

Dear Wine Diary

Creating Your Own Wine Tasting Notes

BY LINDA BARRETT

When it comes to describing wine, we all know enough to be dangerous. Yet, even the most knowledgeable among us are flummoxed by some of the terminology and methods used to describe wine. Here, we'll help you understand how wines are described and show you how you can create your own tasting notes or tasting journal.

Wine terminology

Visit any winery and you will be handed the wine list, with its corresponding descriptions. Here are a few common terms that may help you understand how a wine receives its description.

Acidity Wines with high acidity are described as "tart" as opposed to "round." Reds generally have a lighter color, and whites can have characteristics similar to citrus juice.

Austere Considered an "unfriendly" wine, austere generally means the wine has very high acidity and very little fruit flavors.

Big A big wine brings a large flavor involving all sections of your mouth and tongue. It can also mean that it has big tannins.

Bright Bright wines make your mouth water due to their higher acidity.

Buttery Buttery wine is aged in oak and is rich and flat, or less acidic, with a creamy texture that resonates on the middle of the tongue like oil or butter, with a smooth finish.

Cigar These wines hint at sweetness and cedar, and offer a smoky taste. This is a wine to sit and sip.

Complex In a complex wine, the flavor changes from the time you sip it to the time you swallow.

Crisp Crisp wine is simple and generally is a white. It's great for a hot summer day.

Earthy This term describes a sometimes-unpleasant green finish on a wine.

Elegant An elegant vintage has higher acidity and more green characteristics, and is better once it has aged a bit. It is often described as elegant when it is not bold, fruity or big.

Oaked Fermenting in oak gives white wine a butter, vanilla or coconut overtone, while in red wines it adds flavors similar to vanilla, baking spices or dill.

TASTING NOTES:
Blenheim Vineyards Cabernet Franc
"This Virginia red wine is aged 9 months in American and Hungarian oak barrels. Notes of smoke, dried herbs, eucalyptus, cedar and cracked pepper make this an intriguing example of Virginia Cabernet Franc. This wine is not masked by oak, creating a juicy expression of this varietal."

Opulent Opulent describes a wine that is smooth, bold and rich.

Structured A structured wine can be difficult to drink due to its high tannin levels. Age this wine and it should mellow out.

Toasty These wines refer to those aged in Medium Plus Toasted Oak barrels, offering a burnt caramel finish.

Unoaked An unoaked white wine is zesty, with lemony flavors, while a red is likely to be tart. Unoaked refers to the lack of vanilla, butter, cream or baking spices flavors.

Velvety Like chocolate, velvety wines are smooth, silky and lush.

Writing your own tasting notes

With any wine tasting, it's fun to taste and make comments. Take it to the next level by creating your own tasting journal with these helpful steps.

1. Appearance

Describe the color you see in the wine, and note its shade intensity using descriptive words for the red, purple or yellow tones, such as deep, medium, golden, greenish, opaque or pale.

2. Aromas

Aromas are sometimes referred to as the “nose” or “bouquet.” Take a first sniff and jot down the aromas that come to mind first. First impressions can include “fruity” or “floral.” Then swirl your glass and take a second sniff to look for more descriptors such as “fruit,” “buttery” or “vanilla,” or even “barnyard,” “musty” or “earthy.” List the primary aroma first.

3. Flavors

Take a healthy taste and swirl the wine around in your mouth several seconds before swallowing. Describe the wine's taste as it hits your tongue and note whether you perceive it as sweet, bitter, sour or salty, and note similarities to foods.

Primary: Primary tastes come from the type of grape and its terroir, and might be described as tobacco, black pepper or plum, for example. When describing a wine for your own tasting notes, list the primary taste first, with others to follow.

Secondary: Developed in the winemaking process, secondary flavors can include slightly more subtle notes such as fresh butter, baked bread, fruity, chocolate, nutty or caramel.

Tertiary: Tertiary flavors develop through aging and often the oak, and include more identifiable flavors such as vanilla, clove, coconut, smoke, or almond.

4. Acidity, Tannins and Body

Acidity: Acidity refers to the tartness or how puckering a wine is. With a high acidity, the wine may offer characteristics similar to a lemon or lime. With low acidity, it may be similar to watermelon.

Tannins: Texture is the key. Note whether the wine has a “grip,” or a feeling that it sticks to your teeth.

Body: Notice how the wine feels in your mouth—its silky, rough, heavy or thick feel. The fuller it feels, the more body it has.

5. Finishes

The finish occurs the moment after the wine's flavor dissipates, and leaves a specific aftertaste such as earthy, woody or sweet. While you can make a pleasant wine from inferior grapes, you cannot fake a long finish. Only the best grapes and the best winemaking processes result in a beautiful finish. (Note: On a wine grading scale, the finish is what often gives wine its highest ratings.)

Sweet Finish: The most popular finish, the sweet finish offers a note of sweetness, even if the wine itself is dry. In reds, the note could be reminiscent of sweet blackberry or sweet tobacco.

Tart but Tingly Finish: With a more bitter or tart finish, with some possible green notes, a quality wine's acid will tingle and persist, giving it a long finish.

Fresh Finish: This finish indicates a number of secondary flavors on the finish, and may refer to freshly-made wine.

Keeping a wine tasting journal will help you record wines you loved, and perhaps some you didn't. In either case, the most enjoyment comes when you can recognize the complexities and flavors each individual wine can offer. ❖

TASTING NOTES:

Chrysalis Vineyards Viognier

“The wine has a heady perfume; a mélange consisting of cantaloupe, peaches, nectarines, orange blossoms and honeysuckle. On the palate, the wine is bold with sweet citrus and apple notes follow by hints of pineapple and Limoncello, with an underlying minerality. Fermentation in neutral oak barrels round out the wine and add a creamy texture.”

Total Wine & More provides two wine tasting records—one each for reds and whites—you can download and use for your own tastings.

Download them:

www.totalwine.com/extra/tasting-sheets/tasting_sheet_white.pdf

and

www.totalwine.com/extra/tasting-sheets/tasting_sheet_red.pdf

AUTHOR: Linda Barrett is Wine Editor for Viva Tysons and owner of the corporate writing firm All the Buzz, www.allthebuzz.net.