didn’t start out that way. They started like most people do, tasting and finding out what tastes good in their mouth. So this scribe will try and give you the basics on how to taste wine and some extra insights to help your quaffing query.

The front and back of the tongue contain the taste buds and rather than specializing in a particular taste sensation, all taste buds are capable of detecting sweet, sour, bitter and salty flavors, although there may be some slight differences in sensitivity. So that you get the most out of your taste buds, when tasting wine, swish the wine around your mouth, which will allow all of your taste buds (and your sense of smell) to participate in the detection of the finer flavors of the wine.

To develop your senses for tasting wine, you will need to practice. Now is that good advice of what! It is advised that you experience the various wine tastings in the area so you can not only be exposed to a wide variety of wines but also save yourself money in the process while you practice.

Have you ever tried desperately to detect flavor from a food or beverage when you had a terrible cold? You probably tasted very little, if anything at all. Research indicates that 70 to 75% of what we taste is actually due to our sense of smell. Specialized "aroma" nerves in the nose are necessary to identify tastes more subtle than sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Smell and taste go hand-in-hand when wine tasting . . . without your sense of smell you would be unable to detect the delicate flavors of chocolate, herbs or smoke in your wine.

To wine sophisticates, wine tasting is not just like art, it is an art. While wine tasting can be subjective in nature, wine connoisseurs follow some general "guidelines" when judging a wine. It's very easy to learn the techniques of wine tasting, and if you already enjoy wine, learning the nuances will simultaneously increase the pleasure you derive from tasting.

### **The Three Steps in Wine Tasting are: Look, Smell and Taste**

#### *Look*

You can tell much about a wine simply by studying its appearance. The wine should be poured into a clear glass and held in front of a white background (a tablecloth or piece of paper will serve nicely) so that you can examine the color.

The color of wine varies tremendously, even within the same type

of wine. For example, white wines are not actually white; they range from green to yellow to brown. More color in a white wine usually indicates more flavor and age, although a brown wine may have gone bad. White wines should be consumed when they are young.

Red wines are not just red; they range from a pale ruby red to a deep maroon red. Old red whites may have a brownish color if you tilt the glass and look at top rim of the wine. If it looks too brown, it may not be any good.

**Rim color:** You can guess the age of a red wine by observing its "rim." Tilt the glass slightly and look at the edge of the wine. A purple tint may indicate youth while orange to brown indicates maturity.

**Swirling:** Swirling the wine serves many purposes, but visually it allows you to observe the body of the wine. "Good legs" may indicate a thicker body and a higher alcohol content and/or sweetness level.

### *Smell*

Swirl your wine. This releases molecules in the wine allowing you to smell the aroma, also called the bouquet or nose. The two main techniques that wine tasters use are:

1. Take a quick whiff and formulate an initial impression, then take a second deeper whiff or
2. Take only one deep whiff.

Either way, after you smell the wine, sit back and contemplate the aroma. Don't try to "taste" the wine yet, concentrate only on what you smell. See if you find aromas of pears, green apples, citrus or honeysuckle in white wines. Close your eyes and imagine black berry or cherry or cassis or earthen, leather in red wines. Let your nose influence your mind's eye and your mouth will experience a myriad of flavor profiles.

It may be difficult to describe in words when you're a novice, but after trying many wines you will notice similarities and differences. Sometimes a certain smell will be very strong with underlying hints of other smells. Take your time. By labeling an aroma you will probably remember it better. If you really want to get into wine tasting and develop an educated palate, you may even want to keep a notebook of your impressions of wines, and save the labels; next time you see the wine you won't have to purchase it to know if you like it . . . or you don't! This is how the artist begins to train the palate.

### *Taste*

The most important quality of a wine is its balance between sweetness and acidity. To get the full taste of a wine follow the following three steps:

1. **Initial taste** (or first impression): This is where the wine awakens your senses (your taste buds respond to sensations).
2. **Taste:** Slosh the wine around and draw in some air (even if you do look funny in front of your dinner guests). Examine the body and texture of the wine. Is it light or rich? Smooth or harsh?
3. **Aftertaste:** The taste that remains in your mouth after you have swallowed the wine. How long did the taste last? Was it pleasant?

Dr. Kosta Arger is a noted northern Nevada Cardiologist and more importantly, the wine maker for Arger-Martucci Vineyard in St. Helena, CA. He is also a well respected and internationally recognize wine aficionado. “What is often referred to as the body of wine, I prefer to call texture, the mouth feel of the wine. It can tell you a lot about the quality of the wine. Does it coat your mouth with a rich, lush and silky feel? Is it thin and somewhat watery? Is it sharp and almost bitter or soft and elegant with a subtle bit?”

Developing a good nose for wine takes time and practice and heavy smokers and bad sinuses can keep you from truly appreciating wine. So understanding the texture can help you enjoy wines. There are other things your can learn from the wine in your mouth as Dr. Arger points out, “Understand how it feels in your mouth can tell you if the grapes are mature. Or if it has a high alcohol content. Then there are tannins, (bits of stems from the grapes allowed to ferment with the juice; tannins is what causes the dry and puckery feeling in the mouth) that’s what holds up a red wine an allows it to age and keep its flavor.” After tasting the wine, take a moment to value its overall flavor and balance. Is the taste appropriate for that type of wine? If the wine is very dry, is it supposed to be?

### **What’s in a Glass**

There are those who will argue that the glass makes a difference when tasting a wine. As you develop your interest and skills, that’s another aspect to explore. The quality and intensity of the aromas are determined not only by the character of the wine but by the environment in which it is contained.

A highly respected international wine-smith is Robert Parker, Jr. His books and articles have set a worldwide standard. An expensive, but very high quality glass is Riedel from Bavaria. He say its, “the finest glasses for both technical and hedonistic purposes are those made by the Riedel Company. The effect of the glasses is profound. I cannot emphasize enough what a difference they make.”

Then there is the glass from Austria that “breathes.” Eisch Breathable Glasses are made from a special raw material mixture in lead free crystal. This process changes the molecular structure in the glass allowing it to breath. The Breathable Glass does not lose its effectiveness ever! It also does not have any special cleaning requirements. The affects of the "breathable glass" are most evident with young red wines and white wines; those which typically benefit from at least 30 minutes of aeration before being consumed. The impact is most dramatic with high quality wines.

Another quality glassware is Stölzle. They offer a melted crystal glass is lead-free and reaches the highest standards regarding brilliance, breaking strength, resonance, and scratch and dishwasher resistance. Professional design and hi-tech production guarantee optimum function and elegance with the goal of creating glasses in which each individual drink can evolve its full and optimum flavor

Kosta Arger, MD has judged wine around the world. His thoughts on glasses are simple and straight forward, “the size of the bowl is what is important. It should be a glass that will hold 16 to 20 ounces and be the traditional Burgundy or Boudreaux style glass. That

allows you to easily swirl the wine enhancing the bouquet.” We have only 5 taste sensations on the tongue, but are able to distinguish between many thousands of olfactory differences. Therefore our sense of smell is a key factor in what we taste.

The size of the bowl determines how much or how little liquid can be swirled, which affects the exposure. The shape and thickness of the rim directs the wine to specific parts of the tongue with different taste sensitivities. Finally, the diameter of the opening concentrates or expands the rising aroma or bouquet.

The Boudreaux glass is the large “tulip” or narrowing goblet is the most useful as it allows swirling but has a narrow opening to concentrate the aroma or bouquet. Many wine drinkers call this shape their red or all-purpose glass. Burgundy glasses allow the maximum exposure to air for a “big” or “closed” wine. They also add a note of drama to the table when a very special wine is served. This is often the only glass for "big red" aficionados. Also considered a chardonnay glass (especially those with an "oaked" finish) because of the white Burgundy lineage.

The shape of the bowl directs the wine smoothly onto the tongue, and traps the blanket of aromas that sit on top of the wine in the glass, capturing them for the nose. Bouquet can only develop in a range of temperatures. Low temperatures temper the intensity, whereas high temperatures push mainly alcoholic fumes. Wine served at somewhere around 60° offers the best bouquet.

Wide open glass shapes require us to sip by lowering the head. Narrow rims roll the head backwards and the liquid flows because of gravity. This delivers and positions the beverage to different zones of the palate. Drinking in big sips to quench the thirst will diminish the influence of the vessel, and only the aftertaste will offer flavor.

Alcoholic beverages are consumed according to their strength in small to very small quantities at a time. This gives the chance to control the flow where the beverage contacts the tongue. The resulting nerve message is delivered at a speed of 400 m/sec to our brain where it leaves a lasting first impression. In most cases we would be disappointed if the sweet fruit flavors were lacking, and tart components dominated the taste picture. If this occurs, the blame is usually put on the quality of the wine but never on the shape of the glass.

The more different wines you try, and the more attention you pay to each wine, the better you will become at ascertaining and describing each wine's characteristics. That being your mission, the good Dr. Benjamin Franklin really summed it up well when he said, “Wine makes daily living easier, less hurried, with fewer tensions and more tolerance;” and that’s what wine tasting is really all about! Carpe Diem my friends and make it a point to go out and live the goodlife!