

PTO 63: Wine Tasting(s)  
*(Number 63 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine)*  
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One of the enjoyable things about wine is that the more you experience, the more you learn, and the more you learn, the more you enjoy it. Like any subject, it requires effort, study and lots of homework. A great way to increase your appreciation and enjoyment is to conduct wine tastings with friends or family.

### **Structure**

As people get more interested in wine, they often wine form groups that meet periodically to taste wine, talk about wine, appreciate wine, or just drink wine. Some meet at a central location, but the most common process is to visit a member's home for the event, often followed by a meal (and of course, more wine). To get the most from the experience, it's good to have someone act as moderator, a guide who can keep the conversation focused on the wine (instead of the latest neighborhood gossip), help draw out thoughts and observations from the less vocal guests and occasionally suppress the more vocal ones. A word of caution here — it's best to have a group composed of people who have the same general level of knowledge of wine, because one "expert" who dominates the conversation or feels the need to instruct the other members can make the whole experience a lot less fun. Usually the moderator is the host, who introduces the wines and begins discussions, but some people have the interest and natural talent and may act as moderator for a group at all their events.

Just like everything else today, there's even an Internet-based guide to wine tastings at <http://www.wine-tastings-guide.com/index.html>, with suggestions for serving wine, pairing wine and hosting a wine-tasting party.

### **Sideways?**

There are two time-honored procedures for divining the subtleties of wine, called horizontal and vertical tastings. In a horizontal tasting, it's traditional to taste wines made from the same varietal from a variety of producers, and you can vary the theme by limiting it to one geographic area (Zinfandels made just from the Fiddletown American Viticultural Area) or a single year (only foothill Syrahs from 2004). Taking the time and effort to concentrate on the aromas, flavors and characteristics of a single grape can help to define not only what you like, but often why you like it. Armed with this knowledge, you can go forth and seek out the wines that match your particular taste preferences.

The alternate geometry is called a vertical tasting, in which the same wine (often, but not always) from a single winery is compared over a span of years. While it's true that these are most often conducted by a winery in order to enhance its prestige and respect, they can also be eye-opening experiences to see how wines age and change with differences in the vintage years, the blend, or the person who occupied the winemaking chair over time.

After a few of these, it's possible to make generalizations about the individual years (2004 and 2001 in California were truly great, for instance, while 2000 and 2002 were generally not as stellar) as well as the winery. Again, it's helpful to have someone present with some experience and knowledge to comment on the years, the changes in the winery, or the other reasons behind the year-to-year differences.

### **In the Land of the Blind...**

Another split in the process is between "open" tastings and "blind" tastings. In open tastings, the wines are identified before they are tasted, and people are able to inspect the label, form opinions in advance ("Oh, I never liked *her* Chardonnays!"), and get an idea of what to expect in the glass. In blind tastings, only the most general information is available about the grape variety, region, or winery being considered, and each wine gets much less pre-judgment. An approach that some beginning groups like to use is to choose wines from something like eight different varieties, and ask the guests to identify which one was the Merlot, which was the Cabernet Sauvignon, and which was the Zinfandel in the group (at our winery, we have been known late in the day to produce a "mystery wine" in a brown paper bag and challenge customers and staff alike to guess the variety — we like to pretend that it's "professional development").

When tasting wines blind, however, it's necessary to take precautions so that no one gets unfair advance clues about the wines. The minimum disguise is to place the bottles in brown paper bags, carefully taped up to the top, but you'll need to remove the corks in advance and pull off the foils that cover the top of each bottle, lest there's someone in the group who knows that Sidney's Reserve Merlot is always adorned with a bright purple foil. When dealing with more knowledgeable tasters, it may even be necessary to decant the wines into identical bottles, because someone might know that Chateau LaGrunge is always packaged in unusually broad-shouldered bottles that can be identified by grasping the disguised bottle just below the neck. The alternative is to pour the wines into glasses from a well-concealed staging area, as is done in wine competitions, but this can dramatically increase the amount of glassware washing afterwards (one way to limit the glassware problem is to ask each guest to bring six or eight glasses of their own to the event).

It's amazing how much one's perception changes when the identities of the wines are concealed during tasting. More than once, I have severely disparaged a wine during a blind tasting, only to learn that I had made it and had previously been extremely proud of my accomplishment.

### **The Envelope, Please**

Even in blind tastings, it's nice to provide the tasters with a list of the wines, so people have the ability to choose which wine they think they are tasting (part of the fun for the host is to arrange the wines in an order that will either ease or complicate the identification process). Sheets should be provided on which the tasters can write down their observations and also spy on their neighbors to see what they thought wine number

four was. After the wines' identities are revealed, many groups like to provide an award to the person who correctly identifies the most, which can be anything from a special bottle of wine to a wall plaque or a traveling trophy inscribed "Most Excellent Taster."



While we all hope to increase our awareness and enjoyment of wine, no one expects to approach Peter Lorre's performance as Montresor Herringbone in the hilarious wine-tasting contest in the 1962 Roger Corman filming of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Black Cat*. Already tipsy, he gulps glasses of wines (while Vincent Price's prissy character Fortunado LuCrese fastidiously sips and slurps) and at one point pronounces "It's Burgundy, Volnay, 1832, and it's from the better slopes of the vineyard." (the entire episode can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f475dFQTzQ>, or by going to Oakstone Winery's website — <http://oakstone-winery.com/> — and scrolling down to click on the video link).