

# About glasses again

by Michael Tabone

**T**HIS IS NOT the first time that I have written about how important the shape and style of the drinking glass is in the full enjoyment of wine, but a couple of recent incidents prompted me to delve into the subject again.

A couple of weeks ago I was invited to a wedding at a leading hotel. I had been asked to help with the choice of food and wine by the bride's father, for which I suggested six different wines and the setting of a special wine bar.

The wines were very diplomatically chosen covering 'real' Maltese, French, Italian, Spanish and Australian wines from four different importers. Besides the fact that the waiters behind the wine bar at the wedding did not bother to learn about the wines on offer and that we had to point to the bottles saying "can I have a glass of this or that", the glasses that this five-star hotel made available were the totally useless 'Paris goblets'.

You know the sort of glass you get at 'rabbit' restaurants. I must admit I expected better from a hotel, which suggested not including *timpana* among the finger foods, since this would bring the class of the wedding down, while for some reason Chicken Kiev was OK!

Another incident happened at Meze some time back. While the concept of sharing Med food is great and Pippa Toledo's design is pleasing and comfortable, the wine glasses are completely and utterly useless. There is no doubt that they fit in with the décor, with their funnel shape and violet spots or lines, but a wine glass's function is not to look pretty but to make the wine taste good.

I suppose, there are ways of combining the two, but definitely not at the expense of the wine's characteristics. Admittedly, when I complained and suggested that they should offer 'real' wine glasses for those who care about the wine they drink, the suggestion was taken up and I believe that now they keep a few behind the bar.

But - you might be thinking - what is all this fuss about? Let me try to explain.

Together with temperature, the glass that you drink wine from could completely alter the amount of enjoyment you get from a particular wine. The way the wine smells and tastes completely depends on the glass you drink it from, and not only in intensity but also in the general make-up and character of either the grape variety or the region that that wine is made from. It is a bit like the difference between watching films like *The Matrix*, *Ben-Hur* or *Titanic* on TV or at the cinema.

The most serious research into the subject of wine glasses was and is made by an Austrian crystal company called Riedel Crystal whose European manager, Yair Haidu, recently visited Malta. This company has spent the last 30 years researching and developing glass shapes to suit the many different wine styles and types.

The fundamental theory is that different wines taste differently if drunk from different-shaped glasses. The theory is based on scientific research as well as fieldwork with international and renowned wine producers and tasters.

At the beginning many were sceptical about the whole thing but when in 1989 the famous Californian winemaker, Robert Mondavi, stated that Riedel glasses make his wine taste better, the wine world embraced Riedel's philosophy. Over the years about 30 different shapes have been identified in various crystal and glass quality ranging from the mouth-blown Somellier range to a restaurant range at about 10 per cent of the Somellier price.

Basically, the principle is based on



two fundamental facts. The first, and one that is easy to understand, is that different sizes and shapes of glasses concentrate or dissolve the intensity of smells and flavours as well as highlight, or not, different wine components such as acidity, oak, fruits and alcohol, etc.

As different grape varieties, or regions produce wines with different component balances, the glass you use can totally unbalance the wine. For example, if you drink a naturally high acid wine, like Sauvignon Blanc from a round glass with a wide opening you will unbalance the wine by increasing the detectability of the acids which would make the naturally high acid wine too tart and sharp.

Another example is that if you smell a wine from a glass which is funnel-shaped; the flavours would appear much less concentrated, as the aromas/bouquet are lost in the air.

The other is that our tasting papillae, which are found on the tongue, can detect the four basic flavours in different areas (sweetness at the tip, bitterness at the back, sourness on the sides and saltiness further in and at the centre).

Therefore, where the wine is delivered first will give the impression of that particular flavour. Feel is also affected especially when it comes to tannins, which can be felt around the gums but, especially, in the front of the mouth. Cabernet Sauvignon or other tannic wines will taste terribly over-tannic from small narrow opened tulip shapes rather than from bigger and slightly wider tulip shapes.

**T**o better understand what I am telling you, you can do a small experiment at home. Next time you open a bottle of wine try it from a number of different glasses, you should immediately notice how not only does the wine smell, but also taste, differently.

Other factors such as the thickness and type of glass or crystal used will also have an effect on the full enjoyment of wines.

Of course, if you take the subject to its extremes you will need 100 different glasses in as many sizes, but in general the four basic shapes (see above) should be able to cover most wine styles and types. Riedel understand this problem and recommend that one starts with the glass that suits one's own favourite wine or the wine one drinks most of.

It is a bit more complicated in the restaurant and catering trade since wine lists will be varied, with wines of all styles and origins. An establishment that takes its wines very seriously will have to consider the four basic shapes and possibly more.

However, the minimum that we wine lovers expect from places where wine is consumed is a glass that looks like the one described below as the Zinfandel. This type of glass is probably the one with the most universal advantages. Although it will not show spicy, high alcohol, big wines at their best, it is a glass that can be used for most types of wine, both red and white.

Some restaurants in Malta have taken the aspect of wine very seriously. Mange Tout is now totally

'Riedeled'. The four basic shapes are available and set up according to the wine you order. Restaurants such as New China House and Ta' Frenč in Gozo also have the basic shapes but are used on specific wines. I understand that others such as Nostalgia in St Paul's Bay and Trabixu in Valletta will soon be offering a choice of shapes.

Of course, although there is no doubt that Riedel glasses are the best, other glass makers have suitable glasses and places such as Zest, The Arches, both Tmuns in Gozo and many more offer relatively good glasses.

A number of places, especially in Gozo, are using different shapes of rather heavy, big glasses, which although an improvement on the many others on offer, are not exactly

ideal, due to the weight and thickness of the glass.

I am also a bit concerned that many establishments are using these glasses as showpieces without understanding what it is all about. I have seen a place where more than one shape is available, but the glasses where not being adapted to the wines ordered. For example, glasses shaped for Chardonnay were being given to tables drinking Bordeaux reds, etc.

**F**inally, you are probably wondering, what about occasion? Surely we are not expected to use our best crystal at a barbecue by the sea in summer! No, of course not. We must always keep in mind that it is the wine that gives us pleasure and not the glass. We must also never

forget that wine is all about occasion, celebration and conviviality and there are very, very few glasses that will make me want to drink anything else but a glass of wine.

By the way, if you are serving sherry or port this festive season, please do not serve it in those thimble glasses you have hidden away in some cupboard waiting for every December 25, or a wedding in the family. Sherry and, to a certain extent most ports, taste so much better in tulip-shaped glasses that are filled to a maximum of half.

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If you would like to comment or know of a place where the attention to wine deserves mention please let me know by e-mailing me at [mike@michaeltabone.com](mailto:mike@michaeltabone.com)

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**QuickSoup**