



Wine Guide

Beginning Wine Tasting

If you're new to the world of wine, your first tasting can be intimidating. You don't expect to put on a pair of skis and swoosh down a black diamond trail on your first outing. Similarly, don't expect to be a seasoned wine pro at your first tasting.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind, but remember to focus on enjoying yourself and the wine and you'll do just fine.

THE TASTING PROCESS

Get a good look. Swirl the wine gently in the glass. Does it wash quickly over the glass or appear to take its time traveling back down the side of the glass? Is there sediment in the glass? How deep is the color? How clear is it? Notice how this correlates to taste later.

Smell the wine. According to Live Science, 80 percent of our sense of taste comes via our sense of smell. Wine drinkers know this very well, making it crucial to take a good whiff from your glass before the wine touches your mouth. How a wine is made and stored all affect its "nose" or "bouquet." Take note of what you smell. Is it fruit, herb, earth? If you notice a vinegar smell, the wine might have gone bad. A musty scent could alert you to the presence of mold or dust. A strong smell of cork could also mean trouble. Assuming a pleasant smell, proceed to tasting.

Taste the wine. When tasting a wine, note how it feels and tastes. Swirl it around in your mouth. Is it full-bodied or light? Does it feel "dry" or



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“astringent,” or perhaps sweet? After noting the tastes and considering how it compares to your visual and smell observations, spit out the wine (if you plan to taste several wines) or swallow it.

HONING YOUR TASTING STYLE

Your tasting skills will evolve over time. If you plan to make a hobby of it, you will notice during future tastings that your palate will evolve. As this hap-

pens, you might start to prefer wines that are more “dry” than sweet. You will become more adept at picking out particular characteristics in wines. You also will start to notice what you like in a wine. Do you pre-

fer an oaky Cabernet? A fruity Zinfandel? A rich pinot noir? A fruity rose? There's only one way to find out. Practice makes perfect — or at least in this instance, practice can be a whole lot of fun.

Reading a Wine Label

Wine labels are as varied as the countries from which they hail, but they all contain some basic information. Here's a rundown on the information you should find on a wine label at a minimum.

VARIETY

Many labels clearly state the varietal of grapes used in the wine (Zinfandel, syrah, pinot noir, etc.). On wines that are made using a blend of grapes, the label may or may not list each varietal and the percentage of each one used.

REGION

The region where the grapes used to make a wine were grown is almost always featured on the label. A wine with a label listing a region that is more broadly defined is often a value wine, while wines from more specific areas, or even vineyards, tend to be higher-end, such as "California" vs. "Santa Rita Hills," according to WineFolly.com. Sometimes wines are grouped by region in stores, and you might find the specific region on the label convenient for narrowing down your search.

PRODUCER OR BRAND NAME

Some wines feature the



name of the producer prominently; others display a brand name more prominently. This is a branding decision by the winemaker.

VINTAGE

Wine labels often feature the "vintage," or year the grapes used to make the wine were harvested, however this is not always the case. Non-vintage, or NV, wines — which often are bubbly or

fortified wines — feature combinations of vintages. NV wines are sometimes thought to be of lower quality, but you'll have to judge for yourself. Combining various vintages allows winemakers to mitigate the effects of bad growing conditions during a particular year and present a consistent wine over time.

ALCOHOL CONTENT

The alcohol content in a

wine is often listed as ABV, or alcohol by volume. Federal law requires wines with an alcohol content above 14 percent to list ABV. Below that threshold, winemakers may choose not to list the alcohol content and may call it a "table wine" or "light wine." Tolerance of 1 percent to 1.5 percent is allowed. The alcohol content is used to calculate the class into which the wine falls for the purposes of

federal excise tax.

While the tasting notes provided by the winemaker could sway you, remember that this copy is pure marketing. It's more useful to know the above basics of a wine label to make an informed decision. Of course, it never hurts to check out objective tasting notes, reviews and ratings from a source you trust to find the perfect bottle.

The Role of a Sommelier

You might have seen them in fine restaurants, expertly opening a bottle of wine or recommending just the right vintage. The sommelier is a professional in the restaurant industry with specialized knowledge about beverages — particularly wine. The master sommelier is a rare breed, an expert whose wine knowledge is top-notch.

A sommelier focuses both on knowledge and service. He can answer questions such as, “What’s your favorite bottle in this price range?” or “I recently tried _____. Can you recommend something similar?” or even, “Is this wine a good value?” Wine enthusiasts are often happy to have someone who shares their passion with whom to discuss trends and tastes while they dine.

TIPPING A SOMMELIER

A sommelier aims to enhance your experience at a restaurant, and if he makes an impression, tipping could be in order. Sommeliers often get a cut of the overall tips collected by servers, but if your sommelier went the extra mile, you can do the same and offer an extra tip for her. Wine Spectator’s Dr. Vinny even suggests sharing a glass from your bottle or letting her know you’re leaving some behind for her to try.

CERTIFICATION

The term master sommelier is often used generally to refer to a professional who has reached a level of distinction in the field. The Court of Master Sommeliers and the Wine and Spirit Education Trust are the major certifying bodies. The Court of Master Sommeliers reports that just 236 people worldwide have



earned its Master Sommelier distinction.

The process includes study and rigorous testing, including exams in the areas of theory and service and a detailed blind tasting.

Forbes Magazine wonders aloud if it is “the world’s toughest test.” It is not uncommon for people to make multiple attempts

before becoming certified.

The plethora of knowledge required includes not only details about growing regions, grape varieties and the wine-making process but even the minutiae of which years were better for wine production in certain regions, as well as information about spirits, distilling methods and food pairings.

THE CAREER

If you’ve got a passion for wine, you could make a career of it. According to the Court of Master Sommeliers, salaries range from \$28,000 for beginners to \$160,000 for master sommeliers. The job might include tasks such as marketing and education. Sommeliers often create a restaurant’s wine list and manage its stock and

even arrange wine-tasting dinners. Some sommeliers travel as part of their jobs to expand their knowledge.

Many sommeliers are self-taught, but certifying bodies offer courses around the world. If jetting off to Paris for an intensive wine-drinking and learning experience sounds like fun, you might make a great sommelier.

The Role of Tannins

Tannins in wine are polyphenols — naturally occurring chemical compounds that contribute greatly to the taste, color and texture of wine. Most notably, tannins contribute to the “dry” or astringent feeling of wine in the mouth.

Tannins are found in many other plants. They are used in a variety of processes, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, including tanning leather, dyeing fabric, making ink, and in medical applications.

In the winemaking process, tannins are added or removed to help control characteristics of the wine. Tannins bind easily to proteins, including saliva, producing the “dry” effect in the mouth. In fact, according to the National Institutes of Health, the astringency of tannins might explain why many people prefer drinks such as wine or coffee after a meal, with the tannins making it easier to clear food from the mouth.

RED VS. WHITE

Most tannins in wine are called flavonoids and come from the stem, seeds and skins of grapes. Red wines tend to have higher tannin content than white wines because the grapes spend more time in contact with their skins, seed and stems before fermentation during the winemaking process. Tannins also can be introduced to wines through the use of aging in oak barrels. Some varieties of wine grapes naturally have higher levels of tannins. If the tannins in a wine are too harsh, try softening them by decanting.

AGING

Tannins contribute to the ability of a wine to age over time. This is because tannins are antioxidants that help protect the wine. This is why red wines are commonly chosen for long-term aging.

Wine aged in new oak barrels will

likely be imparted with more tannins than those aged in older barrels, according to the Chicago Tribune. Eventually, the oak barrels stop imparting their tannins to wine. The Tribune also reports that even the grain of the wood in an oak barrel can affect the amount and qualities of its

tannin content.

HEALTH EFFECTS

Some people get headaches after drinking red wines. This might be attributable to tannins, though more research is needed. If you notice the same effects when you consume other

foods containing tannins, such as dark chocolate, strong black tea and cinnamon, you might be able to chalk those headaches up to tannins. If you still want to enjoy wine, choose white or rose wines. Pinot noir is also a lower-tannin choice for those who crave a red wine.



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Organic Wine Basics

Many Americans are making efforts to eat organic foods — sales of organic food and goods reached \$47 billion in 2016 according to the Organic Trade Association — and wine drinkers are no different.

In 2011, the Association reported that organic beverages made up about 12 percent of total organic food sales growth.

The United States Department of Agriculture regulates organic wine in the same way it does other organic foods, to ensure that it is made without prohibited substances or genetic engineering.

ORGANIC GRAPES VS. ORGANIC WINE

According to the USDA, true organic wine undergoes the same rigorous requirements of USDA organic certification as other products throughout its lifecycle, including during the growing of the grapes and the wine-making process.

“This includes making sure grapes are grown without synthetic fertilizers and in a manner that protects the environment and preserves the soil,” according to the USDA.

“Other agricultural ingredients that go into the wine, such as yeast, also have to be certified organic.” Any non-agricultural ingredients, such as salt and water, must be listed on the USDA-approved list of allowed sub-

stances and can't exceed 5 percent of the total product. Added sulfites, which are often used to stop the fermentation process or preserve flavor, are prohibited in organic wine.

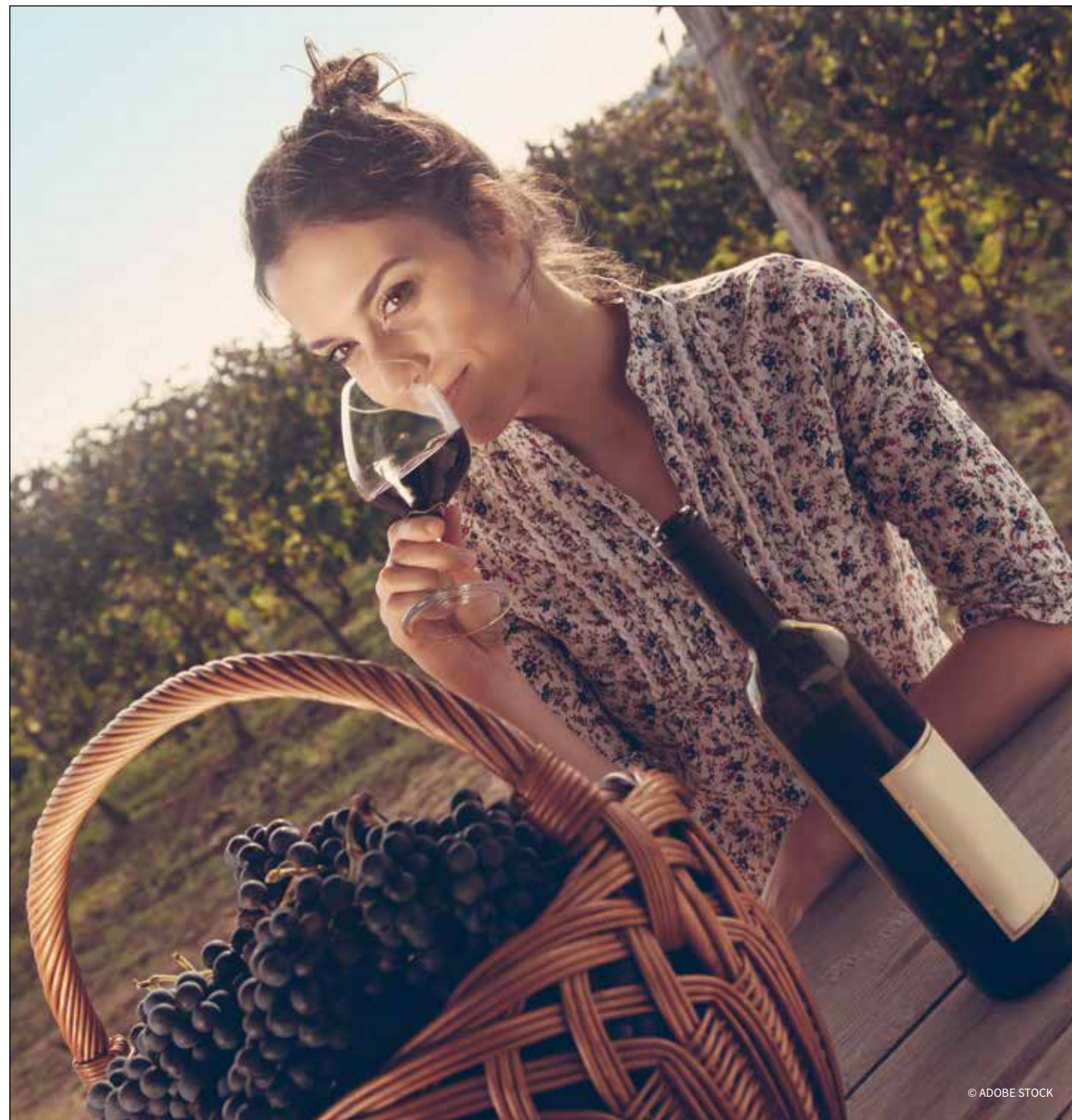
When wine bears a label saying it is “made with organic grapes,” it has been through a different certification process. The grapes and other ingredients still must be 100 percent organic or on the “allowed substances,” list, but sulfites may be added up to 100 parts per million.

ORGANIC ACROSS THE GLOBE

Wine from any region of the world may be sold as “organic wine” in the United States, so long as it meets the USDA's requirements. Organic wine produced in the U.S. can be exported to Canada, the European Union, Japan and Taiwan via trade partnerships.

CERTIFYING AGENTS

Certifying agents who assess winemakers' grape growing and production processes and compliance with USDA regulations are accredited by the USDA's National Organic Program. Winemakers also can gain



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certification for an “organic wine” label by showing proof that all their ingredients are certified.

THE SULFITES ISSUE

Some people are very sensitive to sulfites, especially peo-

ple with asthma. For those people, exposure can cause hay fever, hives and wheezing. For this reason, the level of sulfites present in organic wines is regulated strictly by labeling. Wine with a label reading “organic wine” may

contain only naturally occurring sulfites at a level of less than 10 parts per million. Wine “made with organic grapes” may have sulfites present up to 100 ppm, and the added sulfites must be disclosed on the label.



Red Wine and Heart Health

We've all heard about the purported benefits of red wine for our health. While the potential benefits of red wine and consumption of other kinds of alcohol are no secret, the key is moderation.

THE GOOD

Wine has long been known to have positive benefits for health, in large part thanks to its high concentrations of antioxidants that can protect cells and prevent coronary artery disease and heart attacks. According to the National Library of Medicine, studies have shown that adults who drink light to moderate amounts of alcohol may be less likely to develop heart disease than those who do not drink at all or are heavy drinkers.

A particular antioxidant in red wine called resveratrol (found in grape skins) might help prevent damage to blood vessels, reduce LDL ("bad") cholesterol and prevent blood clots. (It is worth noting that

the Mayo Clinic also points out that other studies have not found the same benefits of resveratrol.)

Previous studies have found benefits can be derived from moderate consumption of all kinds of alcohol, including increased HDL ("good") cholesterol, reduction of blood clot formation, prevention of artery damage and improved function of cells that line the blood vessels.

THE BAD

The National Library of Medicine warns, however, that no one should start drinking to improve their heart health. "There is a fine line between healthy drinking and risky drinking," Library of Medicine warns on its website.

Men should limit their consumption of alcoholic drinks to one or two a day, and women to one. One drink is defined as 4 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, 1 1/2 ounces of 80-proof spirits and 1 ounce of 100-proof spirits.

In addition, the National Library of Medicine points out that there are more effective and less risky ways to improve one's heart health. They include controlling blood pressure and cholesterol; exercising and following a low-fat, healthy diet; not smoking; and maintaining an ideal weight.

If you already have heart disease or heart failure, alcohol can cause those conditions to worsen. Talk to your doctor before drinking alcohol.

THE UGLY

Drinking too much alcohol can have disastrous health effects, including increased risk for diseases of the liver and pancreas, high blood pressure, some cancers, stroke, obesity and other maladies. In addition, heart disease is the leading cause of death in people who abuse alcohol, points out the National Library of Medicine.

The Mayo Clinic cautions that some people shouldn't drink at all, including pregnant women, anyone with a personal or strong family history of alcoholism, those with liver or pancreas disease associated with alcohol consumption, anyone with heart failure or a weak heart and people who take certain medications or a daily aspirin.

Wine Terms

Corkage, varietal and aeration, oh my! There is a lot of wine terminology to know.

Knowing the right terminology can help you describe what you like and order exactly the glass of wine you want — not to mention sound chic at a dinner party. You don't have to be an expert to appreciate proper wine terminology. Here are some basics to get you started.

Varietal — a wine made solely from a particular grape. Examples include syrah, Zinfandel and merlot.

Blend — a blend of two or more varietals.

New world/old world — Old world wines are those produced in a specific region, typically Europe. Examples include Champagne, Bordeaux or Cabernet Sauvignon. New world wines are made from a particular varietal.

Corkage — a fee charged by a restaurant to open and serve a bottle of wine you bring with you. It is intended to cover service, supplies (such as the use of the glass) and the loss of revenue from wine sales. Fees vary widely by restaurant.

Mouth feel — how a wine feels in the mouth (smooth, velvety or rough).

Sediment — solids from the wine-making process that remain in a bottled wine. Sediment is usually removed before bottling but sometimes remains

in the bottle. In older wines, sediment might form in the wine and can result in a bitter taste. Decant a wine containing sediment prior to serving.

Aeration — introducing air to wine, by such methods as decanting, swirling or using special aeration devices. This can improve flavor and aroma by releasing compounds such as sulfites and ethanol from the wine.

Vintage — the year in which grapes used to make wine are harvested. Grapes may be harvested and then aged in barrels, but the wine label should carry the year the grapes were harvested. The term also is sometimes be applied more largely to the effects of weather on the crop of grapes harvested in a particular year.

Sommelier — wine steward, typically employed by fine restaurants to serve wine. A master sommelier is one who has passed a strenuous exam covering various facets of wine knowledge, including theory, tasting and service.

Aroma — smells developed in a wine before and during fermentation.

Bouquet — smells developed in a wine after fermentation.

Nose — a term used to describe the aromas and bouquet of a wine during tasting.