

Ralph Davidovits
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The Ritual of Tasting Wines

Curiosity may be the support for learning new knowledge, and above all when this knowledge is part of one's culture. How can you imagine a French citizen that neither likes drinking wine nor knows nothing about it? That was my situation four years ago. Many of my fellows are in the same situation, but they just do not care. So, I decided to react. I wanted to know why our wine "culture" was so popular and prestigious all over the world. For some people, drinking wine is a kind of ritual like the tea ceremony in Japan. I guessed it should be more than drinking a beverage. Then I was determined to attend an initiation course of wine that would help me to bridge the gap from ignorance to wisdom. However, this course was not sufficient and practicing that knowledge in everyday life helped me to learn more.

The scene took place in the heart of Paris, in a quarter called Quartier Latin, famous for its universities, schools, publishers and its intellectual activities near Saint-Germain-des-Près. It was a very small wine shop in a tight street surrounded by old buildings. The shopkeeper, with his

typical accent of the region of Bordeaux, welcomed me and showed me the way of the classroom. I can recall the place quite well. It was downstairs in a vaulted cellar that might be 300 or 400 years old. It was the perfect scenery for an initiation as some secret societies do! Well-known specialists would teach three sessions of four hours each. We would taste six different wines per session. One meeting was devoted to red wine, the second to white wine and the last session was about the serving. Let me share with you a little of my knowledge.

First of all, we have to define what a wine is. It is a beverage made by a fermentation of grape juice. The alcohol level is among 7 and 15 degrees and its color may be pink, white or red with a wide range of hues.

Before making wine, we must take care of the growing of the grapes. Wine making begins in the vineyard. To encourage the production of a perfect fruit, the vines need to be cut back and guided. Sometimes, the producer cut some grapes to compel the plant to concentrate its juice and flavor, otherwise the plant will dilute its sap and will not give a good wine. Grapes are either red or white. Almost all grapes can produce white wines because grape juice is of a green/yellow color. Red wines require red grapes, as the color comes from the skins. In many countries, the variety name of the grape is used to identify the wine. The flavor varies from one variety to another. For example, Cabernet, Gamay, Grenache, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah are used to produce red wines. Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Muscat, Sauvignon and Semillon are used for white wines. All these varieties have different tastes and we can identify them without reading the label on the bottle.

The way grapes are produced, cultivated and picked dramatically influence the quality and the style of wine. The weather and the soil are important too. The more the wine-maker will take care of the growing, the better its wine will be. The type and style of wine vary considerably

depending on the techniques used to make the beverage. Red, white, rose and sparkling wines are made with different type of crushing, fermentation, pressing and storing.

Even if it is the most theoretical part of the course, the teacher explained that it was the most important because it determines the quality of the wine. Quality would ever be recognized and appreciated in a glass of wine. My experience has given the opportunity to check all that knowledge.

Then arrived the most interesting part of the course: tasting. Tasting wines is not easy. One must learn a method to savor wine in order to retrieve or to guess all the process of making wine which has been seen above. We judge the wine on five main impressions. These aspects are appearance, smell, flavor in the mouth and aftertaste left when the wine has been swallowed. Every aspect has its fashion and terminology.

First, we begin with the visual aspect. The color of wine can give information about the age and character. For example a young red wine is generally of pink glint, whereas old wine becomes orange or brown.

Second, the smell is another significant sense. The first step is to judge the intensity of its smell. Then, moving the wine into the glass releases more smells from the first feeling. The general impression should be pleasant, otherwise it warns that there is something wrong with that wine. Young wines like smell fresh fruits according to the grape variety like blueberry, strawberry, raspberry for red wines and pineapple, grapefruit, lemon, honey for white wines. Older wines tend to a more complex smell of chocolate, fig, tobacco, venison for the red wines and fruit jam and minerals smells, which are more difficult to determine, for white wines. This complexity is a sign of a fine wine.

Finally, the teacher authorized us to drink it. Gustatory, tactile and olfactory are the tastes we met in the mouth. Gustatory is filed in four categories: sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Tactile sensations include the feeling of temperature. A wine can be very light or viscous. Olfactory is activated because our mouth is connected to the nasal receptors in our nose. These three phases give an impression and a fine wine must balance among these three sensations. Then, we swallow. However a last sense gives the last impression. We call it the aftertaste. We simply count the number of seconds the taste of the wine lasts in our mouth. The longer it is, the greater the wine is. Five seconds characterize a fine wine, but ten seconds distinguish the best wines of the world!

I have not mentioned the different terminology that describes all the senses but the most important of tasting wine is the equilibrium between the smell, the taste and the aftertaste. All these perceptions result from the wine-maker work.

After attending this course, I received a diploma! I felt so unconfident and worried about my inexperience. Now, I had to apply all that knowledge to mold and to improve my taste and experience.

When I came back home, I shared my knowledge with my family. My father was enthusiastic with this idea. Then he registered to attend the same course! It was interesting because we would have to share the same level of information and progress at the same pace. So we sneaked to the supermarket and specialized stores to begin our collection of wines. We read magazines and books to improve our comprehension. Every Sunday, at dinner, we open one of our interesting and/or expensive bottle in a kind of ritual.

First, we choose the bottle that will, at first sight, match with the food. The combination of wine and food can become complex because of the extraordinary variety of each component that will interact with the wine. Some ingredients may destroy the taste of the wine and some powerful wines may annihilate the taste of the food. Generally speaking, red wines match with red meat and white wines with poultry and fish.

Second, we check the temperature of the wine in order to serve it at the right temperature. For example, we serve white wines roughly at 46 degrees, champagne at 51, light red wines at 56 and rich red wines at 62 degrees.

Third, we decant young red and white wines because we believe that the contact with the air will develop its smell. We carry out the decanting either just before serving or one hour before tasting it. It depends of the type of wine.

Next, we taste the drink before the food to prevent the smell of the meal being melted with the wine's flavor. As we have seen above, we reproduce the process of tasting. We pour a little wine in the glass, check its appearance and its smell, put down the glass and talk about it! After sharing our first sensations, we taste it, and finally we give our actual impression. However, it is like a game. During this process, we guess the type of grape used to produce the wine and try to know which method of fermentation and storage were chosen by the wine-maker.

Finally, we eat the meal and check if it matches with the wine. Neither the wine nor the meal must take the advantage. They must be at the same level of taste. In fact, this ritual has improved my knowledge, my experience and shaped my preferences about wines.

Learning wine has taken a long time but has given me a great background. It has not only developed my knowledge on that topic but enlarged my sense. Indeed, my smell and my taste are far more accurate. I can feel and recognize quite well different smells and tastes. Furthermore, I noticed that the more I learn about wine, the less I know, because there are so many exceptions that you can not define any general rules. It makes you more humble, more patient (waiting for ten years before tasting a wine may be considered as a crazy behavior) and more able to appreciate perfection. Because pleasure comes always from a sensation of perfection.