

What Makes a Good Wine Good?

Understanding what's in your glass is
a matter of learning a few simple facts
and tasting, tasting, tasting

BY KAREN MACNEIL



I used to think: Why couldn't wine be more like cocktails? Cocktails had a way of making pleasure effortless. No one worried about the different styles of Bloody Marys before ordering one with brunch. Wine, by comparison, seemed far more cerebral. It had etiquette. It had rules.

It had the ability to make me bite my fingernails.

How was I supposed to know if the wine in my glass was truly "good" or just something I liked? What were people talking about when they said a wine was "complex"? Were vintage charts really meaningful, even though wine experts seemed to disagree about vintages all the time? And if someone gave me bottle of wine as a gift, should I save it and age it, or just drink it?

As I began to learn more about wine, I realized that answering the questions that used to make me worried is actually part of what makes wine drinking intriguing. One of the pleasures of wine is that it engages the mind and challenges us to learn. The first step is to understand a few basic facts and terms; then the most important part of a wine lover's education—drinking—can begin in earnest.

IS WINE GOOD JUST BECAUSE YOU LIKE IT?

One of the most insidious myths in American wine culture is that a wine is good if you like it. Liking a wine has nothing to do with whether it's good.

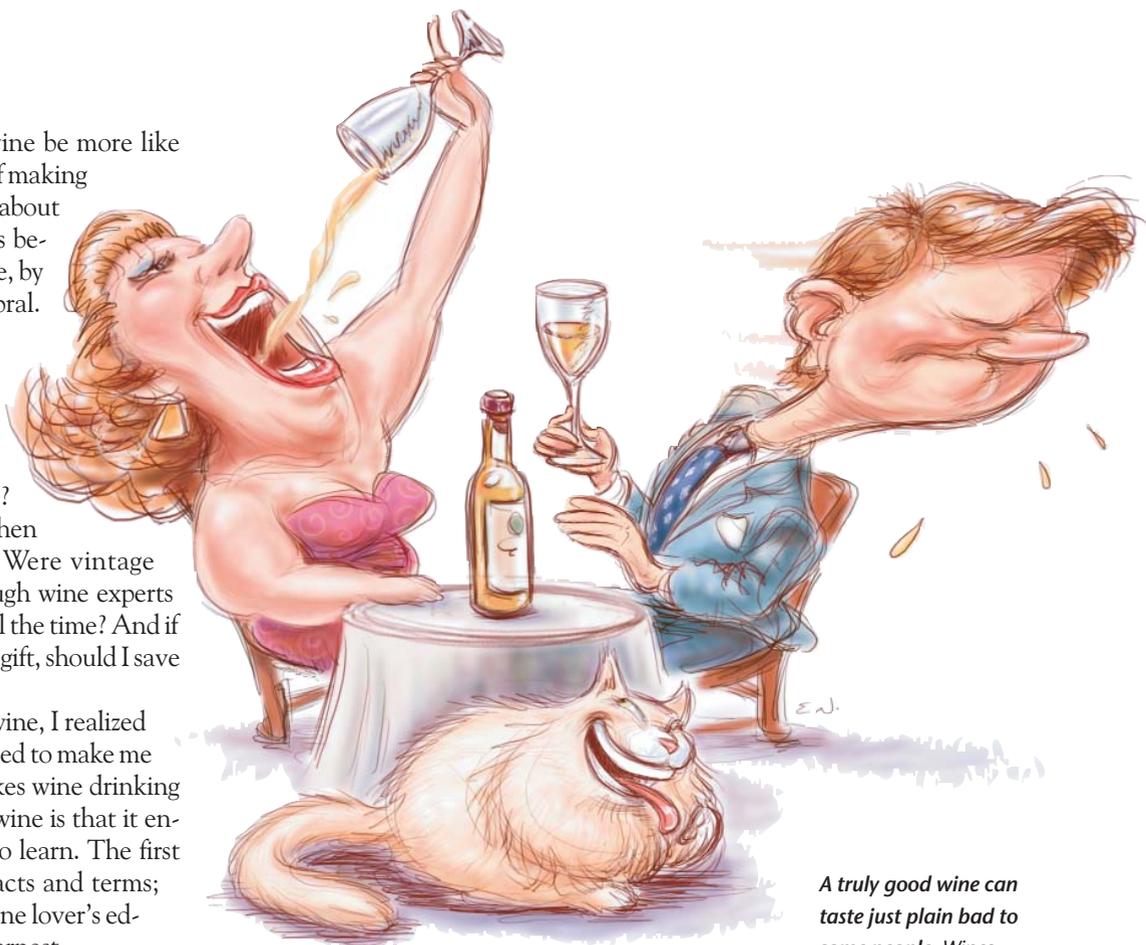
I'm not suggesting that your enjoyment of a wine doesn't matter. Wine is meant for pleasure, and what you like is important. Nonetheless, getting to the point where you're knowledgeable enough to have both a subjective and an objective opinion of a wine is one of the most important stages in developing your understanding of wine. Let's use the example of sea urchin.

Sea urchin is very good indeed. It's creamy, briny, flavorful, refreshing, and intriguing; nevertheless, you may not like it.

Almost anyone is capable of a subjective opinion. Having a valid objective opinion, however, requires experience with a particular wine. The only way to acquire this experience is to expand your sphere of tasting beyond the wines you already know you like. Only by drinking wines that are unfamiliar to you and tasting them in a focused way can you increase what you know about wine. *The best way to learn nothing about wine is to only drink the wines you like.*

WHAT MAKES WINE GREAT?

Or another more helpful question: what should one look for in a wine?



A truly good wine can taste just plain bad to some people. Wines made from Sauvignon Blanc, for example, can have a character that some wine drinkers liken to the scent of a tomcat.

No one expects a Granny Smith apple to taste like a Red Delicious. Similarly, one shouldn't look for Chardonnay-like characteristics in a Sauvignon Blanc or Zinfandel-like qualities in a Pinot Noir. Each grape varietal presents itself in its unique way. This is called "varietal character." Distinct varietal character is a good thing: the more Granny Smith-ish the Granny Smith apple is, the more it can be savored and appreciated.

Not all varietal character has mass appeal, however. For example, some wine drinkers find the green-

olive/wet-straw/fig varietal character of some Sauvignon Blancs nasty stuff. They call it "tomcat."

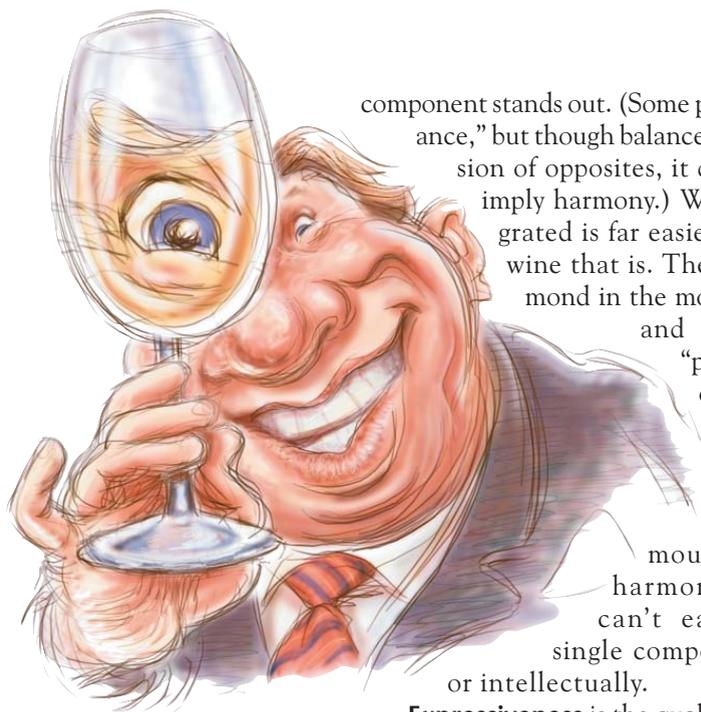
As it turns out, tomcat and other unflattering descriptions are used fondly by wine drinkers (including this one) who *do* like Sauvignon Blanc. There's an obvious analog

gy here with cheese. Is blue cheese awful just because some people can't bear smelly cheese? Should every cheese be like Cheddar just because Cheddar has widespread appeal?

In addition to varietal character, a wine taster looks for four other qualities: integration, expressiveness, complexity, and connectedness.

Integration is a state whereby the components in the wine (acids, tannins, alcohol, etc.) are so impeccably interwoven that no single characteristic or

Learning about wine implies drinking it, which, after all, is not the worst fate.



component stands out. (Some people call this “balance,” but though balance implies a good tension of opposites, it doesn’t necessarily imply harmony.) Wine that isn’t integrated is far easier to describe than wine that is. The first is like a diamond in the mouth. You can taste and talk about the “points” of acidity or oak or tannin, etc. By comparison, an integrated wine presents itself like a marble in the mouth: so round, so harmonious that you can’t easily “grab” any single component, sensorially or intellectually.

Expressiveness is the quality a wine possesses when its aromas and flavors are potent, definite, and clearly projected. While some wines seem feeble, muddled, and diffused, others beam out their character with almost unreal clarity and focus.

Complexity is not a thing but a phenomenon. It’s the force that psychologically pulls you into a wine and compels you to keep returning for another smell and taste because you can never quite resolve your thoughts. Like an integrated wine, a complex wine almost defies you to describe it. Yet just as the pain of a well-exercised, sore muscle feels good, the frustratingly indefinable nature of a complex wine heightens its gratification.

Connectedness is the sense you derive from a wine’s aroma and flavor that it couldn’t have come from just anywhere, but rather that the wine is the

embodiment of a single piece of earth. This bond between a wine and the plot of land it was born in is what gives a wine true personality. Wine without a sense of the ground from which it came may be of good quality but, like a Ramada Inn in Barcelona, there’s a limit to how deep one’s aesthetic appreciation of it can be.

A wine that combines all four qualities—integration, expressiveness, complexity, and connectedness—is extremely special.

DO VINTAGES REALLY MATTER?

The first tip-off that there’s something fishy in the vintage department is this: for all the years gushingly deemed by the wine press to be a “vintage of the century,” more than half are later pronounced not quite as good as originally thought.

Well, of course! Wine changes. It can never be pinned down and categorized just once. No matter what a wine tastes like now, it most certainly will taste different two years from now. What’s the point of memorizing the details when the details change? But even this reasoning doesn’t get to the heart of the matter, which is that vintages are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. They’re just different.

For example, a year without huge amounts of sun may produce wines that are delicate and light. Is there anything wrong with those qualities? Very hot, sunny years produce the opposite—wines that are thick, big, and jammy. Are these qualities good or bad? I know at least as many people who dislike big, thick wines (“too overwrought,” they say) as I do people who dislike light, delicate wines (“too insubstantial,” they say). And vice versa.

I’m not saying vintages are meaningless. They’re not. Knowing the details of a vintage can help you

Learning about wine is not a purely intellectual pursuit.

Tasting—both wines you like and those you don’t—will teach you lessons you can remember.

Don’t give in to vintage-chart tyranny.

While weather can be a clue to what a wine will taste like, it can’t indicate whether the wine is good or bad.



Decoding winespeak

Describing a wine's flavor is about creativity, not actuality. Wines can taste "nervy," "swarthy," "like chocolate-dipped cherries," or anything else you can imagine. There are certain terms, however, that are either scientifically based or have been collectively agreed upon by generations of wine experts. They include:

◆ **Acid**—Responsible for the zesty, refreshing qualities of some wines, acid also helps wine to age. Wines with a lot of acid relative to alcohol are tart and vibrant in the mouth. Wines

with little acid but high alcohol are flat and blowzy.

◆ **Aftertaste or finish**—The flavor that lingers after a wine has been swallowed. The best wines have a long aftertaste reminiscent of the flavor of the wine itself. Poor wines may have almost no aftertaste (thankfully) or else a strange, discordant aftertaste.

◆ **Astringent**—A negative term for a wine that is harsh and drying, causing the mouth to pucker.

◆ **Barrel-fermented**—Description of a wine that has fermented in small oak barrels as opposed to large casks, stainless-steel tanks, or cement vats. Barrel fermentation imparts a rich, sometimes buttery flavor and a creamy texture to wine, though these char-

acteristics may be acquired at the expense of the wine's fruit.

◆ **Body**—The perceived weight of wine in the mouth. The higher the alcohol, the more full-bodied the wine. As a reference, light-bodied wines feel like skim milk, medium-bodied like whole milk, and full-bodied like half-and-half.

◆ **Finesse**—A term for elegant, integrated wines. It implies a level of polish and sophistication.

◆ **Oaky**—A term for the toasty, woody, and vanilla smells and flavors acquired by wines that are aged in oak barrels. The newer the oak barrel, the greater potential for the wine to have a pronounced oaky flavor.

◆ **Structure**—Like the bones of a body or the frame of a

house, structure is what gives a wine form. Wines can either have small structures, or very dominant large structures, or anything in between. Generally speaking, wines low in tannin tend to have small structure, and those with more tannin have a larger structure.

◆ **Tannin**—A compound derived from the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes and from barrels. Tannin gives certain red wines their firm structure, as well as their potential for long aging. Highly tannic wines have a tight, puckery quality when young that usually melts away after time. White wines, which aren't fermented with their skins, have far less tannin than reds.

understand one of the puzzle pieces that make a wine taste the way it does. But still, a wine isn't good or bad based on its vintage.

WHEN IS A WINE READY TO DRINK?

The question of readiness is a valid, if frustrating, one. Drinking a wine when its most interesting flavors are fully expressed is clearly preferable to drinking a wine that's too young to have anything much to say. Saddest of all is to open a bottle you've patiently saved, only to find the wine has wizened and lost its flavor in its old age.

I'm speaking primarily of red wines. Only they can go from being nearly undrinkable to charming. Red wines have tannin, which acts as a preservative, giving them a potentially long life. These tannins mellow over time and add to the character of the wine. White wines have very little tannin; correspondingly, they have a shorter life and a narrower window of drinkability. Most white wines are ready to drink when you buy them.

There is no one "magic moment" when a wine spontaneously metamorphoses into a perfectly actualized drink. Most red wines evolve and soften progressively. They start out straitjacketed by tannic, tight, raw-berry fruit and, bit by bit, slowly become softer and broader. Where a wine is along this spectrum at any time is a matter of conjecture.

This shouldn't be disillusioning, however. In fact, it should be just the opposite. Never truly knowing what to expect is part of the attraction; it's why wine appeals to the intellect in a way that, say, vodka does not.

I know. You *still* want a specific idea of when a wine might be ready. As a bold-stroke guiding principle:

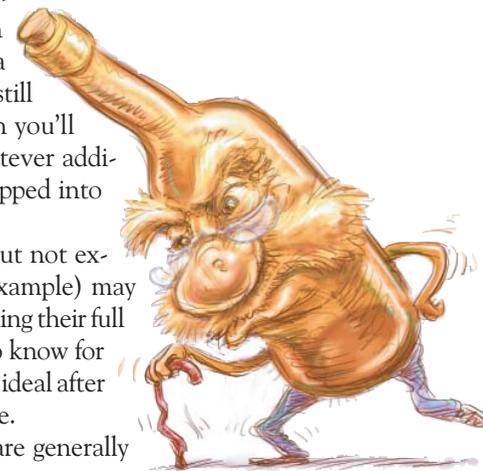
For firm, structured wines (like expensive Cabernet Sauvignons), wait as long as you can bear to. This sort of wine may have decades of staying power. Tuck it away someplace cool and plan to drink it in ten years. If you want a sneak peek, drink it in five years: you'll still have a good experience (even though you'll have knowingly decided to forego whatever additional nuances the wine might have slipped into given more time).

Reds that are better than average but not extremely pricey (many Zinfandels, for example) may need three to five years or so before reaching their full expression. But again, there's no way to know for sure and, in any case, a wine that may be ideal after five years can still be delicious after three.

Moderately priced "everyday" reds are generally ready to drink when they're released.

The inexact nature of "readiness" is a good reminder of the pointlessness of getting uptight about wine and, at the same time, the perfect excuse to buy several bottles and have fun opening them whenever you like. An intriguing wine, after all, is like an intriguing person you wouldn't mind having dinner with at several different stages of life.

Karen MacNeil, a wine and food writer, teacher, and consultant based in Sausalito, California, is the author of the forthcoming book, *The Wine Primer* (Workman Books). She teaches at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley. ◆



Old doesn't always mean good. A dust-crusted bottle from the back of the cellar may hold ambrosia, but many wines, especially moderate to inexpensive ones, are best drunk young.