

# How to Taste Wine

## 1

**Look at the wine, especially around the edges.** Tilting the glass a bit can make it easier to see the way the color changes from the center to the edges. Holding the glass in front of a white background is another good way to make out the wine's true color. Look for the color of the wine and the clarity. Intensity, depth or saturation of color are not necessarily linear with quality. White wines become darker as they age while time causes red wines to lose their color turning more brownish, often with a small amount of harmless, dark red sediment in the bottom of the bottle or glass. This is also a good time to catch a preliminary sniff of the wine so you can compare its fragrance after swirling. This will also allow you to check for any off odors that might indicate spoiled (corked) wine.

## 2

**Swirl the wine in your glass.** This is to increase the surface area of the wine by spreading it over the inside of the glass allowing them to escape from solution and reach your nose. It also allows some oxygen into the wine, which will help its aromas open up.

## 3

**Note the wine's viscosity (how slowly it runs back down the side of the glass) while you're swirling.** More viscous wines are said to have "legs," and are likely to be more alcoholic. Outside of looking pretty, this has no relation to a wine's quality but may indicate a more full bodied wine.

## 4

**Sniff the wine.** Initially you should hold the glass a few inches from your nose. Then let your nose go into the glass. What do you smell?

## 5

**Take a sip of wine, but do not swallow it until you're finished with this step.** The difference between drinking and tasting is expectorating! Roll the wine around in your mouth exposing it to all of your taste buds. You will only be able to detect sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami (think: meaty or savory). Pay attention to the texture and other tactile sensations such as an apparent sense of weight or body.

## 6

**Aspirate through the wine.** With your lips pursed as if you were to whistle, draw some air into your mouth and exhale through your nose. This liberates the aromas for the wine and allows them to reach your nose where they can be detected. The nose is the only place where you can detect a wine's aromas. However, the enzymes and other compounds in your mouth and saliva alter some of a wine's aromatic compounds. By aspirating through the wine, you are looking for any new aromas liberated by the wine's interaction with the environment of your mouth.

## 7

**Take another sip of the wine, but this time (especially if you are drinking a red wine) introduce air with it.** In other words, slurp the wine (without making a loud slurping noise, of course). Note the subtle differences in flavor and texture.

- The tip of the tongue detects sweetness
- The inner sides of the tongue detect sourness and/or acidity
- The outer sides of the tongue detect saltiness

## 8

**Note the aftertaste.** How long does the finish last? Do you like the taste?

## 9

**Write** down what you experienced. You can use whatever terminology you feel comfortable with. The most important thing to write down is your impression of the wine and how much you liked it. Many wineries provide booklets and pens so that you can take your own tasting notes. This will force you to pay attention to the subtleties of the wine. Also, you will have a record of what the wine tastes like so that you can pair it with meals or with your mood.

# How Does it Taste?

## **Tasting for Sweetness**

The first thing you will probably notice is the relative sweetness or dryness of the wine. This is determined by the amount of natural sugar in the wine. Higher sugars in the grapes have the potential to produce higher alcohol.

## **Tasting for Acidity**

The next sensation you will notice almost immediately is the tartness or acidity of the wine. Just think of the difference between grapefruit juice and water. Acid may sound harsh but it is very important in making wine taste crisp and fresh. If there is too much acid, the wine will taste bitter and unpleasantly sharp. If there is not enough acid, the wine will taste flabby and flat.

## **Tasting for Tannin**

If you are drinking red wine, you may also notice the tannins in the wine. Tannin is a chemical that comes from the stalks, pips and skins of red grapes. It tastes astringent and "mouth-drying", and makes your mouth "pucker". There are many kinds of tannin. Some tannins taste bitter. Tannins are most noticeable in young red wines. Over time, as wines age, tannins "soften" and give the wine a certain full-bodied weightiness that is very enjoyable.

## **Tasting for Alcohol**

Alcohol is found in all wine. A moderate amount of alcohol in wine adds "sweetness" to the taste. If the alcohol is too high and out of balance with the tannin and fruit, then the wine will feel hot in your mouth and difficult to drink.

## **Tasting for Aftertaste**

This is the sensation that lingers in your mouth just after swallowing a sip of wine. Aftertaste is important in wine tasting because it can reveal an extra attribute or a fault. Sometimes certain flavors become noticeable in the aftertaste, such as chocolate. A long, pleasant aftertaste, where all the components of the wine are in balance is a sign of quality.

- Here are some commonly found tastes for each of the most common varieties (bear in mind that growing region, harvesting decisions and other production decisions have a great impact on a wine's flavor character):
  - Cabernet - black currant, cherry other, black fruits, green spices
  - Merlot - plum, red and black fruits, green spices, floral
  - Zinfandel - black fruits (often jammy), black spices - often called "briary"
  - Syrah (aka Shiraz, depending on vineyard location) - black fruits, black spices - especially white and black pepper
  - Pinot Noir - red fruits, floral, herbs
  - Chardonnay - cool climate: tropical fruit, citrus fruit in slightly warmer climes and melon in warm regions. With increasing proportion of malolactic fermentation, Chardonnay loses green apple and takes on creamy notes, Apple, pear, peach, apricot
  - Sauvignon Blanc - Grapefruit, white gooseberry, lime, melon
- Malolactic fermentation (the natural or artificial introduction of a specific bacteria) will cause white wines to taste creamy or buttery
- Aging in oak will cause wines to take on a vanilla or nutty flavor.
- Other common taste descriptors are minerality, earthiness and asparagus.

# A shorter simpler version of the above:

## 1. Look

Hold the glass at a 45-degree angle over a white tablecloth or napkin and examine the wine's color and intensity. Is it a deep red, a pale gold? Is the color saturated throughout or does the wine look watery around the rim/edges? Does it look viscous or watery?

## 2. Smell

Place the glass on the table and swirl it vigorously to release the wine's aromas, then bring the glass up to your nose and inhale. What does the smell remind you of? Berries? Tobacco? Chocolate? It may be helpful to close your eyes at this point to help focus your attention on what you smell. If you can't quite pin down what you're smelling, go through a list of fruits, herbs, vegetables, and other flavors in your head: cherry, melon, plum, peach, apple, pineapple, citrus, raisin, mint, cinnamon, green pepper, vanilla, etc. Having these options in your head before you taste may help you identify flavors when you're actually tasting.

## 3. Sip

Take a sip of wine and swish it around your mouth without swallowing. Try taking in some air to help release the aromas and flavors. Think about what flavors you taste as well as the wine's acidity and sweetness. Also consider the wine's body and texture: Is it light or heavy? Thick or thin? If you're sampling red wine, think about the tannin level—tannins make for a dry, almost velvety mouthfeel. Again, you may want to close your eyes to focus on what you're tasting.

## 4. Swallow

Swallow the wine and think about its finish and aftertaste. Does the flavor linger (have a "long finish") or disappear quickly? Is the wine one-dimensional or more complex?

## 5. Evaluate

Do you like this wine? Try to identify exactly what you like or dislike, as that can help you identify wines you'll enjoy in the future. And, keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers—it's all a matter of personal preference.