

*NOTES ON WINE*

*for*

*1982 Summer Associates Tasting*

To inject a modicum of educational value and redeeming social importance to what some might otherwise characterize as an "Upper East Side-style Beer Bust", we offer the following abbreviated guide to wine tasting together with sundry facts which may be of interest:

**WINETASTING**

Unless you aspire to be a professional wine taster or plan to lay away large quantities of wine for prolonged bottle ageing, the only reason for winetasting is to find wines that you like. Whenever you drink a wine, you consciously or unconsciously evaluate it and compare it to others you have drunk. Our purpose in these notes is to point out some aspects you may find helpful in organizing your impressions of a wine. Although the standard wine evaluation system uses many more categories, we think that four basic categories are sufficient for almost all purposes. These categories are color, smell, taste and overall impression. Short discussions of each may be useful:

**Color**: Whether a wine is red or white, it should be brilliantly clear and free from cloudiness when held to the light. Color of a wine will vary greatly depending on the variety and style of vinification, but even without knowing such specifics the range of color can tell you much about the age and condition of a wine.

In red wine, a deep purple indicates the wine is very young. Deep red is characteristic of a wine that is maturing soundly, while a fully aged wine is usually closer to brick red. Brownishness indicates oxidation and tells you the wine is over the hill at best, or bad at worst. For whites, healthy colors range from pale straw yellow or very light green to a rich gold for a fully aged Chardonnay. Amber indicates oxidation in white wine and should definitely be avoided. Although oxidation is rarely a problem with premium wines in a store, it can be a problem with jug wines (whites especially) and in restaurants. Never pay for an oxidized wine!

**Smell:** This category is usually broken out into aroma and bouquet. Rather simplistically, aroma is the smell of the grapes and bouquet refers to the complex smells which develop after several years of bottle aging. While each wine grape has a characteristic aroma, even if you are unfamiliar with it, you can easily tell if the wine smells of fresh grapes ("fruity"), the wood in which it was aged ("oaky" or sometimes "redwoody"), or if any unpleasant or "off" smells are present. A wine that doesn't smell good is bad, period. Off smells assault your nose when present: a vinegar smell means the wine has turned sour, a rotten cabbage smell indicates either a wine which has deteriorated or was made from underripe grapes. A slight rotten egg smell means too much sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) was used to stabilize the wine. The SO<sub>2</sub> smell should dissipate within 15 minutes after opening, otherwise the wine is bad.

Bouquet is almost as difficult to describe as obscenity is to define. If you taste a classic wine with a rich, fully developed bouquet, you will, like Potter Stewart, know it when you see it.

**Taste:** Taste is usually separated into several subcategories, but they add up to explanations of why a wine does or does not taste good. For wines to be served with food, a drier taste is usually preferred to a sweet taste, and red wines are usually preferred drier-tasting than whites. You should notice if a wine is perceptibly sweet and decide whether you like the sweetness.

Perhaps the most important aspect of taste is the characteristic flavor of the grape used to make the wine, which you will generally find pleasing or displeasing. Here few generalizations apply and even experienced palates disagree sharply. Many people settle on two or three varieties they like and stick with them. Most of the world's great wines are made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay or White Riesling grapes.

A puckering, astringent taste in a red wine is caused by the tannic acid from the skins of the grapes. The acidity level affects how well the various flavors come together in a wine ("balance") and the alcohol content, if too high, can cause a wine to taste "hot", like an overstrong mixed drink. The lingering taste in your mouth after swallowing a sip of wine is called the "finish" and is very important. A good finish will be pleasant and smooth, except in immature reds where the tannins tend to predominate.

An afterthought about tannin: a red wine needs lots of it to age properly. When a big red wine is ready after ten or twenty years, the tannins will be smoothed out and the wine will feel almost like velvet. The amount of tannin indicates how long the wine will take to mature. If you really dislike the presence of high tannin, your choices are limited to drinking fully mature reds (very expensive), jug reds made to drink young (not very interesting) or whites only.

**Overall Impression:** This is the stage where you decide whether you like a wine or not, integrating all of the partial evaluations which concentrate on the individual senses. A wine may do well in one category and poorly in others. You may like a wine with one defect better than a wine with no defects, but nothing outstanding about it. The possibilities are endless and you have to decide what is important to you in selecting a wine. Ideally we would choose only wines which are outstanding in all aspects, but such wines are rare. Trust your own taste.

We advise caution with ratings of wines in charts or in articles. Charts overgeneralize and professional wine writers and tasters often base ratings on the future possibilities inherent in a wine which tells you little about how it tastes now. Also, they tend to be impressed with "showy", big wines which may not go well with food. And lastly, some of them have commercial interests in wines which may influence their evaluations and make them less than entirely candid in public.

## MISCELLANEOUS ASPECTS OF ORDERING AND BUYING WINE

The only way to learn about wine is to pull a lot of corks and remember what you like and don't like about the wines that you taste.

Wine "rules" exist and so do wine snobs. The "rules" at their best represent accumulated experience which can be helpful in selecting wines to accompany food. There are no easy outs for total ignorance because in most restaurants, the people who work there know less about wine than you do after reading these Notes, and wine lists vary enormously in price, quality and choice. If a restaurant has a great wine list, the sommelier is usually knowledgeable and helpful and the house wine may be rather good. Ask.

Most places, however, the staff is too ignorant to be helpful and the house wine is probably undrinkable. It is almost certainly the wine on which a place makes the biggest profit. A magnum which costs \$5 at retail can give ten servings at \$2 per glass. With bottled wines, the usual mark up is twice retail, but it varies. The best values usually come from the middle third of the price range on the list.

Buying wine in a liquor store can be confusing and infuriating. Most employees, though there are exceptions, know nothing about wine. Their advice may steer you to the wine with the highest markup or that they want to get rid of. Very cheap wines usually have the highest percentage markups in a store, up to 150% over wholesale. If you know what you want, go to the "price bombers" who sell close to wholesale. (Look at the ads in any Wednesday **New York Times**.) Never buy old wines from them, however, because you don't know how the wine was stored. Their advice is almost always worthless. If you want advice on a wine,

try a few stores where the staff seems knowledgeable until you find one whose recommendations agree with your taste and whose prices don't seem too high. Professional knowledge is a service, so expect to pay something for it.

The conventional wisdom in pairing food and wine is to serve red wine with red meats and game and white wine with everything else. No one should take this literally, but with most fish (except broiled salmon) reds often taste funny and few white wines are strongly flavored enough to stand up to red meat or game. Dry wines should precede sweet wines, or the dry wines will seem coarse and whites generally precede reds because the tannin in the reds seems to linger and overpower the more delicate flavors in the whites.

Wine snobs are a pain in the ass.

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