



WINE MANNERS

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WINE MANNERS / TASTING

Wine qualities

Wine has always been considered a unique beverage. It can leave your palate with an entire range of sensations. It can be smooth or quite sharp and crisp. Therefore wines are to be savoured rather than drunk; wines are to be treated with care and without haste.

The colour

First of all, one must note the color of the wine or, as tasters call it, the “dress”. Each brand has its own color, with a unique sparkle. A good wine is clear and clean, has no sediments and is not dull. The color of white wines is best appraised against an immaculately white background, holding the glass at a certain distance from the eyes. For example, the glass can be held against the sleeve of a white shirt or placed on a table covered by a white cloth. Red wines have to be examined against a source of light—a window, lamp, or candle. The color of the wine can indicate its age, which in turn determines the wine’s taste. As years pass red wines

become lighter, acquire a brownish-reddish shade, while white wines on the contrary become darker:

- light-shaded wines are almost colourless and are usually produced in regions with a cool climate; greenish wines are more tart, while yellow ones have a smoother, fuller taste;

- the dark whites are characteristic of dessert wines or those made of very ripe or over-ripened grapes and kept in barrels for a long time. Such wines have golden, honey, and amber shades of color.

Young red wines are characterized by a colour palette ranging from rose to purple; the more aged wines have a deep-red, ruby-red, pomegranate, blue-red or black-red dress. The depth of the color betrays the concentration of tannin, which could render the wine tart. The range of rosé wines varies from light-rosé to light-red.

Fluidity (viscosity)

In order to assess the wine's viscosity, the glass has to be slightly shaken in order to observe how the wine flows down the glass. If it flows down quickly, then the wine is agile and therefore belongs among light, table varieties. If however it lingers on the glass, this means that the wine has a high glycerin and sugar content. Some wines leave stripes on the glass—they are called “legs” or “tears”. This used to be considered a sign of high quality, while today it has been shown that the legs are determined by the surface tension of the liquid and volatility of alcohol. The stripes thus indicate a high alcohol content of the wine.

Aroma

The aroma of the wine is generally determined by the grape variety from which it is produced. High-quality wines can contain entire bouquets of aromas, whose presence also depends on the conditions in which the wine is fermented and matured. There are wines with aromas of flowers, fruits, vanilla, honey, tobacco, caramel, wood, resin and so on. When assessing the wine's smell the tasters use the term "nose"; if they say that the wine has a "long nose" it means that it displays a rich bouquet. In order to fully feel the range of aromas the glass has to be shaken in circles—the wine thus mixes with air—then brought to the nose and inhaled deeply.

Taste

The taste of the wine is its main quality, as it is the taste which influences most strongly the choice of the consumer. Professional tasters recommend the following procedure: take a little wine into your mouth, keep it in the mouth first and only then swallow. Different parts of the tongue respond to different qualities. The tip of the tongue reacts to sweet, the sides react to sour, while the back reacts to tartness. Besides, there are also strength and fullness. The alcohol concentration is registered by the tunica mucosa of the mouth, while the fullness is a general impression of the depth of the wine's taste. This latter quality is referred to as the wine's "body", which can be light, medium or full.

The wine's sweetness has a major part in the assessment of dessert and fortified wines, which generally have a honey, sweetish or sugary taste. Dry wines have a light, pleasant sweetness.

The acidity depends on the grape variety, as acidity is contained in the grapes from the very beginning. It is usually this

quality which represents the base of the wine's taste. Excessive acidity makes the wine hard, while its insufficiency makes the wine insipid and flat; a balanced acid content renders the wine's taste smooth, soft and delicate.

The wine's tartness is determined by the content of tannins. Red wines have a much higher concentration of tannins than white wines. This is explained by the fact that the process of making wine is not limited to grape juice but also includes peel and pits. Aged red wines have however a smoother taste than young ones.

Aftertaste

The aftertaste is an important characteristic of wine, which permits a more complete appreciation of the taste and bouquet of aromas. Depending on how long the aftertaste lingers, connoisseurs distinguish between "long" and "short" wines. Long are high-quality wines, which can preserve an aftertaste for up to 15 seconds. Some tasters call them "wines unfolding a peacock tail". However, the majority of wines produced today are "short". They can leave a good initial impression, but "dissipate" only after two or three seconds.

Harmony

A wine's harmony, or complexity, characterizes the match among its color, aroma and taste. For example, a thick aroma does not match a light taste.

Typicality

"Typicality" means that the wine has to correspond to what is written on the label. This includes such qualities as sugar content, alcohol content, grape variety and so on.

A general classification of wines

Finally, one can draw a classification of wines:

- a harmonious wine is the beverage which has a balanced color, bouquet and taste, which must also match the wine's age and variety. At the same time no one single quality should dominate otherwise the wine will be sugary, too tart, or too sour;

- tasters call a wine lively if it has preserved the brightness of color, depth of aroma and freshness of taste;

- an ordinary wine has no blatant flaws nor any bright qualities. A sort of middle of the road;

- a tired or weary wine is the exact opposite of a lively one, i.e. it has lost the richness of its dress, strength of the bouquet and depth of taste;

- in a wine which is not harmonious one of its qualities—taste, color or aroma—clearly does not match the others;

- a bad wine has been produced with disregard to prescribed technology or has been stored improperly and so goes bad.

WINE MANNERS / SERVING THE WINE

Serving wine in restaurants

Good restaurants have a specially trained waiter who is in charge of serving wine—a sommelier. This profession emerged in the Middle Ages in France, when the sommelier's duty was to prepare and choose the beverages for the royal table. This must be a fine connoisseur of wines, able to characterize in terms easy to understand any wine and recommend the appropriate wine for the dishes ordered by the customer.

The bottle is brought to the customer corked, so that the customer can ascertain that this is his order and the wine has not been touched by anyone else. The wine is then opened on the table of the customer, and the cork is placed on the table or on a plate for the customer to verify its quality: he makes sure the cork does not have foul smells, has not crumbled and is not soaked in wine. Then the sommelier or the waiter pours out a small quantity of wine into the glass to be tasted. If the client is not satisfied with the quality, for example he may consider the wine spoiled or below the expected standard, then the wine must be replaced for no charge. If the customer is satisfied, then the waiter pours the wine out into the glasses of the guests, serving ladies first and the person who has ordered the wine last.

Aeration of the wine

Wine can be compared to humans, since as time passes its chemical composition changes; for example, during production the wine eliminates carbon dioxide and absorbs oxygen; each wine has its own life span. Some wines only become better when they interact with air. This is generally true of the red wines with a high

tannin concentration; when aerated their taste becomes smoother and more delicate. Young wines require longer aeration than aged wines. Some white wines, too, may require aeration. This process can be accelerated if the wine is poured out into a glass carafe with a wide neck. This procedure also helps separate the wine from the sediment, which develops inevitably after a long period of ageing.

Uncorking the bottle

In the Middle Ages the cover of the bottle neck was made of lead and fixed by sealing wax. Since lead is quite noxious for the human body, there were frequent cases of wine poisoning. Today the caps are made of plastic or aluminium foil. The cap can be removed completely or just its upper part separated by using a special wine knife.

Then the bottle is uncorked. The cork is made of corkwood, which grows around the Mediterranean. Portugal is the largest corkwood producer, taking up about 50% of the market, followed by Italy, Spain, and Morocco. It takes the tree about 50 years to grow a thick enough bark to be used in cork manufacturing. The bark is first dried for several months, then boiled for one or two hours in order to kill all the germs, reduce tannins and increase elasticity. After drying the corkwood is cut up according to bottle sizes, while the residues are used in manufacturing pressed corks, which are employed for inexpensive or sparkling wines.

The bottle is opened by a corkscrew, but without piercing the cork through lest small cork crumbs fall into the wine. This does not influence the wine's quality, it is but an esthetic precaution.

Wine glasses

Each type of wine has its own serving glass, characterized by three elements: size, shape and glass quality. Regardless of the wine's dress the glass has to be colorless, since it is important to assess the wine's color. In order to assess the aroma quite large glasses are used; an exception to this rule are dessert wines, e.g. cherry, which are inherently aromatic and are consumed in small amounts. Red wines require glasses of 300-600 ml, while white wines can use 250-300 ml. No matter what the size of the glass, it must never be filled to the brim. Red wines must fill one-third of the glass, while white wines one half. Crystal glasses are not mandatory; plain glass is all right as long as it is not too thick. A glass with red wine may be warmed up in the palm of the hand in order to help it unfold its aroma more fully. Red-wine glasses narrow down at the top in order to concentrate at the mouth the wine's aroma. For dry white wines narrow glasses are recommended, slightly widening at the top, which allows one to feel the fruitiness of the aroma and reduces the effect of the wine's acidity. Wide glasses are best suited for barrel-aged wines, as such glasses increase the wine's contact with air. Dessert-wine glasses can be of a variety of shapes but smaller in size than red- or white-wine glasses.

Wine serving and storage temperature

As far as the temperature of the wine served is concerned, the rule is as follows: the warmer the wine, the stronger its aroma as well as the sweetness and sourness of taste; the cooler the wine the more bitter and tart it is. Therefore, full-bodied red wines, with a high tannin content and aged for many years are served at 18 °C,

medium-bodied reds containing a medium tannin level—at 16 °C, while light red varieties of a fruity taste are recommended to be consumed at 12-14 °C.

Dessert and fortified wines are usually cooled down to 12-16 °C before being served.

A wine can be stored in an open bottle after it is poured out into a smaller vessel and tightly corked. This will reduce the amount of air interacting with the wine. The bottle is best stored in a cool and dark place at 12-16 °C, since light has a negative influence on the quality of the wine; the humidity in the storage place should be at least 70% in order to prevent the cork from drying.

WINE MANNERS / WINE AND FOOD

General rules

It has always been considered that wine exists to accompany meals, for it is with meals that the wine develops its best qualities. Certain wines match certain dishes. As a rule, wines from various countries match best the traditional cuisines of those countries. Moreover, certain ingredients can enhance or soften the taste of the wine. For instance, the protein in walnuts tends to strengthen the tannin taste of red wines. Spicy dishes produce the same effect. Such wines are best matched by salty and rich foods—roast meat, cheese—and are absolutely inadvisable for fish and desserts. Hence one could conclude that the wine should be chosen so that it would match in taste the dish. For example, light-bodied wines are best suited for light dishes, medium-bodied for salty dishes, and full-bodied for heavy dishes. Thus, if you serve mushrooms then choose a wine with herbal aromas. Fruits ought to be accompanied by fruity wines. In general, there is a quite simple method to choose the wine to a meal: Fish and game are to be served with dry white wine, meat with dry red, and dessert goes with sweet wine.

The succession of wines is also to be kept in mind—white wines are to be served before red ones, light before heavy, young before old, while wines matured in metal vats and having fruity aromas should be consumed before barrel wines. Today, however, people tend to give preference to one type of wine and ignore the variety at hand. The senses of smell and taste become used quite quickly to one type of wine, and the freshness of perception is thus lost.