

Grapes: Glasses and Goofiness

(Number 32 in a series of highly opinionated articles about grapes and wine in El Dorado County)

There are many rituals surrounding the making, storing and drinking of wine. Wine is fussy—it needs the right temperature during its birth and adolescence in the winery, and it demands that you store its bottles on their sides at reasonable temperatures. Recent hype to the contrary, however, it does not give a rat's behind about the kind of glasses you drink it out of! My basic thesis in this article is the following: the only *real* function of a wine glass is to prevent wine poured from a bottle from hitting the floor before you have a chance to drink it. Now, many manufacturers, dealers and stores are currently going to great length to convince you otherwise, but perhaps with the enlightenment presented here, you can resist their persuasive powers.

Does Size Really Matter?

Ok, here's the first qualifier—it's really nice if a wineglass is big enough so you can swirl the wine in it. Swirling wine in the glass is a ritual that has a basis in science, since it allows wine to come in contact with air, and to release the delightful aromas that may have become hidden during its captivity in the bottle (you can easily recognize winemakers or other wine nuts, who have a tendency to swirl their beer, milk, orange juice or even their communion cup—once the habit starts, it's hard to quit). For that reason, I recommend that wine glasses should hold a minimum of about six ounces, so you can pour a three-ounce glass and have room to swirl. You *can* drink wine out of thimbles, but since the aroma of wine is responsible for most of its true flavor, being able to smell the wine adds greatly to its enjoyment. Stand well back, though, from those who insist on gripping their glasses with a fingertip and thumb at the very edge of the glass's "foot," so they can generate a really huge swirl in their wine.

Lately, there has been a disturbing trend, encouraged by glass makers like Riedel (more later), to get you to buy glasses roughly the size of punchbowls. The only real justifications for buying these mega-goblets are: a. you hope they will make you look sophisticated (even if you can't pronounce the word after you empty one of them); b. you have too much money and need places to spend it; or c. your doctor has said you can have only one glass of wine each day. Otherwise, glasses holding more than about 12 ounces have no real purpose in life.

How Shapely?

Because red wines benefit from air and swirling more than most white wines, their glasses have traditionally have larger bowls. This makes sense up to the point where you start determining which glass is exactly right for Zinfandel grown in Fair Play as opposed to Fiddletown! Riedel Crystal, along with Vindel, Grand Sommelier or other pretentious manufacturers, are now trying to tell you that each variety of red wine should have a distinctly different shape (after all, as the British say, the first duty of a wine is to be red).

This is based on a small body of pseudoscientific literature which purports to place different wines on different parts of your tongue to create the perfect marriage of flavors and sensory perceptions. Hogwash! Over 90% of the sensory impression of wine is what you smell, rather than what you taste, and having a radius of curvature in the bowl of the glass precisely tuned to the intersection of your middle palate with the Brunello clone of Sangiovese is the height of silliness. I would agree with the prevailing tradition of bigger bowls for bigger wines, but if you have more than three shapes of wine glasses in your cupboard, you are in danger of having believed a fairy tale.

The “Tasting Glass”

Like everything else in life, there’s always someone who honestly believes he has discovered the true peak of perfection in a glass that should be used for “critical” tasting of wine (this is clearly different from that ordinary, “uncritical” tasting that so many of us regular people do). There is a French organization called the Institut National d’Appellation d’Origine, or INAO, that would like to think of itself as the world’s authority on the correct shape of a wineglass. It has issued a specification of the size, shape and weight of the glass that best suits their superior taste buds. Oh, and by the way, they’ll be happy to sell you the glasses as well. Seriously, they’re not overly expensive, and if you are attracted to squatty little short-stemmed glasses with egg-shaped bowls, you’ll probably like them a lot.

But wait, it gets worse! As you know, it complicates the job of The Kindly Editor of this newspaper to include diagrams and drawings, so we reserve those for concepts which are difficult to portray in words (in this case, some of them may be too *silly* for words). Some doofus somewhere imagined that holding a glass by the stem was detrimental to determining the subtle qualities of fine wine, so he invented a “Wine Analyzer” glass with no stem, below.



The indentations are for your thumb and finger, and by some magical process, they allow you to pick up the glass and “expose every aroma, especially highlighting flaws.” My personal opinion is that, if you buy these glasses, the major flaws that are highlighted involve your good judgment and possibly your character.

Merrily We Roll Along

Did you think that was the end of glassware folly? Nope, there’s more, and it takes the shape of a glass you can use to rrrrolllllll your way to ultimate goofiness:



This is a glass in which you fill only the foot, then tip it on its side and roll it over the table, ostensibly to reveal the aromas previously hidden by the upright nature of ordinary swirling. Possibly, if you were to lie on your side on the tabletop to sip from the glass, even more hidden assets might be revealed.

The Serious Side

Having made fun of some of the things some people hold dear, here's just a bit of serious advice to balance the absurd. There is no doubt that leaded crystal, which contains up to 24% lead, makes the clearest and prettiest glasses anywhere, and drinking wine out of them is not likely to cause you harm in this lifetime. Storing wine in a lead crystal decanter is another matter. Because of wine's acidic nature, if left in leaded glass for a long time, it can and will extract hazardous levels of lead. And since lead accumulates in the body over your entire lifetime, if you allow too much contact, you might suffer the same fate that has been surmised for the fall of the Roman Empire—too much wine stored too long in leaded containers. If you only decant wine the same day you drink it, and if you drink wine under ordinary circumstances (and with ordinary postures), you likely have nothing to fear.

Just remember one rule, in keeping with our basic premise listed above, because no matter what the shape of the glass, sooner or later some of the wine will escape. When trying to decide what wine goes with what: white wines go with light-colored carpets; red wines with hardwood floors.