

The ABC's of Wine Tasting

**Skillful tasting unlocks wine's treasures.
This step-by-step guide gives you the keys.**

By Thomas Matthews

Drinking wine is easy: tilt glass and swallow. Tasting wine is more of a challenge. You need special tools, the proper environment, keen concentration, a good memory and a vivid imagination. But after three or four glasses, the basic effect is the same either way. So why bother? I'm a baseball fan. When I take a friend who knows nothing about the sport to the ballpark, he may enjoy the crowd, down a hot dog, cheer if someone hits a home run. The rest of the time he's asking me, What's the big deal? One guy throws a ball, the other guy misses it. But for me, every pitch is a small drama: what the pitcher chooses to throw, how the defense sets up, where the batter tries to hit it, how the strategies play out. When nine innings are over, we both know the score. But while my friend may have passed a pleasant afternoon, I've been totally absorbed in the game.

Life can be lived in a casual way, or plumbed to the depths. We all choose how and where to spend our energy and attention. You may play music, cook seriously, tend a lovely garden. Maybe the things you love aren't vital, but they make life richer. Passion is never wasted effort.

That's why wine lovers learn to taste. We know that the effort we put into understanding and appreciating wine--as opposed to simply enjoying it (or its psychotropic effects)--pays big dividends. Really tasting wine adds an extra dimension to the basic daily routines of eating and drinking. It turns obligation into pleasure, a daily necessity into a celebration of life.

The Components Of Tasting:

Set and Setting

So what is wine tasting all about? Like any skill, serious tasting requires a combination of technique and experience. The more you do it, the better you become. Given an unidentified wine, an expert taster, using only his senses and his memory, can pick out the grape variety, the wine's vintage, its region of origin, even the specific winery that produced it.

That's the myth. In fact, if the wine is served at room temperature and the taster is blindfolded, most can't even tell whether it's red or white. Harry Waugh, an English wine expert who has been tasting for nearly 80 years, was once asked if he had ever mistaken Burgundy for Bordeaux. "Not since lunch," he replied.

Blind tasting is a great parlor game. But the real goal is to understand a wine, not to unmask it. Through a concentrated application of all the senses, and by comparison of the immediate sense data with memories of other wines tasted, the serious taster can decipher a wine's biography to an amazing extent, including the growing season that produced it, the approach of the winemaker who created it and its relation to other wines of similar type or origin. Every bottle of wine is a message, the physical embodiment of a specific place and time captured and transmitted for the pleasure of the taster. Open a bottle of 1961 red Bordeaux and even a generation later the dusty warmth of that long, hot summer floods the dining room.

Even more, though, wine is a catalyst. The effort to understand it through tasting, and to share that understanding with other tasters, creates a common experience that builds bonds between people. The great French enologist Emile Peynaud emphasized this aspect of tasting in his landmark book, *The Taste of Wine*:

"Great wine has that marvelous quality of immediately establishing communication between those who are drinking it. Tasting it at table should not be a solitary activity and fine wine should not be drunk without comment. There are few pleasures which loosen the tongue as much as that of sharing wine, glass in hand. In essence it is easy to describe what one senses provided one has made a sufficient effort to notice it. What is clearly perceived can be clearly expressed."

The techniques of tasting enhance the ability to perceive wine clearly. They're actually pretty simple and follow logically through a well-defined series of steps. Some of the procedures may seem unnatural or pretentious to the uninitiated, but they've been developed over centuries to achieve specific ends. After a while, they become

automatic. Swirling wine in the glass to release the aromas may feel clumsy at first, but now I often find myself at the table swirling my glass of water. At Wine Spectator, the editors taste nearly 8,000 wines a year. Here's how we do it. First of all, consider the circumstances. Not all wines deserve or repay close analysis. If you're drinking white Zinfandel out of paper cups at a picnic, any attempt to taste seriously will be wasted effort and probably perceived as snobbery. Professional tasters prefer a day-lit, odor-free room with white walls and tabletops, in order to throw the wine into the clearest possible relief, but in the end it's a sterile environment that improves analysis at the cost of pleasure. To maximize both enjoyment and understanding, serve your wine at a dinner party with friends; comfortable chairs, warm light and good food create an ambience where the wines--and the guests--can express themselves without constraint or reproach.

Remember that tasting is not a test--your subjective response is more important than any "right answers." The bottom line is: Wine that tastes good to you is good wine.

And no matter how advanced your technique, tasting is not an exact science. Sensitivities vary widely when it comes to flavor and aroma. These differences are both physiological and cultural. When test groups of French and Germans were given wine with 8 grams of sugar per liter, 92 percent of the Germans called the wine "dry" while only 7 percent of the French did. Their reference points were different: German whites are more often frankly sweet than French ones, so the German tasters were less sensitive to sugar in their wines.

The goal in tasting wine is not to "find" the same aromas and flavors some other taster is describing. If you hone your own perceptual abilities and develop your own vocabulary to articulate them, you'll not only derive more pleasure from the wine itself, but also stimulate better communication between you and the friends who are sharing the bottle.

The Components Of Tasting:

Looking at Wine

The first step in your examination is visual. Fill the glass about one-third full, never more than half-full. Pick it up by the stem. This may feel awkward at first, or affected, but there are good reasons: Holding the glass by its bowl hides the liquid from view; fingerprints blur its color; the heat of your hand alters the wine's temperature. Peynaud says, "Offer someone a wine glass and you can tell immediately by the way they hold it whether or not they are connoisseurs."

Focus in turn on hue, intensity and clarity. Each requires a different way of looking. The true color, or hue, of the wine is best judged by tilting the glass and looking at the wine through the rim, to see the variation from the deepest part of the liquid to its edges. Intensity can best be gauged looking straight down through the wine from above. Clarity--whether the wine is brilliant, or cloudy with particles--is most evident when light is shining sideways through the glass.

Each of these elements reveals different aspects of a wine's character and quality; I'll detail these later. But don't forget simply to enjoy the wine's color. No other liquid is as vivid and variegated, or reflects light with such joy and finesse. There's good reason wine's appearance is often compared to ruby and garnet, topaz and gold.

Next comes the swirling. This too can feel unnatural, even dangerous if your glass is too full and your clothing brand-new. But besides stirring up the full range of colors, it prepares the wine for the next step, the olfactory examination. The easiest way to swirl is to rest the base of the glass on a table, hold the stem between thumb and forefinger, and gently rotate the wrist. Right-handers will find a counter-clockwise motion easiest, left-handers the reverse.

Move the glass until the wine is dancing, climbing nearly to the rim. Then stop. As the liquid settles back into the bottom of the glass, a transparent film will appear on the inside of the bowl, falling slowly and irregularly down the sides in the wine's "tears" or "legs." "Experts" derive meanings from them as various and profound as fortune-tellers do from looking at tea leaves, but in truth they're simply an indication of the amount of alcohol in the wine: the more alcohol, the more tears. Remember that when you're considering whether to open another bottle.

The Components Of Tasting:

Smelling Wine

When you stop swirling, and the tears are falling, it's time to take the next step: smelling. Agitating the wine vaporizes it, and the thin sheet of liquid on the sides of the glass evaporates rapidly; the result is an intensification of the aromas. If the glass narrows at the top, the aromas are further concentrated. Stick your nose right into the bowl and inhale.

There's no consensus about the proper sniffing technique. Some advocate two or three quick inhalations; others prefer one deep, sharp sniff. I've seen tasters close one nostril, sniff, then close the other and sniff again. The goal is to draw the aromas deep into the nose, to bring them into contact with the olfactory mucosa and thence to the olfactory bulb, where the sensations are registered and deciphered. It's a remote and protected place, and a head cold or allergies will effectively block it off from even the strongest aromas. But with practice, and keen attention, you'll learn how to maximize your perception of aromas, and then how to decipher them.

The world of smell is vast and bewildering. First of all, our olfactory equipment is incredibly sensitive; we can distinguish aromas in quantities so small that laboratory equipment can scarcely measure them. Second, our analytic capacity is extraordinary; estimates of the number of different smells humans can identify range up to 10,000!

Finally, wine has a staggering number of smellable elements. In their exhaustive study *Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation*, Maynard Amerine and Edward Roessler, both professors at the University of California, write that "Identified in wine aromas are at least 181 esters, 52 alcohols, 75 aldehydes and ketones, 22 acetals, 18 lactones, six secondary acetamides, 29 nitrogen-containing compounds, 18 sulfur-containing compounds, two ethers, 11 furans and 18 epoxides, as well as 30 miscellaneous compounds. Many of these are modified in various ways by aging and cellar treatment, and they can and do react with each other or have additive, masking or synergistic properties." Serious wine tasters love to identify smells. "Chocolate!" cries one. "Burnt matches!" insists another. "Tea, tobacco, mushrooms and a bit of the old barnyard," intones a third. Are they just playing word games?

Let's face it: Contemporary American culture turns up its nose at strong smells. We deodorize our bodies, our homes and our cars; everything from hand lotion to dishwashing detergent comes "lemony fresh," to give the impression of cleanliness and neutrality. It's no wonder we lack the language to describe the complex, fleeting sensations that evanesce from a half-filled glass of wine.

But in fact, wine does smell of more than grapes. Analysis of its volatile components has identified the same molecules that give many familiar objects their distinctive scents. Here are just a few: rose, iris, cherry, peach, honey and vanilla. Who's to say that some of the more imaginative descriptors--from road tar to cat's pee, sweaty socks to smoked bacon--aren't grounded in some basic chemical affinity?

As with color, wine's aromas offer insights into character, origin and history. Because our actual sense of taste is limited to four simple categories (the well-known sweet, sour, bitter and salt), aroma is the most revealing aspect of our examination. But don't simply sniff for clues. Revel in the sensation. Scientists say smells have direct access to the brain, connecting immediately to memory and emotion. Like a lover's perfume, or the scent of cookies from childhood, wine's aromas can evoke a specific place and time with uncanny power.

The Components Of Tasting:

Tasting Wine

Now comes the best part. You can be mesmerized by wine's flashing colors and hypnotized into dreamy reverie by its evocative aromas, but actually drinking the wine is what loosens the tongue, opens the arms and consummates the liquid's true purpose.

You might think it's the easiest part, too. After all, you learned to drink from a cup when you were 2 years old and have been practicing diligently ever since. But there's a huge distinction between swallowing and tasting, the same gulf that yawns between simply hearing and truly listening. Once again, correct technique is essential to full appreciation.

With the aromas still reverberating through your senses, put the glass to your lips and take some liquid in. How much? That depends on the size of your mouth. But too little is as ineffective as too much. I find that one-third to

one-half an ounce is just about right. You need to have enough volume to work it all around your tasting apparatus, but not so much that you're forced to swallow right away.

Because you don't want to swallow, not just yet. It takes time and effort to force the wine to divulge its secrets. I keep a pleasant wine in my mouth for 10 to 15 seconds, sometimes more.

Roll the wine all around your mouth, bringing it into contact with every part, because each decodes a different aspect of the liquid. Wine provokes sensations, too: The astringency of tannins is most perceptible on the inner cheeks; the heat of the alcohol burns in the back of the throat.

The strength of these taste sensations can be amplified through specialized techniques that, frankly, are more appropriate to the tasting lab than the dining room. But if the wine is seductive enough, you may not be able to resist. First, as you hold the wine in your mouth, purse your lips and inhale gently through them. This creates a bubbling noise children find immensely amusing. It also accelerates vaporization, intensifying the aromas. Second, chew the wine vigorously, sloshing it around in your mouth, to draw every last nuance of flavor from the wine. Don't forget the finish. After you swallow, exhale gently and slowly through both your nose and mouth. The retronasal passage, which connects the throat and the nose, is another avenue for aromas, which can linger long after the wine is finally swallowed. You'll find that the better the wine, the more complex, profound and long-lasting these residual aromas can be. With great wines, sensitive tasters and minimal distractions, the finish can last a minute or more. It's a moment of meditation and communion that no other beverage can create.

What Tasting Tells:

What Wine Is

Wine tasting offers us the best route to understanding the messages hidden in the bottle. You can think of them as poetic, or autobiographical.

Poetry comes easily to sensitive palates confronted with great wines. It's harder work to tease out the facts that create these feelings. After all, as Peynaud puts it so bluntly, "Considered from a chemical point of view, wine is a hydro-alcoholic solution containing 20 to 30 grams of substances in solution, which constitute the extract and give it flavor, and several hundred milligrams of volatile substances, which constitute its odor." By deciphering these diverse substances, an attentive taster can learn a great deal about the wine they compose.

Every wine is a complex web made up of natural and man-made components. The final taste is determined by forces as non-negotiable as the number of hours of sunlight during the grapes' growing season, and decisions as personal as whether the grape juice should macerate on its skins for 10 days or two weeks or a month. While no introductory guide can even attempt to link all the ways flavor reflects the particular history of a wine, the more of them tasters can identify, the more complete their appreciation will be. Here are a few of the most important links between the real world and the liquid. I'll use a hypothetical Cabernet Sauvignon as an example.

The Components Of Tasting:

Clues From Color

A wine's color gives many clues to its character. First, color reflects the specific variety of grape (or grapes) the wine is made from. Take two common red grapes, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. Cabernet berries are typically smaller, with thicker, darker skins, than Pinot Noir. As a result, wines based on Cabernet tend to show darker colors, leaning toward purple and black, instead of the ruby tones associated with Pinot.

Second, color is influenced by growing conditions in the vineyard. A warm summer and dry autumn produce grapes that are fully ripe, with a high ratio of skin to juice, resulting in dark colors. A cool summer or a rainy harvest can result in unripe or diluted grapes, which will show up in colors with lighter hues and less intensity.

Vinification techniques can also affect color. When red wines ferment, the grape skins are left to macerate in the juice, like a tea bag steeping in warm water. The elements that create color, the anthocyanins, are found in the skins, not the juice itself (most grapes, even red varieties, have clear juice), so the longer the skins steep, the darker the color will be. Even after fermentation is over and the skins are discarded, some solid material remains in suspension in the wine. Some winemakers choose to remove this material, through fining or filtering; others believe the wine benefits from a little residual deposit.

Time in bottle--the inevitable process of aging--also has an impact. Young red wines are full of anthocyanins, and so their colors are deeper; with maturity, these coloring elements evolve, lightening through red to colors described as "brick" or "amber," slowly combining and falling out of suspension in the wine, creating a sediment in the bottom of the bottle.

So if you pour a glass of red wine and look at it closely, you may find a deep garnet color, with good intensity but not brilliantly clear. You might reasonably infer that the wine is made from Cabernet Sauvignon grown in a warm climate, that the winemaker chose to extend maceration and to filter only lightly, and that it's from a recent good vintage. If the tasting's not blind and you already know what the wine is, you can compare its color with what you might expect: Perhaps it's exceptionally dark for a weak vintage, indicating good grape-growing or winemaking abilities, or maybe it's already faded for its age, suggesting that the grapes lacked concentration, or the winemaker was unable to extract the intensity that allows wines to mature with grace and complexity.

What Tasting Tells:

Clues From Aroma

Every step of the tasting will add more information to the equation, modifying the conclusions you're drawing about the wine. Aroma is the most complex element, and the most revealing to the experienced taster. Some commentators divide the aromatic components into several classes: those produced by the grapes themselves, those introduced by the chemical processes of winemaking and, finally, those that result from the evolution of the wine over time in the bottle. Sometimes the first two classes, which are most distinctive when the wine is young, are called the "aroma," while the third, which emerges only in maturity, is called the "bouquet."

As with color, grape variety and growing season are powerful determinants of aroma. Pinot Noir typically smells of red fruits like cherries and strawberries. Cabernet Sauvignon, like its color, tends to have darker aromas, typically black cherries or plums.

Winemaking techniques dramatically affect aromas. The yeasts that cause fermentation are sometimes chosen by the winemakers and added to the juice specifically because of the aromatic and flavor nuances they create. Cool fermentations yield vibrant, fruity aromas; warmer ones give more spicy and earthy notes.

The biggest aromatic impact comes after fermentation, when the wine is racked off the skins and held for clarification and maturation before bottling. Some Cabs are simply pumped into large vats, generally made of stainless steel, epoxied concrete or old wood. The large volume of the liquid and the neutral character of the container emphasize the fruit character inherent in the wine. Other (generally more ambitious and expensive) wines are racked into small (60-gallon) oak barrels. If the barrels are old, they too will be basically neutral, adding little in the way of flavor or aroma. If they are new, however, the wine absorbs elements from the wood that can add aromas (and flavors) of vanilla, smoke, toast, coffee, even chocolate. These aromas will vary in character and intensity depending on whether the oak is French or American in origin, how much the inside of the barrels have been charred, or "toasted," and what percentage of the barrels are new.

Time in bottle also influences aromas. Young red wines smell of fruit; as they age, their bouquet evolves into complex perfumes that mingle cedar, tobacco, tea, mushrooms and spices. Different cultures prefer one stage over the other; the French drink their reds vigorous and fruity, while the English favor the softer, more earthy aromas of mature wines. Young wines can be delicious, but a great wine aged to perfect maturity is a glorious experience, and once sniffed will never be forgotten.

So when you smell our hypothetical Cabernet and find scents that remind you of plums or blackberries, joined by aromas of vanilla and toast, you can reasonably assume the wine is young, made from ripe grapes and aged in a high percentage of new barrels--the "formula" that most often results in concentrated, age-worthy wines. If there are herbal, vegetal or other "green" notes, you may suspect the growing season was cool or short, preventing the grapes from achieving complete maturity. If the fruit smells "cooked," ripe and sweet like jam or even raisins, overripe fruit from a long, hot summer is a likely cause.

What Tasting Tells: Clues From Taste

Finally you taste the wine, and the last evidence falls into place. Our taste buds are blunt instruments--most of what we "taste" is actually perceived by our sense of smell--but they do add basic information, particularly about sweetness and acidity. Just as important are other physical sensations perceived in the mouth, such as a wine's body, astringency and level of alcohol.

A wine's alcohol level results primarily from the ripeness of the grapes at harvest (more sugar in the grapes equals more strength in the wine) plus, where it's permitted, from additional sugar added during fermentation (a process called chaptalization). Most table wines contain from 7 to 14 percent alcohol naturally, and winemakers generally chaptalize where necessary to reach levels of 12 to 13 percent (though it's almost always illegal to boost a wine more than two degrees, or percent, through added sugar). Higher alcohol levels give wines richer textures and fuller bodies. Alcohol also provides a subliminal sweetness that's necessary to balance acid and bitter components inevitably present in wine.

Acidity is also inherent in the grapes, though in hot climates (and where it's legal) winemakers may add some tartaric or citric acid to balance the sugar in ultraripe fruit. Acidity can also be manipulated through a process called malolactic fermentation (this is actually a bacterial activity, not a true fermentation). The process takes place after alcoholic fermentation, almost always in red wines and selectively in whites, according to the winemaker's vision of the wine. It transforms rather harsh malic acid (the kind found in green apples) to softer, rounder lactic acid (the kind found in milk), yielding softer wines that, especially in whites, often show marked buttery or creamy flavors. Tannins are elements extracted primarily from grape skins (and so found mostly in red wines), but which can derive from stems or seeds, and also from oak, especially new oak barrels. They're perceived as an astringent feeling. Young red wines meant for long aging are pumped full of tannins, by extending the maceration period or otherwise enhancing their extraction, because tannins act as a preservative and their chemical evolution toward softer, silkier textures is part of the maturation of great wines.

Back to our Cab. In the mouth, you may note a marked astringency, plenty of fruit and very little tartness. When you swallow, there's a warm feeling in the back of your throat followed by a long aftertaste. You can reasonably assume that the wine is made from ripe grapes, possibly grown in a warm climate, and that the winemaker emphasized extraction to produce a long-lived wine. If the wine is too alcoholic and lacking in acidity, the grapes may have gotten too ripe before they were picked; if the tannins are too harsh, the winemaker may have left the juice on the skins for too long, aiming to make a super-wine but winding up with a bodybuilder, impressive in youth but unlikely to maintain its form.

Don't stop concentrating when you swallow, though. The finish--the taste that lingers for seconds, even minutes, when the wine is gone--is the wine's farewell. If it's short, the wine is simple and probably meant for early drinking. The longer it is, no matter what its age, the better the chances you have a winner.

With age the tannins soften and the wine, which may be a collection of impressive but disparate impressions in its youth, will become more harmonious and complex. One of the most important and least certain judgments a wine taster makes is when a wine will reach its peak, achieve a point when all its elements come into alignment, creating a seamless web of color, aroma and flavor. One reason to invest in a wine by the case is to follow its evolution through the years. This maximizes your chances of catching the wine at its best.

So our hypothetical tasting is over. Given an unknown red wine, we've determined that it has a deep garnet color, offers vibrant aromas and flavors of blackberries and toast, and is full-bodied and firmly tannic on the palate, with a long, clean finish. We can make a good guess that it's a young California Cab from a good vintage that's been made to develop with age and that, while it's attractive to drink now, it will be smoother and more complex after two or three years in the bottle. (Of course, we won't be surprised if it's from Bordeaux or Australia or even from some completely different grape!)

If we know that the wine we're drinking is, say, Beringer Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Private Reserve 1992 (\$45, rated 95 points or "classic" by Wine Spectator editors), we can agree that it delivers on its promises and happily put our other bottles safely in the cellar for a special dinner down the road.

Understanding Wine

Most of the time, most of us drink young, simple wines. What you taste is what you get--they may be flavorful and refreshing, but they don't repay extended analysis. Even so, it can be amusing to taste them blind, to try to reach back through the wine to its components: grape variety, vintage quality, winemaking techniques.

Sometimes we splurge, drinking a bottle from a topflight producer in a great vintage. Then, good tasting technique is essential to full appreciation. If the setting or the company is distracting, or we can't be bothered to concentrate on the data our senses are providing, then we've wasted our money and insulted the winemaker and the wine. Recently a Wine Spectator editor dined with a wealthy collector who opened 17 bottles for eight guests, serving them almost completely at random, pairing, for example, 1985 Krug Champagne and 1929 Château Mouton-Rothschild as apéritifs. Appreciation is impossible when conspicuous consumption is filling the glass. But when you put senses and imagination to work, tasting a great wine can be more than a great pleasure; its memory can illuminate all the other wines we drink, majestic and modest, from then on.

And once in a while we get lucky. Every passionate wine lover tells the same story: a special night, close companions, an extraordinary bottle of wine. Maybe it's an old Burgundy, fragile and recalcitrant at first, blossoming into magical complexity. Maybe it's a honeyed Château d'Yquem drunk with an unctuous terrine of foie gras, proving that a sophisticated disdain for "sweet wines" was utterly mistaken. Suddenly we have the impression that rather than analyzing the wine we're practically worshiping it, and what began as superficial sensory pleasure becomes as profound as a religious conversion. Eating and drinking will never be quite the same again.

Life goes on. Corks are pulled, glasses broken, wine racks fill and empty and fill again. If we're paying attention along the way, though, our memory's cellar grows and grows, and every addition adds meaning and value to each wine we drink. Here's Peynaud again, nearly 70 now, reflecting on a lifetime of wine drinking:

"The world of wine is infinite," he writes. "How could I possibly commit to memory the thousands of wines that I have tasted from all over the world? The rate at which I taste now has gone beyond the limits of memory, it is wasteful in effect. Nonetheless, I still have the notes of all my tastings and every now and again I leaf through them; the experience is like looking at the pictures in a travel album which can take me back in time and space."

Wine tasting is a technique that can enhance our everyday experience of eating and drinking. But it can also be a way of life that enriches our perceptions and deepens our connections with every aspect of the sensory world. That's a large claim for a common activity, but those who know wine well know it to be true.

Getting the Most From Wine

Accurate and complete wine tasting depends primarily on the concentration and perspicacity of the taster. But the right tools and an efficient approach can make a big difference, too.

Technical details include the serving temperature of the wine, proper opening and pouring methods, the decision whether or not to decant the bottle and appropriate stemware.

The "correct" temperature, like so many details in wine tasting, is ultimately a matter of personal preference. I know Southerners who simply cannot drink a beverage without ice, and that includes Montrachet and Yquem. But wine temperature influences wine flavor and there are good reasons to follow time-tested practices.

Cold temperatures enhance the perception of bitterness; warm ones increase the impact of sweetness and alcohol. According to French enologist Emile Peynaud, "the same red wine will seem thin and hot at 72° F, supple and fluid at 64°, full and astringent at 50°." So a powerful, tannic red should be poured warm enough to minimize its astringency, but not so warm as to emphasize its alcohol. We drink sweet white wines well chilled to keep their sweetness in balance.

We recommend serving full-bodied and mature red wines at 60° to 65°F, light-bodied young reds at 55° to 60°, dry whites at 45° to 50° and sweet whites at 40° to 50°. Remember that the wine will warm up in the glass, since most dining rooms are heated to 70° or more, so it's better to serve them a couple of degrees too cold than too warm.

The way you open the bottle won't normally affect its flavors, but as part of the ceremony of wine it helps put the tasters in a receptive mood. If a capsule covers the neck of the bottle, cut it cleanly below the protruding lip and remove the top portion (or simply take the whole thing off). Wipe the neck of the bottle to remove any mold or mineral salts that may have accumulated. Using a corkscrew that feels comfortable in your hand (we prefer the Screwpull or a simple waiter's corkscrew), pull the cork slowly, trying not to disturb any sediment in the wine, and clean the inside of the bottle neck before pouring.

Should you decant the wine--that is, pour it from the bottle into a different container for serving? Yes, if the wine has thrown a heavy deposit; vintage Port and full-bodied, mature reds are the usual culprits here. (But decanting is useless if the sediment is floating throughout the wine; be sure to stand the bottle upright for a day or two before opening.) Yes, if you want to show off an heirloom crystal decanter or hide the identity of the wine. In all other cases, decanting is useless at best, harmful at worst.

This advice flouts some conventional wisdom, which argues that young reds (and occasionally other wines as well) benefit from "breathing" and need the vigorous contact with oxygen that decanting provides in order to "open up" and show their best. No scientific evidence supports this point of view. It is true that wines change with exposure to air, but mostly for the worse--old wines, for example, may deteriorate rapidly after opening. I enjoy following the whole arc of a wine's evolution, from the first taste until the last sip, which may come hours later.

Don't forget the glasses. Any container that will hold water can serve wine, but appropriate stemware not only adds beauty to the table, it also enables the fullest communication between wine and taster. Austrian glassmaker Georg Riedel offers special glasses specifically made for dozens of particular wine types, and investigation has convinced me that glass shape and size can affect wine taste significantly. If cost is no object, it pays to tailor your stemware to your wines. On the other hand, even Riedel offers an "all-purpose" goblet.

In our experience, the best wine glass is a slender goblet of thin, clear crystal with a long stem on a sturdy base. Heavy cut glass may take light beautifully, but it blunts the contact between wine and tongue, and examining wine through colored glass is like gazing at a beautiful friend who's wearing wraparound sunglasses. The glass should hold 10 to 18 ounces and the bowl should be biggest at the bottom, tapering to a small opening in order to concentrate the wine's aromas.

Once you've got the mechanics in place, two more subjective questions arise: When is the wine ready to drink? What foods make the best match with the wine you want to serve?

These are long discussions without clear answers. English wine authority and Wine Spectator columnist Jancis Robinson once wrote a book, *Vintage Timecharts*, exploring the maturation curves of great wines. She plotted arcs on graphs showing time on one axis and wine evolution on the other; the colored lines curving sinuously across the pages are impressively scientific but hopelessly confusing. The truth is that different people prefer wines at different stages of maturity, and different bottles of the same wine may mature at different rates. Trying to find the "perfect" match between taste and development is like trying to hit two moving targets with one shot.

Wine and food matching is even more complicated, and fine books have been written on the topic. However, before you submit to the many complex and dogmatic rules offered by seemingly authoritative experts, remember that in the 1890s the best restaurants in America routinely served sweet white Bordeaux, such as Barsac and Sauternes, with oysters and other shellfish--exactly the opposite of today's taste.

The best advice is: Eat what you like and drink what you like. You'll find combinations that work, and they will suggest general rules that will increase your chances of creating other magical matches. And one day, when everything comes together--the food, the wine, the company--to create a whole that far surpasses any single element, you'll be glad you took the time and the effort to get the details right.

Judging a Wine By Its Label

More people choose wines by their labels than are comfortable admitting it. Novices reach for pretty pictures; snobs demand famous names. But in fact, a wine label reveals a great deal about the flavors in the bottle. You can begin your tasting even before you've pulled the cork.

There are basically three kinds of labels: varietal-based, terroir-based and sheer fantasy. The information they offer--much of it required by law--overlaps to a large extent, but each one reflects a different approach to winemaking.

Have you ever bought a Chardonnay? Then you're already familiar with the varietal approach: wines named for the grape variety that makes up all (or some legally defined minimum) of the juice in the bottle. California pioneered this method, and most of the New World producers have adopted it. However, some European wine regions--Alsace in France, Friuli in Italy, for example--have traditionally followed this approach.

Most European wines, however, use terroir-based labeling. Terroir is a French word that comprehends all the physical factors which distinguish a given vineyard or wine region: its soil, exposure, microclimate, etc. These wines may be made from a single grape variety (such as Pinot Noir for red wines in Burgundy) or a blend that may vary by vintage (such as Bordeaux's judicious mix of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc).

Some winemakers have found themselves so frustrated by local wine regulations--which may dictate certain grape blends or vinification techniques as prerequisites to obtaining labels, whether based on varietal or terroir--that they abandon traditional approaches and use labels based simply on fantasy. In Tuscany, producers determined to make new-style wines abandoned the terroir-based Chianti labels for the humble designation vino da tavola (table wine). In California, winemakers working with the grapes and flexible blending approach of Bordeaux have given up some varietal-based labels to bottle "Meritage" wines.

Each kind of label gives different clues to the wine inside the bottle, but all labels include a few basics. For example, the producer's name is always prominent. Most wineries develop consistent signatures, based on their location, winemaking skills and marketing goals; once you're familiar with a winery's profile, the producer's name is perhaps the most reliable indicator of wine style and quality.

The wine's vintage is almost always shown, too. If you're familiar with the vintages of a given region, this can be a telling indicator--red Bordeaux were mostly light and diluted in 1992, but rich and concentrated in 1990. However, even if you don't know whether a specific vintage was good or bad, knowing how old a wine is indicates something about its current style: young, fresh and fruity, or older, smoother and more complex. Most whites, and very many reds, are best within three years of the vintage; wines that age well increase in price over time. Beware of old, inexpensive wines.

Most labels indicate the region where the grapes were grown and the wine made. On terroir-based labels, this is emphasized: The Burgundian appellations of Nuits-St.-Georges and Vosne-Romanée, for example, are more or less homogenous and distinctive vineyard areas that, at least in theory, impart recognizable character to their wines, especially since appellation laws generally regulate many aspects of grape growing and wine making. Varietal-based labels also generally indicate appellations (though often in small type), sometimes right down to the name of the vineyard. But in these production areas regulation tends to be much looser, and so wines from the same appellation tend to have less in common. Fantasy labels often avoid any mention of origin at all (some-times the laws won't permit their indication). But since fantasy wines deliberately break with the traditions of their regions, origin doesn't mean that much, anyway.

Finally, don't forget the price tag, stuck right there next to the label. Yes, there may be wide disparities between a wine's cost and its quality. Wine Spectator takes pains to point these out, whether it's a great wine for little money or an overpriced bottle to avoid. But more often than not, there is a rough correlation.

If you're spending under \$5 per bottle, the wine is likely to be simple, offering alcohol as its principal virtue. From \$5 to \$12, most wines offer fresh fruit, enough structure to marry well with food and some individual personality. From \$12 to, say, \$50, you can expect complex flavors of ripe fruit and new oak, enough concentration to develop with aging and a distinctive character stamped with the wine's creator and origin. Pay any more, and you enter into a rarefied world inhabited by passionate and deep-pocketed collectors; the rest of us usually pass by with a shake of the head.

Wineries put a lot of effort into their labels. Savvy wine lovers can decipher what the law says they must say, what the producers want to say and sometimes more than they intend to say. Spend some time studying labels before you buy and you'll increase your chances of finding a wine to suit your tastes.

Decoding the Language of Wine Tasting

Understanding the wine you taste is only half the battle; communicating your impressions to others in words is just as big a challenge. And since the wine itself disappears as you drink it, verbal descriptions are the only way to preserve the pleasure wine provides.

It's easy to ridicule our feeble attempts to put wine into words. Perhaps the most famous satire on tasting notes is a James Thurber cartoon: Three people at a dinner table look quizzically at their host, who's got a glass in his hand and a manic look in his eye, saying, "It's merely a naive domestic Burgundy, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption."

In fact, the struggle to develop a lucid and coherent vocabulary for wine tasting has been going on for centuries. In his landmark study, *The Taste of Wine*, Bordeaux enologist Emile Peynaud traces the slow accretion of terms commonly used to describe fine wines. Ancient Greeks and Romans wrote about wine, and even in the 15th century there are references to wines called "good, clean, honest and commercial." But the true taster's vocabulary really

began in the 18th century, when Bordeaux wines such as Haut-Brion and Lafite began to be sold at four to five times the price of ordinary claret, and it became necessary to find words to describe and justify the difference.

Based on extensive research in the literature of wine, Peynaud culled about 40 terms used in the late 18th century, ranging from "acidic," "sour" and "hot," to "lively," "fine" and "strong." More specific flavor descriptors appear in the 19th century, such as "balsamic," "herbal" and "woody." A manual for wine merchants published in 1896 used nearly 200 different descriptors, and today Peynaud recognizes over a thousand terms commonly used to describe wines. In fact, the vocabulary has gotten a bit out of hand; in *Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation*, Maynard Amerine and Edward Roessler list over 300 terms to avoid in wine description, including the innocuous "charming" and "intense" and even the antique "lively."

Wine Spectator attempts to use commonsense words to describe wines in our tasting reports. Our goal is to characterize the wine in general terms, give several distinctive taste descriptors, compare it to other wines of its specific type and indicate when it may be drinking at its best. Though writing tasting notes is more of an art than a science, the descriptions give a fuller idea of a wine's character than the accompanying score, which locates the wine on a comparative quality ranking.

The best way to develop your own wine vocabulary is to write your own tasting notes. You'll find that certain words recur as descriptors of similar wines and soon you'll be fluently describing your organoleptic sensations. Of course, the bottom line of tasting is your own pleasure; your description should reflect your judgment. It has always been thus. There's something disconcertingly familiar in one of the earliest known tasting notes, found in a third century document from Roman Egypt: "The wine taster has declared the Euboean wine to be unsuitable." We hope few of your wine-tasting experiences fall into the same dismal category.