

LEARNING MADE EASY



7th Edition

Wine

^{for}
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Understand grape
varieties and wine styles

Match food with wines that
will bring out the best in both

Select, store, open, pour,
and enjoy wine

Ed McCarthy

Certified Wine Educator

Mary Ewing-Mulligan

Master of Wine

Wine

^{for}
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7th Edition

by Ed McCarthy

Certified Wine Educator

and

Mary Ewing-Mulligan

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dummies®**
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Wine For Dummies®, 7th Edition

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Introduction

We love the amazing variety of wines in the world, and we love the way wine brings people together at the table. We want you and everyone else to enjoy wine too — regardless of your experience or your budget.

We will be the first to admit that the trappings of wine — the ceremony, the fancy language, the paraphernalia — don't make it easy for regular people to enjoy wine. You have to know strange names of grape varieties and foreign wine regions. You have to figure out whether to buy a \$20 wine or an \$8 wine that seem to be pretty much the same thing. You usually even need a special tool to open the bottle when you get it home — although screwcaps are being used more and more for many wines.

All the complications surrounding wine will not go away easily because wine is a very rich and complex field. But you don't have to let the complications stand in your way. With the right attitude and a little understanding of what wine is, you can begin to buy and enjoy wine. And if, like us, you decide that wine is fascinating, you can find out more and turn it into a rewarding hobby.

We hate to think that wine, which has brought so much pleasure into our lives, could be the source of anxiety for anyone. We want to help you feel more comfortable around wine. Some knowledge of wine, gleaned from the pages of this book and from our shared experiences, will go a long way toward increasing your comfort level around wine.

Ironically, what will *really* make you feel comfortable about wine is accepting the fact that you'll never know it all — and that you've got plenty of company. You see, after you really get a handle on wine, you discover that *no one* knows everything there is to know about wine. There's just too much information, and it's always changing. And when you know that, you can just relax and enjoy the stuff.

About This Book

Because wine is always changing, we have written a seventh edition of *Wine For Dummies*. We have added some new countries and regions, have updated prices, and updated information on the latest vintage years. If you already have a

previous edition, you might be wondering whether you need this book. We believe that you do. We wrote the first edition of *Wine For Dummies* in 1995, and the world of wine has changed tremendously since then. It has even changed a lot since our sixth edition in 2016:

- » The wine world has an exciting new face thanks to the communities of wine lovers who share opinions, chat, and blog on Internet sites, and these voices are shaping new trends. New styles of popular wine are emerging, and a whole new approach to food and wine pairing has taken root.
- » The wines of South America have come on strong, and they offer some of the best values around. We've ramped up our coverage of Chile and Argentina to give you the inside track on these explosive wine regions.
- » Hungary, Croatia, and Slovenia have recently become a more important part of the wine world. We have added them to the 7th Edition.
- » English sparkling wines have become an important part of the sparkling wine world, even challenging Champagne. They are now in our 7th Edition.
- » Dozens of California wineries have opened, a few have gone out of business, many have improved, and a few have slipped. Our recommendations reflect all these changes.
- » Remember those prices we listed for wines worth trying in our earlier editions? Well, big surprise: Just about all those prices have increased. But we point out some bargains, especially in Parts 3, 4, and 5.
- » Several new vintages have occurred; we give you the lowdown on them throughout the book, and especially in our vintage chart in Appendix C.

We wrote this book to be an easy-to-use reference. You don't have to read it from cover to cover for it to make sense and be useful to you. Simply turn to the section that interests you and dig in. Note that sidebars, which are shaded boxes of text, consist of information that's interesting but not necessarily critical to your understanding of the topic.

Also, when this book was printed, some web addresses may have needed to break across two lines of text. If that happened, rest assured that we haven't put in any extra characters (such as hyphens) to indicate the break. So, when using one of these web addresses, just type in exactly what you see in this book, pretending that the line break doesn't exist.

Foolish Assumptions

We assume that you picked up this book for one of several reasons:

- » You know very little about wine but have a strong desire to find out more.
- » You do know something about wine, more than most people, but you want to understand it better, from the ground up.
- » You're already very knowledgeable but realize that you can always discover more.

We also assume that you don't have a lot of ego invested in wine — or maybe you do, and you're buying this book “for a friend.” And we assume (correctly, we hope) that you are someone who doesn't appreciate a lot of mumbo jumbo and jargonistic language about wine — that you're someone who wants straight talk instead.

Icons Used in This Book

The pictures in the margins of this book are called *icons*, and they point out different types of information.



REAL DEAL

A bargain's not a bargain unless you really like the outfit, as they say. To our tastes, the wines we mark with this icon are bargains because we like them, we believe them to be of good quality, and their price is low compared to other wines of similar type, style, or quality. You can also interpret this logo as a badge of genuineness, as in “This Chablis is the real deal.”



REMEMBER

Some issues in wine are so fundamental that they bear repeating. Just so you don't think that we repeated ourselves without realizing it, we mark the repetitions with this symbol.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This odd little guy is a bit like the 2-year-old who constantly insists on knowing “Why, Mommy, why?” But he knows that you may not have the same level of curiosity that he has. Where you see him, feel free to skip over the technical information that follows. Wine will still taste just as delicious.



TIP

Advice and information that will make you a wiser wine drinker or buyer is marked by this bull's-eye so that you won't miss it.



WARNING

There's very little you can do in the course of moderate wine consumption that can land you in jail — but you could spoil an expensive bottle and sink into a deep depression over your loss. This symbol warns you about common pitfalls.



WORTH THE
SEARCH

Unfortunately, some of the finest, most intriguing, most delicious wines are made in very small quantities. Usually, those wines cost more than wines made in large quantities — but that's not the only problem; the real frustration is that those wines have very limited distribution, and you can't always get your hands on a bottle even if you're willing to pay the price. We mark such wines with this icon, and hope that your search proves fruitful.

Beyond the Book

As if all the great information in this book weren't enough, you can go beyond the book for even more! Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet for a quick guide to wine pronunciation, tips on how to buy wine with confidence, and more. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for this book's title.

Where to Go from Here

We recommend that you go to Chapter 1 and start reading there. But if you don't have time because you're about to head out to a fancy restaurant, then begin at Chapter 7. If you already have bottle in hand, wine in glass, and want to know more about what you're about to sip, turn to Chapter 4 to decode the words on the label, and then consult the index to find the regional section that corresponds to your wine, to read about the wines of that area. Or — because so many wines today are named after grape varieties — start with Chapter 3, which explains the major grape varieties for wine.

In other words, start wherever you wish, closer to the beginning if you're a novice and closer to the middle if you know something about wine already. On the journey of wine appreciation, *you* get to decide how far to go and how quickly — and you get to choose the route to get there. The final destination is pleasure.

1

Getting Started with Wine

IN THIS PART . . .

Gain some basic wine knowledge to get you started on your wine-loving journey.

Find out the techniques involved in tasting wine.

Become familiar with the different varieties of grapes and the wines they make.

Understand how to read wine names and labels.

Take a sneak peek at the process of winemaking.

- » What wine is
- » Why color matters
- » Differences among table wine, dessert wine, and sparkling wine

Chapter **1**

Wine 101

We know plenty of people who enjoy drinking wine but don't know much about it. (Been there, done that ourselves.) Knowing a lot of information about wine definitely isn't a prerequisite to enjoying it. But familiarity with certain aspects of wine can make choosing wines a lot easier, enhance your enjoyment of wine, and increase your comfort level. You can master as much or as little as you like. The journey begins here.

How Wine Happens

Wine is essentially just fermented fruit juice. The recipe for turning fruit into wine goes something like this:

- 1. Pick a large quantity of ripe grapes from grapevines.**
You could substitute raspberries or any other fruit, but 99.9 percent of all the wine in the world is made from grapes, because grapes make the best wines.
- 2. Put the grapes into a clean container that doesn't leak.**
- 3. Crush the grapes somehow to release their juice.**
Once upon a time, feet performed this step.
- 4. Wait.**

In its most basic form, winemaking is that simple. After the grapes are crushed, *yeasts* (tiny one-celled organisms that exist naturally in the vineyard and, therefore, on the grapes) come into contact with the sugar in the grapes' juice and gradually convert that sugar into alcohol. Yeasts also produce carbon dioxide, which evaporates into the air. When the yeasts are done working, your grape juice is wine. The sugar that was in the juice is no longer there — alcohol is present instead. (The riper and sweeter the grapes, the more alcohol the wine will have.) This process is called *fermentation*.

Fermentation is a totally natural process that doesn't require man's participation at all, except to put the grapes into a container and release the juice from the grapes. Fermentation occurs in fresh apple cider left too long in your refrigerator, without any help from you. We read that even milk, which contains a different sort of sugar than grapes do, develops a small amount of alcohol if left on the kitchen table all day long.

Speaking of milk, Louis Pasteur is the man credited with discovering fermentation in the 19th century. That's discovering, not inventing. Some of those apples in the Garden of Eden probably fermented long before Pasteur came along. (Well, we don't think it could have been much of an Eden without wine!)

Now if every winemaker actually made wine in as crude a manner as we just described, we'd be drinking some pretty rough stuff that would hardly inspire us to write a book about wine. But today's winemakers have a bag of tricks as big as a sumo wrestler's appetite, which is one reason no two wines ever taste exactly the same.

- » The men and women who make wine can control the type of container they use for the fermentation process (stainless steel and oak are the two main materials) as well as the size of the container and the temperature of the juice during fermentation — and every one of these choices can make a real difference in the taste of the wine.
- » After fermentation, winemakers can choose how long to let the wine *mature* (a stage when the wine sort of gets its act together) and in what kind of container. Fermentation can last three days or three months, and the wine can then mature for a couple of weeks or a couple of years or anything in between. (If you have trouble making decisions, don't ever become a winemaker.)



REMEMBER

Obviously, one of the biggest factors in making one wine different from the next is the nature of the raw material, the grape juice. Besides the fact that riper, sweeter grapes make a more alcoholic wine, different *varieties* of grapes (Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, or Merlot, for example) make different wines. Grapes are the main ingredient in wine, and everything the winemaker does, he does to the particular grape juice he has. Chapter 3 covers specific grapes and the kinds of wine they make.

THE 411 ON SULFITES

Sulfur dioxide, a compound formed from sulfur and oxygen, occurs naturally during fermentation in very small quantities. Winemakers add it, too. Sulfur dioxide is to wine what aspirin and vitamin E are to humans — a wonder drug that cures all sorts of afflictions and prevents others. Sulfur dioxide is antibacterial, preventing the wine from turning to vinegar. It inhibits yeasts, preventing sugar that has remained in a wine (if any) from fermenting in the bottle. It's an antioxidant, keeping the wine fresh and untainted by the demon oxygen. Despite these magical properties, winemakers try to use as little sulfur dioxide as possible because many of them share a belief that the less you add to wine, the better (just as many people prefer to ingest as little medication as possible).

Most wine labels in the United States carry the phrase *Contains Sulfites* (meaning sulfur dioxide) because of a law enacted to protect the extremely tiny percentage of the population who are very sensitive to sulfites. That law requires that any wine containing more than 10 parts per million of sulfites carry the *Contains Sulfites* phrase on its label. Considering that about 10 to 20 parts per million of sulfites occur naturally in wine, that covers just about every wine.

Ironically, winemakers today need to rely on sulfur dioxide less than ever before because winery hygiene is so advanced, and sulfur dioxide use is probably at an all-time low.

Actual sulfite levels in wine range from about 30 to 150 parts per million (about the same as in dried apricots); the legal max in the United States is 350. White dessert wines have the most sulfur — followed by medium-sweet white wines and sweet rosé (pink) wines — because those types of wine need the most protection. Dry white wines generally have less, and dry reds have the least.

Of course, grapes don't grow in a void. Where they grow — the soil and climate of each wine region, as well as the traditions and goals of the people who grow the grapes and make the wine — affects the nature of the ripe grapes and the taste of the wine made from those grapes. That's why so much of the information about wine revolves around the countries and regions where wine is made. In Parts 3 and 4, we cover all the world's major wine regions and their wines.

What Color Is Your Appetite?

Your inner child will be happy to know that when it comes to wine, it's okay to like some colors more than others. You can't get away with saying "I don't like green food!" much beyond your sixth birthday, but you can express a general preference for white, red, or pink wine for all your adult years.

(Not exactly) white wine

Whoever coined the term *white wine* must have been colorblind. All you have to do is look at it to see that it's not white; it's yellow (sometimes barely yellow, sometimes a deeper yellow). But we've all gotten used to the expression by now, so *white wine* it is.

White wine is wine without any red color (or pink color, which is in the red family). Yellow wines, golden wines, and wines that are as pale as water are all white wines.

Wine becomes white wine in one of two ways: First, white wine can be made from white grapes — which, by the way, aren't white. (Did you see that one coming?) *White* grapes are greenish, greenish yellow, golden yellow, or sometimes even pinkish yellow. Basically, white grapes include all the grape types that aren't dark red or dark bluish. If you make a wine from white grapes, it's a white wine.

The second way a wine can become white is a little more complicated. The process involves using red grapes — but only the *juice* of red grapes, not the grape skins. The juice of almost all red grapes has no red pigmentation — only the skins do — therefore, a wine made with only the juice of red grapes can be a white wine. In practice, though, very few white wines come from red grapes. (Champagne is one exception; Chapter 15 addresses the use of red grapes to make Champagne.)



TECHNICAL
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In case you're wondering, the skins are removed from the grapes either by pressing large quantities of grapes so that the skins break and the pulpy juice flows out — sort of like squeezing the pulp out of grapes, the way kids do — or by crushing the grapes in a machine that has rollers to break the skins so that the juice can drain away.

You can drink white wine anytime you like, but typically, people drink white wine in certain situations:

- » Most people drink white wines without food or with *lighter foods*, such as fish, poultry, or vegetables. Chapter 9 covers the dynamics of pairing wines with food and has suggestions of foods to eat with white wine.
- » White wines are often considered *apéritif* wines, meaning that people consume them before dinner, in place of cocktails, or at parties. (If you ask the officials who busy themselves defining such things, an *apéritif* wine is a wine that has flavors added to it, as vermouth does. But unless you're in the business of writing wine labels for a living, don't worry about that. In common parlance, an *apéritif* wine is just what we said.)
- » A lot of people like to drink white wines when the weather is hot because they're more refreshing than red wines, and they're usually drunk chilled (the wines, not the people).

WHITE WINE STYLES: THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS PLAIN WHITE WINE

White wines fall into four general taste categories, not counting sparkling wine or the really sweet white wine that you drink with dessert (see Chapters 15 and 16 for more on each of those). If the words we use to describe these taste categories sound weird, take heart — they're all explained in Chapter 2. We also explain the styles in plentiful detail in our book *Wine Style: Using Your Senses to Explore and Enjoy Wine* (Wiley). Here are our four broad categories:

- **Fresh, unoaked whites:** These wines are crisp and light, with no sweetness and no oaky character. (Turn to Chapter 3 for the lowdown on oak.) Most Italian white wines, like Soave and Pinot Grigio, and some French whites, like Sancerre and some Chablis, fall into this category.
- **Earthy whites:** These wines are dry, fuller-bodied, unoaked or lightly oaked, with a lot of earthy character. Some French wines, such as Mâcon or whites from the Côtes du Rhône region (covered in Chapter 10), have this taste profile.
- **Aromatic whites:** These wines are characterized by intense aromas and flavors that come from their particular grape variety, whether they're *off-dry* (that is, not bone-dry) or dry. Examples include a lot of German wines and wines from flavorful grape varieties, such as Riesling or Viognier and, in some cases, Sauvignon Blanc.
- **Rich, oaky whites:** These wines are dry or fairly dry and full-bodied with pronounced oaky character. Most Chardonnays and some French wines — like many of those from the Burgundy region of France — fall into this group.



TIP

We serve white wines cool, but not ice cold. Sometimes, restaurants serve white wines too cold, and we actually have to wait a while for the wine to warm up before we drink it. If you like your wine cold, fine; but try drinking your favorite white wine a little less cold sometime, and we bet you'll discover it has more flavor that way. In Chapter 8, we recommend specific serving temperatures for various types of wine.

Red, red wine

In this case, the name is correct. Red wines really are red. They can be purple red, ruby red, or garnet, but they're red.

Red wines are made from grapes that are red or bluish in color. So guess what wine people call these grapes? Black grapes! We suppose that's because black is the opposite of white.

POPULAR WHITE WINES

These types of white wine are available almost everywhere in the United States. We describe these wines in Parts 3 and 4.

- **Chardonnay:** Can come from California, Australia, France, or almost any other place
- **Pinot Grigio** or **Pinot Gris:** Can come from Italy, France, Oregon, California, and other places
- **Prosecco:** Comes from Italy (and it's a bubbly wine)
- **Riesling:** Can come from Germany, California, New York, Washington, France, Austria, Australia, and other places
- **Sauvignon Blanc:** Can come from California, France, New Zealand, South Africa, Italy, and other places
- **Soave:** Comes from Italy

The most obvious difference between red wine and white wine is color. The red color occurs when the colorless juice of red grapes stays in contact with the dark grape skins during fermentation and absorbs the skins' color. Along with color, the grape skins give the wine *tannin*, a substance that's an important part of the way a red wine tastes. (See Chapter 2 for more about tannin.) The presence of tannin in red wines is actually the key taste difference between red wines and white wines.

Red wines vary quite a lot in style — partly because winemakers have so many ways of adjusting their red winemaking to achieve the kind of wine they want. For example, if winemakers leave the grape juice in contact with the skins for a long time, the wine becomes more *tannic* (firmer in the mouth, like strong tea; tannic wines can make you pucker). If winemakers drain the juice off the skins sooner, the wine is softer and less tannic. And heating the crushed grapes can extract color without much tannin.



TIP

Traditionally, people have consumed red wine as part of a meal or with accompanying food rather than as a drink on its own, but plenty of red wines today are made to taste delicious even without food.

Thanks to the wide range of red wine styles, you can find red wines to go with just about every type of food and every occasion when you want to drink wine. The one exception is times when you want to drink a wine with bubbles: Although bubbly red wines do exist, most bubbly wines are white or pink. In Chapter 9, we give you some tips on matching red wine with food.



WARNING

One sure way to spoil the fun in drinking most red wines is to drink them too cold. Those tannins can taste really bitter when the wine is cold — just as in a cold glass of very strong tea. On the other hand, way too many restaurants serve red wines too warm. (Where do they store them? Next to the oven?) If the bottle — or the glass of wine — feels cool to your hand, that's a good temperature. For more about serving wine at the right temperature, see Chapter 8.

Rosé wines

Rosé wine is the name that wine people give to pinkish wine. These wines are made from red grapes, but they don't end up red because the grape juice stays in contact with the red skins for just a short time — only a few hours, compared to days or weeks for red wines. Because this *skin contact* (the period when the juice and the skins intermingle) is brief, rosé wines also absorb very little tannin from the skins. Therefore, you can chill these wines and drink them as you'd drink white wines.

Rosé wines are not only lighter in color than red wines, but they are also lighter in body (they feel less heavy in your mouth; Chapter 2 explains body and other taste characteristics of wine). They have a fascinating range of color, from pale orange to deep pink, depending on the grape variety that they come from. Some rosé wines are actually labeled “White [red grape name]” — “White” Zinfandel is the most common — as a marketing gimmick.

The rosé wines that call themselves *white* are fairly sweet; they are sometimes referred to as *blush* wines, although that term rarely appears on the label. Wines labeled *rosé* can be sweetish, too, but some wonderful rosés from Europe, including Champagne (and quite a few from the United States) are *dry* (not sweet). The popularity of rosé wines has varied over the years, but in the decade of the 20-teens, it is at an all-time high (about five times as popular in the U.S. now, compared to 30 years ago). Even hard-core wine lovers are discovering what a pleasure — not to mention what a versatile food partner — a good rosé wine can be.

Choosing your color

Your choice of a white wine, red wine, or pink wine will vary with the season, the occasion, and the type of food you're eating (not to mention your personal taste). Choosing a color usually is the starting point for selecting a specific wine in a wine shop or in a restaurant. As we explain in Chapters 6 and 7, most stores and most restaurant wine lists arrange wines by color before making other distinctions, such as grape varieties, wine regions, or taste categories.

Certain foods can straddle the line between white wine and red wine compatibility — grilled salmon, for example, can be delicious with either a rich white wine or a fruity red. But your personal preference for red, white, or rosé wine will often be your first consideration in pairing food with wine.

RED WINE STYLES: THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS PLAIN RED WINE, EITHER

Here are four red wine styles:

- *Soft, fruity reds* have a lot of fruitiness and fairly little tannin (like Beaujolais Nouveau wine from France, some Pinot Noir wines from California, and many under-\$15 U.S. wines).
- *Mild-mannered reds* are medium-bodied with subtle flavors that are savory more than fruity (like less expensive wines from Bordeaux, France, and some inexpensive Italian reds).
- *Spicy reds* are flavorful, generally fruity wines with spicy accents and some tannin (such as some Malbecs from Argentina and Dolcettos from Italy).
- *Powerful reds* are full-bodied and tannic (such as the most expensive California Cabernets; Barolo, from Italy; Priorat, from Spain; the most expensive Australian reds; and lots of other expensive reds).

POPULAR RED WINES

You find descriptions and explanations of these popular and widely available red wines all through this book.

- **Barbera:** Comes from Italy, but can also come from other countries
- **Beaujolais:** Comes from France
- **Bordeaux:** Comes from France
- **Cabernet Sauvignon:** Can come from California, Australia, France, Chile, and other places
- **Chianti:** Comes from Italy
- **Côtes du Rhône:** Comes from France
- **Malbec:** Comes from Argentina, France, Chile and other places
- **Merlot:** Can come from California, France, Washington, New York, Chile, and other places
- **Pinot Noir:** Can come from California, France, Oregon, New Zealand, and other places
- **Zinfandel:** Usually comes from California

FIVE OCCASIONS TO DRINK ROSÉ

Here are some of our favorite reasons to drink pink:

1. When she's having fish and he's having meat (or vice versa)
2. When a red wine just seems too heavy
3. On the patio or deck on warm, sunny days
4. To wean a son/daughter, mate, friend (yourself?) off cola
5. When serving ham (hot or cold) or other pork dishes

RED WINE SENSITIVITIES

Some people complain that they can't drink red wines without getting a headache or feeling ill. Usually, they blame the sulfites in the wine. We're not doctors or scientists, but we can tell you that red wines contain far less sulfur than white wines. That's because the tannin in red wines acts as a preservative, making sulfur dioxide less necessary. Red wines do contain numerous substances derived from the grape skins that could be the culprits. Whatever the source of the discomfort, it's probably not sulfites.

Pairing food and wine is one of the most fun aspects of wine, because the possible combinations are almost limitless. (We get you started with the pairing principles and a few specific suggestions in Chapter 9.) Best of all, your personal taste rules!

Other Ways of Categorizing Wine

We sometimes play a game with our friends: We ask them, "Which wine would you want to have with you if you were stranded on a desert island?" In other words, which type of wine could you drink for the rest of your life without getting tired of it? Our own answer is always Champagne, with a capital C (more on the capitalization later in this section).

In a way, Champagne is an odd choice because, as much as we love Champagne, we don't drink it *every day* under normal circumstances. We welcome guests with it, we celebrate with it after our team wins a Sunday football game, and we toast our cats with it on their birthdays. We don't need much of an excuse to drink Champagne, but it's not the type of wine we drink every night.

What we drink every night is regular wine — red, white, or rosé — without bubbles. These wines have various names. In the United States, they're called *table* wines, and in Europe, they're called *light* wines. Sometimes, we refer to them as *still* wines, because they don't have bubbles moving around in them.

In the following sections, we explain the differences among three categories of wines: table wines, dessert wines, and sparkling wines.

Table wine

Table wine, or *light wine*, is fermented grape juice whose alcohol content falls within a certain range. Furthermore, table wine isn't bubbly. (Some table wines have a very slight carbonation but not enough to disqualify them as table wines.) According to U.S. standards of identity, table wines may have an alcohol content no higher than 14 percent; in Europe, light wine must contain from 8.5 percent to 14 percent alcohol by volume (with a few exceptions). So unless a wine has more than 14 percent alcohol or has bubbles, it's a table wine or a light wine in the eyes of the law.

The regulation-makers didn't get the number 14 by drawing it from a hat. Historically, most wines contained less than 14 percent alcohol — either because the juice didn't have enough sugar to attain a higher alcohol level or because the alcohol killed the yeasts when it reached 14 percent, halting the fermentation. That number, therefore, became the legal borderline between wines that have no alcohol added to them (table wines) and wines that might have alcohol added to them (dessert or fortified wines; see the next section).



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But today, the historical phenomenon of 14 percent alcohol as the natural limit of fermentation is, well, history. Many grapes now grow in warm climates where they become so ripe and have so much natural sugar that their juice attains more than 14 percent alcohol when fermented. The use of gonzo yeast strains that continue working even when the alcohol exceeds 14 percent is another factor. Most red Zinfandels, Cabernets, and Chardonnays from California — and many red wines from almost everywhere — now have 14.5 or even 15 to 16 percent alcohol. While U.S. government definitions have not changed, the U.S. tax code has recognized the new reality by raising to 16 percent the upper limit for a wine to be taxed at the table-wine rate of excise tax, which is lower than for a higher-alcohol dessert wine. (Read about dessert wines in the next section.)



REMEMBER

Here's our own, real-world definition of table wines: They're the normal, non-bubbly wines that most people drink most of the time.



TIP

HOW TO (SORT OF) LEARN THE ALCOHOL CONTENT OF A WINE

Regulations require wineries to state a wine's alcohol percentage on the label (again, with some minor exceptions). It can be expressed in degrees, like 12.5 degrees, or as a percentage, like 12.5 percent. If a wine carries the words *Table Wine* on its label in the United States but not the alcohol percentage, it should have less than 14 percent alcohol by law.

But for wines sold within the United States — whether the wine is American or imported — there's a big catch. The labels are allowed to lie. U.S. regulations give wineries a 1.5 percent leeway in the accuracy of the stated alcohol level. If the label states *12.5 percent*, the actual alcohol level can be as high as 14 percent or as low as 11 percent. For wines with a stated alcohol level above 14 percent, the leeway is just 1 percent; a wine with a stated alcohol content of 14.5 percent, can legally fall within the 13.5 to 15.5 range.

Many winemakers have told us that wineries (their competitors, surely!) routinely understate the alcohol content of their wines. When you read a wine's label, bear in mind that the number you see is not necessarily what you get.

Dessert wine

Some wines have more than 14 percent alcohol because the winemaker added alcohol during or after the fermentation. That's an unusual way of making wine, but certain parts of the world, like the Sherry region in Spain and the Port region in Portugal, have made quite a specialty of it. We discuss those wines in Chapter 16.

Dessert wine is the legal U.S. terminology for such wines, even if they're not necessarily sweet and not necessarily consumed after dinner or with dessert. (Dry Sherry is categorized as a dessert wine, for example, but it's dry, and we drink it before dinner.) In Europe, this category of wines is called *liqueur wines*, which carries that same unfortunate connotation of sweetness.

We prefer the term *fortified*, which suggests that the wine has been strengthened with additional alcohol. But until we get elected to run things, the term will have to be *dessert wine* or *liqueur wine*.

Sparkling wine (and a highly personal spelling lesson)

Sparkling wines are wines that contain carbon dioxide bubbles. Carbon dioxide gas is a natural byproduct of fermentation, and winemakers sometimes decide to trap

it in the wine. Just about every country that makes wine also makes sparkling wine. In Chapter 15, we discuss how sparkling wine is made and describe the major sparkling wines of the world.

In the United States, Canada, and Europe, *sparkling wine* is the official name for the category of wines with bubbles. Isn't it nice when everyone agrees?

Champagne (with a capital C) is the most famous sparkling wine — and probably the most famous *wine*, for that matter. Champagne is a specific type of sparkling wine (made from certain grape varieties and produced in a certain way) that comes from a region in France called Champagne. It is the undisputed Grand Champion of Bubbles.

Unfortunately for the people of Champagne, France, their wine is so famous that the name *champagne* has been borrowed again and again by producers elsewhere, until the word has become synonymous in people's minds with practically the whole category of sparkling wines. For example, until a recent agreement between the United States and the European Union (E.U.), U.S. winemakers could legally call any sparkling wine *champagne* — even with a capital C, if they wanted — as long as the carbonation was not added artificially. Even now, those U.S. wineries that were already using that name may continue to do so. (They do have to add a qualifying geographic term such as *American* or *Californian* before the word *Champagne*.)

For the French, limiting the use of the name *champagne* to the wines of the Champagne region is a *cause célèbre*. E.U. regulations not only prevent any other E.U. country from calling its sparkling wines *champagne* but also prohibit the use of terms that even *suggest* the word *champagne*, such as fine print on the label saying that a wine was made by using the “Champagne method.” What's more, bottles of sparkling wine from countries outside the European Union that use the word *champagne* on the label are banned from sale in Europe. The French are that serious about Champagne.

To us, this seems perfectly fair. You'll never catch us using the word *champagne* as a generic term for wine with bubbles. We have too much respect for the people and the traditions of Champagne, France, where the best sparkling wines in the world are made. That's why we stress the capital C when we say Champagne. *Those* are the wines we want on our desert island, not just any sparkling wine from anywhere that calls itself champagne.



TIP

When someone tries to impress you by serving a wine labeled “champagne” that's not French, don't fall for it. Nearly all the respectable sparkling wine companies in the United States refuse to name their wines champagne, out of respect for their French counterparts. (Of course, many of California's top sparkling wine companies are actually owned by the French — so it's no surprise that *they* won't call their wines champagne — but many other companies won't use the term, either.)

- » How to slurp and gurgle
- » The meaning and effect of acidity, tannin, alcohol, and other components of wine
- » Six mysterious concepts of wine quality

Chapter 2

A Matter of Personal Taste (Buds)

We know they're out there — the cynics who are saying, right about now, “Hey, I already know how to taste. I do it every day. All that wine-tasting humbug is just another way of making wine complicated.”

And you know, in a way, those cynics are right. Anyone who can taste coffee or a cheeseburger can taste wine. All you need are a nose, taste buds, and a brain. Unless you're like our friend who lost his sense of smell from the chemicals he used every day as a cosmetology teacher, you, too, have all it takes to taste wine properly.

You also have all it takes to speak Mandarin; of course, having the ability to do something is different from knowing how to do it and applying that know-how in everyday life. In this chapter, we show you how (how to taste wine, that is — you're on your own for the Mandarin).

The Special Technique for Tasting Wine

You drink beverages every day, tasting them as they pass through your mouth. But when it comes to wine, drinking and tasting are not synonymous. Wine is much more complex than other beverages: There's more going on in a mouthful of wine. For example, most wines have a lot of different (and subtle) flavors, all at the

same time, and they give you multiple simultaneous sensations, such as softness and sharpness together.

If you just drink wine by gulping it down the way you do soda, you miss a lot of what you paid for. But if you *taste* wine, you can discover its nuances. In fact, the more slowly and attentively you taste wine, the more interesting it tastes.



REMEMBER

And with that, we have the two fundamental rules of wine tasting:

1. Slow down.
2. Pay attention.

The process of tasting a wine — of systematically experiencing all the wine's attributes — has three steps, which we discuss in the following sections. The first two steps don't actually involve your mouth at all: First, you look at the wine, and then you smell it. Finally, you get to sip it.

Savoring a wine's appearance

We enjoy looking at the wine in our glass, noticing how brilliant it is and the way it reflects the light, trying to decide precisely which shade of red it is and whether it will stain the tablecloth permanently if we tilt the glass too far.



TIP

To observe a wine's appearance, tilt a (no more than half-full) glass away from you and look at the color of the wine against a white background, such as the tablecloth or a piece of paper (a colored background distorts the color of the wine). Notice how dark or how pale the wine is and what color it is. Also notice whether the wine is cloudy, clear, or brilliant. (Most wines are clear. Some *unfiltered* wines — Chapter 5 explains filtering — can be less than brilliant but shouldn't be cloudy.) Eventually, you'll begin to notice patterns, such as deeper color in younger red wines and older white wines.

If you have time, at this point you can also swirl the wine around in your glass (see the following section) and observe the way the wine runs back down the inside of the glass. Some wines form *legs* or *tears* that flow slowly down. Once upon a time, these legs were interpreted as the sure sign of a rich, high-quality wine. Today, we know that a wine's legs are a complicated phenomenon having to do with the surface tension of the wine and the evaporation rate of the wine's alcohol. If you're a physicist, feel free to show off your expertise and enlighten your fellow tasters — but otherwise, don't bother drawing conclusions from the legs.

The nose knows

After you observe a wine's appearance, you get to the really fun part of tasting wine: swirling and sniffing. This is the stage when you can let your imagination run wild, and no one will ever dare to contradict you. If you say that a wine smells like wild strawberries to you, how can anyone prove that it doesn't?

Before we explain the smelling ritual, and the tasting technique that goes along with it (described in the next section), we want to assure you that (a) you don't have to apply this procedure to every single wine you drink; (b) you won't look foolish doing it, at least in the eyes of other wine lovers (we can't speak for the rest of the human population); and (c) it's a great trick at parties to avoid talking with someone you don't like.



WARNING

To get the most out of your sniffing, swirl the wine in the glass first. But don't even *think* about swirling your wine if your glass is more than half full.

Keep your glass on the table and rotate it three or four times so that the wine swirls around inside the glass and mixes with air. Then quickly bring the glass to your nose. Stick your nose into the airspace of the glass and smell the wine. Free-associate. Is the aroma fruity, woody, fresh, cooked, intense, mild? Your nose tires quickly, but it recovers quickly, too. Wait just a moment and try again. Listen to your friends' comments and try to find the same things they find in the smell.

As you swirl, the aromas in the wine vaporize so that you can smell them. Wine has so many *aromatic compounds* that whatever you find in the smell of a wine is probably not merely a figment of your imagination.

The point behind this whole ritual of swirling and sniffing is that what you smell should be pleasurable to you, maybe even fascinating, and that you should have fun in the process. But what if you notice a smell that you don't like? Hang around wine geeks for a while, and you'll start to hear words like *petrol*, *sweaty saddle*, *burnt match*, and *asparagus* used to describe the aromas of some wines. "Yuck!" you say? Of course you do! Fortunately, the wines that exhibit such smells are not the wines you'll be drinking for the most part — at least not unless you really catch the wine bug. And when you do catch the wine bug, you might discover that those aromas, in the right wine, can really be a kick. Even if you don't come to enjoy those smells (some of us do, honest!), you'll appreciate them as typical characteristics of certain regions or grapes.



WARNING

Wine can also have bad smells that nobody will try to defend. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen, because wine is a natural, agricultural product with a will of its own. Often, when a wine is seriously flawed, it shows immediately in the nose of the wine. Wine judges have a term for such wines. They call them *DNPIM* — *Do Not Put in Mouth*. Not that you'll get ill, but why subject your taste buds to the

same abuse that your nose just took? Sometimes a bad cork is to blame, and sometimes the problem lies with some issue in the winemaking or even the storage of the wine. Just rack it up to experience and open a different bottle.



REMEMBER

When it comes to smelling wine, many people are concerned that they aren't able to detect as many aromas as they think they should. Smelling wine is really just a matter of practice and attention. If you start to pay more attention to smells in your normal activities, you'll get better at smelling wine.

The mouth action

After you've looked at the wine and smelled it, you're finally allowed to taste it. This is the stage when grown men and women sit around and make strange faces, gurgling the wine and sloshing it around in their mouths with looks of intense concentration in their eyes. You can make an enemy for life if you distract a wine taster just at the moment when he's focusing all his energy on the last few drops of a special wine.

TIPS FOR SMELLING WINE

Try these techniques for getting more out of wine when you sniff:

- Be bold. Stick your nose right into the airspace of the glass where the aromas are captured.
- Don't wear a strong scent; it will compete with the smell of the wine.
- Don't knock yourself out smelling a wine when strong food aromas are present. The meat you smell in the wine could really be a stew cooking on the stove.
- Become a smeller. Smell every ingredient when you cook, everything you eat, the fresh fruits and vegetables you buy at the supermarket, even the smells of your environment — like leather, wet earth, fresh road tar, grass, flowers, your wet dog, shoe polish, and your medicine cabinet. Stuff your mental database with smells so you'll have aroma memories at your disposal when you need to draw on them.
- Try different techniques of sniffing. Some people like to take short, quick "rabbit sniffs," while others like to inhale a deep whiff of the wine's smell. Keeping your mouth open a bit while you inhale can help you perceive aromas. (Some people even hold one nostril closed and smell with the other, but we think that's a bit kinky.)



TIP

Here's the procedure to follow:

1. **Take a medium-sized sip of wine.**
2. **Hold the wine in your mouth, purse your lips, and draw in some air across your tongue, over the wine.**
(Be utterly careful not to choke or dribble, or everyone will strongly suspect that you're not a wine expert.)
3. **Swish the wine around in your mouth as if you're chewing it.**
4. **Swallow the wine.**

The whole process should take several seconds, depending on how much you are concentrating on the wine. (Wondering what to concentrate on? The next two sections tell you, along with the section “Parlez-Vous Winespeak?” later in this chapter.)

Feeling the tastes

Taste buds on the tongue can register various sensations, which are known as the *basic tastes* — sweetness, sourness, saltiness, bitterness, and umami, a savory characteristic. Of these tastes, sweetness, sourness, and bitterness are those most commonly found in wine. By moving the wine around in your mouth, you give it a chance to hit all your taste buds so that you don't miss anything in the wine (even if sourness and bitterness sound like things you wouldn't mind missing).

WINES HAVE NOSES — AND PALATES, TOO

With poetic license typical of wine tasters, someone once dubbed the smell of a wine its *nose* — and the expression took hold. If someone says that a wine has a huge nose, he means that the wine has a very strong aroma. If he says that he detects lemon *in the nose* or *on the nose*, he means that the wine smells something like lemons.

In fact, most wine tasters rarely use the word *smell* to describe how a wine smells because the word *smell* (like the word *odor*) seems pejorative. Wine tasters talk about the wine's nose or aroma. Sometimes they use the word *bouquet*, although that word is falling out of fashion.

Just as a wine taster might use the term *nose* for the smell of a wine, he might use the word *palate* in referring to the taste of a wine. A wine's palate is the overall impression the wine gives in your mouth, or any isolated aspect of the wine's taste — as in, “This wine has a harmonious palate,” or “The palate of this wine is a bit acidic.” When a wine taster says that he finds raspberries *on the palate*, he means that the wine has the flavor of raspberries.

As you swish the wine around in your mouth, you're also buying time. Your brain needs a few seconds to figure out what the tongue is tasting and make some sense of it. Any sweetness in the wine often registers in your brain first; *acidity* (which, by the way, is known to normal people as *sourness*) and bitterness register subsequently. While your brain is working out the relative impressions of sweetness, acidity, and bitterness, you can be thinking about how the wine feels in your mouth — whether it's heavy, light, smooth, rough, and so on.

Tasting the smells

Until you cut your nose in on the action, all you can taste in the wine are those three sensations of sweetness, acidity, and bitterness and a general impression of weight and texture. Where have all the wild strawberries gone?

They're still there in the wine, right next to the chocolate and plums. But to be perfectly correct about it, these flavors are actually *aromas* that you taste, not through tongue contact, but by inhaling them up an interior nasal passage in the back of your mouth called the *retronasal passage* (see Figure 2-1). When you draw in air across the wine in your mouth, you're vaporizing the aromas just as you did when you swirled the wine in your glass. There's a method to this madness.

TEN AROMAS (OR FLAVORS) ASSOCIATED WITH WINE

The following are some of the most common aromas you can find in wine:

- Fruits of all sorts
- Herbs
- Flowers
- Earth
- Grass
- Tobacco
- Butterscotch
- Toast
- Vanilla
- Coffee, mocha, or chocolate

FIGURE 2-1:
Wine flavors are actually aromas that vaporize in your mouth; you perceive them through the rear nasal passage.

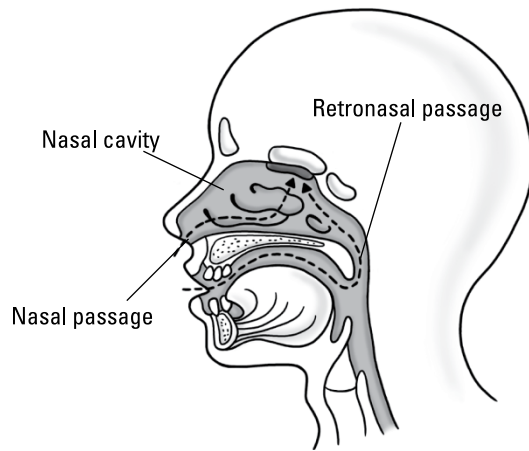


Illustration by Lisa S. Reed

After you go through all this rigmarole, it's time to reach a conclusion: Do you like what you tasted? The possible answers are yes, no, an indifferent shrug of the shoulders, or "I'm not sure, let me take another taste," which means that you have serious wine-nerd potential.

Parlez-Vous Winespeak?

Now we have to confess that there is one step between knowing how to taste wine and always drinking wine that you like. And it's a doozy. That step is putting taste into words. You wouldn't have to bother with this detail if only you could always choose your wines the way that customers choose cheese in a gourmet shop. ("Can I try that one? No, I don't like it; let me taste the one next to it. Good. I'll take half a pound.")

"Like/Don't like" is a no-brainer when you have the wine in your mouth. But most of the time, you have to buy the stuff without tasting it first. So unless you want to drink the same wine for the rest of your life, you're going to have to decide what you like or don't like in a wine and communicate that to another person who can steer you toward another wine you'll like.

There are two hurdles here: Finding the words to describe what you like or don't like and then getting the other person to understand what you mean. Naturally, it helps if everyone speaks the same language.



WARNING

Unfortunately, Winespeak is a dialect with an undisciplined and sometimes poetic vocabulary whose definitions change all the time, depending on who's speaking. In case you really want to get into this wine thing, we treat you to some sophisticated wine language in Chapters 5 and 19. In the following sections, we provide a few basic words and concepts to get you started.

Deconstructing a wine's taste

The tastes of a wine reveal themselves sequentially as the tongue detects them and your brain registers them. We recommend that you follow the natural sequence we describe in the next sections when you try to put words to what you're tasting.

Sweetness

As soon as you put the wine into your mouth, you can usually notice sweetness or the lack of it. In Winespeak, *dry* is the opposite of sweet. Classify the wine you're tasting as either *dry*, *off-dry* (in other words, slightly sweet), or *sweet*.

Acidity

All wine contains acid (mainly *tartaric acid*, which exists in grapes), but some wines are more acidic than others. Acidity is a key taste factor in white wines more than in reds. For white wines, acidity is the backbone of the wine's taste (it gives the wine firmness in your mouth). White wines with a high amount of acidity feel *crisp*, and those without enough acidity feel *flabby*.



TIP

IS IT SWEETNESS OR FRUITINESS?

Beginning wine tasters sometimes describe dry wines as sweet because they confuse fruitiness with sweetness. Here's the difference:

- A wine is *fruity* when it has distinct aromas and flavors of fruit. You smell the fruitiness with your nose; in your mouth, you "smell" it through your retronasal passage (see the earlier section "Tasting the smells").
- Sweetness, on the other hand, is a tactile impression on your tongue. When in doubt, try holding your nose when you taste the wine; if the wine really is sweet, you'll be able to taste the sweetness despite the fact that you can't smell the fruitiness.

TOUCHY-FEELY

Softness and firmness are actually *textural impressions* a wine gives you as you taste it. Just as your mouth feels temperature in a liquid, it also feels texture. Some wines literally *feel* soft and smooth as they move through your mouth, while others feel hard, rough, edgy, or coarse. In white wines, acid is usually responsible for impressions of hardness or firmness (or crispness); in red wines, tannin is usually responsible. Low levels of either substance can make a wine feel pleasantly soft — or *too* soft, depending on the wine and your taste preferences. Unfermented sugar also contributes to an impression of softness, and alcohol can, too. But very high alcohol — which is fairly common in wines these days — can give a wine an edge of hardness. Initially, it's enough to notice a wine's texture, without figuring out what factor is creating that sensation.

You generally perceive acidity in the middle of your mouth — what wine-tasters call the *mid-palate*. How much you salivate after tasting a wine can be a clue to its acidity level, because high acidity triggers saliva production. You can also sense the consequences of acidity (or the lack of it) in the overall style of the wine — whether it's a tart little number or a soft and generous sort, for example. Classify the wine you're tasting as *crisp*, *soft*, or *Pillsbury Doughboy*.

Tannin

Tannin is a substance that exists naturally in the skins, seeds (or *pips*), and stems of grapes. Because red wines are fermented with their grape skins and pips, and because red grape varieties are generally higher in tannin than white varieties, tannin levels are far higher in red wines than in white wines. Aging wine in new oak barrels can also contribute tannin to wines, both reds and whites.

Have you ever taken a sip of a red wine and rapidly experienced a drying-out feeling in your mouth, as if something had blotted up all your saliva? That's tannin.

To generalize a bit, tannin is to a red wine what acidity is to a white: a backbone. Tannins alone can taste bitter, but some wine tannins are less bitter than others. Also, other elements of the wine, such as sweetness, can mask the perception of bitterness (see the section “Balance,” later in this chapter). You sense tannin — as bitterness or as firmness or richness of texture — mainly in the rear of your mouth, on the inside of your cheeks, and on your gums. Depending on the amount and nature of its tannin, you can describe a red wine as *astringent*, *firm*, or *soft*.