

Steps to Tasting Wine

by Chris Jensen

There are many ways to enjoy a wine tasting but there are only a few ways to sample the wines while you are there. I have read guides communicating a relaxed approach and guides communicating a strict approach to wine tasting. Generally the approaches are the same, they are only different in the manner they describe how to taste wine.

That being said, enjoy yourself when you are there. Don't be intimidated by what you perceive as people who are more knowledgeable than you (they were novices at one time). If you are asked what you think of a wine give your honest opinion, even preface it with what you feel is your level of expertise. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It is the best way to learn.

Try as many wines as you can while you are there. There is no better barometer than your nose and palate. It will let you know when something is wrong or off, or when it doesn't truly compare to similar varieties at the tasting. The caveat is to spit the wine out if you are going to try 50 or 60 in an evening.

Another important factor is to try wines in the correct order. Why is this important? It allows you to taste the nuances of the different wines. If you were to taste red wines before white wines your palate would not be able to make the adjustment to truly appreciate the white wines. In general, all white wines should be tried first followed by the reds, dessert wines whether red or white, should be tried last. Lighter bodied white wines such as Viognier should be tried before more full bodied whites such as Chardonnay. This holds true for red wines as well. Lighter bodied red wines such as Pinot Noir should be tried prior to more full bodied reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

Other important factors include cleansing your palate (if you plan on tasting many wines during the course of the evening) and the temperature of the wine. These factors will influence the perception of the wine on your palate. To cleanse your palate consider drinking some water or eating some cheese and crackers. The temperature of the wine at a tasting is unfortunately out of your control. Opinions vary as to the correct temperature for serving wines, and they vary by type of wine. In general, white wines are typically served between 36 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Fuller bodied whites can be served at the warmer end of the spectrum. Red wines are typically served at between 57 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Lighter bodied red wines can be served at the cooler end of the range while heavier red wines can be served at the warmer end. Again, these are general guidelines to follow, individual preferences can vary greatly.

Now that we have gone through all of that, how do you taste wine?

All wines have common characteristics that can be used to describe the wine when tasting. Sweetness or dryness, acidity, tannin, weight or body, and fruit. The more you taste wines, the more you will be able to describe these characteristics.

In tasting a wine, there are several components; How does the wine look? How does the wine smell? How does the wine taste? These components are what define the wine to critics and consumers alike.

How does the wine look?

After your wine has been poured hold it over a white tablecloth. Hold it at an angle so the point where the wine and the glass intersect is clearly visible. When young, red wines start off as purple and slowly mature to red, and finally to brown when they are oxidized. Note clarity of the wine. Is the wine bright? Or is it cloudy? Are there any suspended solids? These factors can give a partial indication of the quality of the wine.

How does the wine smell?

A wine's smell is referred to as it's "nose." Swirling the wine while it is in the glass will help oxygen mix with the wine thereby bringing out the true aromas of the wine. This can be a tricky process as some wines can remain closed off for an extended period of time. When the aromas present themselves what are they like? Are the aromas pleasing? Are there any unpleasant aromas? Are the aromas intense? Describing what you smell can be difficult, as with anything the more you practice the better you will become.

How does the wine taste?

The look and smell of a wine can be deceiving. There are cloudy wines that taste terrible and smelly wines that taste great.

Tasting a wine truly determines how good it is. Take a small sip; roll it around in your mouth. The tongue has different taste buds that identify different flavors, make sure the wine hits all of them. Is the wine pleasing on your palate? Aerate the wine on your palate, pull some air through the wine and exhale through your nose. How does this change the flavor of the wine?

There are other factors that can be discussed such as the balance of the wine and the style. But those are better suited for another conversation. In the mean time, enjoy the next wine tasting you attend.