

## Wines

## Intricate language, tiny nuances



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Jancis Robinson, who wrote the foreword, suggests: "The book could represent the most fun one can have with wine without drinking a single drop!"

Without wanting to popularise the idea, I agree with her and encourage you to read it.

It is this book that lays the foundations for my contribution today regarding the subjective observations on wine and how these influence others.

Having some experience at listening to comments and descriptions on a vast range of wines from a broad spectrum of wine enthusiasts, I am very aware that describing a wine is not as easy as one thinks and that putting into words one's taste and smell sensations is in itself probably more subjective than the appreciation of wine itself.

Even when tasting great wines we are often short of words as very often it is little nuances that make wine great.

The late Johnny Hugel used to say that a nod or a smile is how best describes a truly great wine. He once commented: "You can write a book describing a Beaujolais but only a few words for a great Alsace."

At beginners' level, extra enthusiasm frequently leads to highly descriptive commentary, which many times is inspired by tasting notes on wine lists or on back labels which are often highly imaginary, repetitive or, at worst, misleading.

Let me give you an example of a description of a young Barolo I once heard on BBC: "Bright, clear colour of rubies and sapphires, sparkling with the vitality of youth. Full of cherries and plums, grass and tar, deep penetrating aroma of earth, pepper, turmeric, parsley, mint and sage. Big, huge body and mouth coating with an attack of chicken stuffed with sage and almonds ending with a long-lasting flavour of stewed hare mixed with prunes, porcini and fried polenta."

At a recent talk I gave to newcomers, I emphasised the fact that all wines or, shall we say, 99.9 per cent of them, are solely made from grapes of a very specific family called *vitis vinifera*, when a bewildered participant remarked that plums and green peppers are not grapes. Neither are pepper, banana and spices.

Intrigued, I asked why she was asking. The reply was that she assumed that these fruits or spices are added to wine, as that is what she reads on tasting notes on wine lists and back labels or when she attends wine talks.

On a different occasion, while visiting a Maltese vineyard, I noticed bananas floating in the fermentation vat. Asking why, the proprietor replied that he likes the taste of Beaujolais, which is often described as having a banana flavour.

So let's be clear! While there are some yeasts or enzymes that are added to some wines to enhance certain flavours, it is forbidden to a legally defined wine to be made from other fruits other than wine grapes. However, I can understand that it is easy to assume that other fruits or flavours were added to support the descriptive narrative on some labels.

## Objective or subjective?

If there is one aspect of wine which should fall under the objective, surely it must be the art of writing a tasting note. That is to say that unless the ability of the writer is weak, tasters should agree on the content of the various components which make up the composition of a particular wine, such as colour intensity, fruit character, levels of tannin, depth, length, etc.

But how useful are these types of notes when one thinks that, in essence, tasting notes are written for the benefit of the wine consumers or readers who may not have the same taste vocabulary as the writer? Here is an example.

Look up the tasting note of a Sancerre at the next opportunity and undoubtedly you will find descriptions such as 'gooseberries', 'cut grass', 'herbacious', 'citrusy', etc.

So I ask: how many people have actually tasted a gooseberry? Or how many, at least in Malta, know the smell of cut grass?

Even more. If I take some gooseberries, squeeze some lemon juice, add some herbs and go and smell them on the Gżira roundabout after the grass has just



been mowed, will the smell remind me of a Sancerre? I doubt it.

Do we really like a certain wine because of its similarity to a fruit of sorts or a particular flavour? I don't think that in reality people like certain young Merlot-based wines because they have a faint similarity to plums. I don't think I would be exaggerating if I said that indeed, for any liquid to taste of plums, it would have to be plum juice. Furthermore, knowing that wine is a beverage in an ever-changing state, how can, for example, a physical tasting note on the back label of an average quality wine from the 2000 vintage still apply in 2015?

**"Different wine writers use different techniques which attract different types of wine lovers"**

So how best can we communicate the language of wine?

Experienced tasters often use the most simple forms of human expression to express their opinions, especially regarding great wine: a sigh or a twitch of the face, a hand movement or a look that says it all.

But, of course, wine writers have to communicate using the media. That is their job. So words or images have to be found to express, as faithfully as possible, their experiences.

Different wine writers use different techniques which attract different types of wine lovers. Some even delve into the rather mind-numbing system of numbered scores or stars, which absolutely mean nothing unless put in some sort of context, but which many speculative wine consumers pay unquestionable allegiance to.

However, I rather think that the kind of tasting note or general writing a wine writer publishes reflects their own personality, which is equally reflected by the wine lover. It is both's connection with wine in

general, with a specific wine and possibly, more importantly, the correlation between writer and reader that will facilitate successful communication.

Let me illustrate two very different texts describing the same wine I recently tasted: "Tawny fading at the rim, with an intense core. The nose is earthy with tobacco and mineral hints. Subtle at the beginning but intensifying with time in the glass. Nose keeps changing and evolving, introducing preserved red fruits which live up as the oxygen makes the wine more volatile. On the mouth, the wine is impressably fresh with a smooth texture. Same flavours as on the nose but with gamey and smoky undertones. Tannins are ripe and non-obtrusive, which are in harmony with the alcohol and acidity. Mouth filling with a very long and persistent finish."

Although that is a well-defined and well-constructed, objective tasting note, it describes the physical aspects of the wine and does not say much about its identity and does nothing to interpret or express my own subconscious connection with it. My judgement!

OK, maybe an experienced taster/drinker would realise that I am talking about an oldish wine because of the colour and the earthy flavours. Maybe one can conclude that it is a complex wine because of all the different components... but without interpretation the reader cannot know if I like, love or am crazy about this wine.

So, here is a shorter but equally informative tasting note about the same wine, Ch Grand Corbin Despagne 1955 - Saint-Emilion Grand Cru Classe, which I tasted recently.

"Holding its 60 years beautifully, this is an intellectual wine. A wine to meditate on. A wine with a huge identity card. Very complex. Fine. Deep-reaching and soul-comforting. Magical."

If you are a wine lover and find all of this very confusing, just ignore the whole thing and continue to enjoy wine in any way you deem best. That is what wine is all about.

But if you are intrigued by these arguments, *Questions of taste - The Philosophy of Wine* explores these ideas into much more detail.

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