

This article was written originally in 2006 for our grandson Nicholas when he graduated from college and sought my advice about wines. It has been updated since.

WINE BASICS

by

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Prosit - Salute - A Votre Santé - Cheers

The enjoyment of wine is far more than the mere ingestion of alcohol, it can – and should - be a feast for the senses. It helps if you truly enjoy food and perhaps even prepare meals yourself, because the matching of cuisine and wine can be challenging at times, yet it is truly rewarding when the two elements harmonize. Having said this, let me also tell you that knowledge and the tasting of wine are not governed by immutable conventions, as some wine snobs would have you believe, but rather it should be enjoyment, not a straightjacket of rules. So, do not be intimidated by certain seemingly rigid wine opinions or practices. It does not matter how you taste a wine or whether you define and describe all aspects of a wine correctly. Once you gain experience and become a connoisseur – hopefully with a pocketbook to match – you will get into some of these practices voluntarily, on your level.

With that in mind, let me begin with a few general comments: For white wines, it is usually prudent to buy the most recent vintage. Also, do not cellar white wines too long, drink them young. The same advice applies even more so for Rosé wines. When buying red wines, reach for older vintages, cellar them if you like the wine, and buy by the case if you have the money. As you gain more experience you may remember favorite vintages/years for different wines in different areas and choose with that in mind. However, as with the afore-mentioned rules, do not put too much emphasis on vintages.

Vintage is a measure of excellence mostly in famous, and high-priced, small wine areas like Bordeaux or Burgundy, or for entire small regions like Germany (Riesling) that to a large degree has a similar climate. California, for instance, has so many micro-climates that an overall vintage statement would apply only in case of catastrophic weather that year. It is true that, especially with unknown wineries, vintage can be useful as a general guideline for wines of a given region. After gaining experience, you will be able to trust certain dependable producers, who are able to overcome challenging weather, to maintain quality and consistently turn out enjoyable vintages.

An observation on the role money plays with wine. A high price is not necessarily proof of a good wine, but it can be a guideline. For each wine-producing country – France, Germany, Italy, USA, Australia, etc., there are certain vineyards which have proven themselves to be exemplary by having consistently excellent production, and they can rightfully ask high prices for their wines - and get them. Once you acquire some experience, you will find that there are many satisfactory and delectable wines on the market from smaller vineyards for lower prices (under \$20). However, you can save money even on more expensive wines if you have the means to buy larger quantities rather than a single bottle of the wine that you like. Buying a case of twelve

bottles will most often get you at least a 10% discount, sometimes even six bottles will be discounted. Always ask for mixed case prices.

Store any wine bottles lying down, to keep the cork moist. Several wineries now use screw tops, which were considered gauche in the past but quite frankly, they are really an improvement and they are no longer considered a mark of poor quality. But store any wine in a dark, dry and cool area (hint: the top of the refrigerator is not it).

When serving any wine temperature is important. Generally speaking white wines should be served chilled, red wines at room temperature. It is advisable to open red wine and let it breathe before serving, especially for older, complex vintages. Again, your own experience will be your guide.

Wine glasses should always be clear, never colored, so you can judge the color of the wine correctly. In my opinion, wine glasses should also have a stem by which to hold them. The latest fad of using wine tumblers looks like a sales gimmick to me. Also the trend of using a different style of glass for every type of grape is excessive. Unless one is truly snobbish about wine customs, a glass for white and a glass for red wine, plus a champagne/sparkling wine flute, should suffice. I might add that a good wine glass can add to the enjoyment of wine, and I cannot understand why some restaurants neglect that aspect and serve wine in clumsy, thick-rimmed tumblers.

WHITE WINES

Riesling

This is a light, delicate and fruity, generally sweet wine, but during the last two decades vintners have been making semi-dry and dry Rieslings also. Alcohol content is usually between 8.5-11.0%. For an outstanding sweeter Riesling, pick a Mosel wine from Germany. Even President Jefferson already imported German Mosel Rieslings. For a drier and more full-bodied Riesling I prefer wines from the renowned Pfalz area or the Baden region of Germany. In the USA good dry Rieslings come from the Finger Lakes region of New York. **Dr. Konstantin Frank Winery** and **Hermann Wiemer Vineyard** are well known for their excellent dry Rieslings. Most American Rieslings from other regions are too sweet for my taste.

Riesling goes very well with oriental dishes. It also pairs well with seafood of all types, and is one of the few wines that pairs well with sweets. It is also splendid on its own, as an aperitif or a dessert wine.

Across the Rhine River from Germany, France produces excellent Alsatian Rieslings in the Alsace-Lorraine region. These Rieslings are still fruity but are made much drier than their German neighbors. Other outstanding drier Rieslings come from Austria.

Sauvignon Blanc/Fumé Blanc

This is a dry wine of medium weight, with pronounced flavors of citrus fruits, peach, apple, sometimes with a taste of grass or a soft smoky taste. Excellent examples come from California. Outstanding versions are produced by New Zealand. Alcohol content generally about 13.0%. It is a superb and refreshing wine not only for the summer, but deserving of attention as a white wine of choice any time of the year.

Sauvignon Blanc, sometimes also called Fumé Blanc, pairs well with Asian dishes and grilled sea food. Serve it with chicken, if grilled or lightly sauced. I love it with a garlicky Mushroom Risotto. You may like it with other dishes as well; it is a matter of personal experimentation.

Pinot Gris

Depending on its origin, Pinot Gris can be a full-bodied, well-rounded dry wine of expressive impact, with an alcohol content of about 12.5-13.5%. Good examples of this type come from Oregon in the Pacific Northwest of the USA. Try the offering from **Ponzi** vineyards. Germany produces a wonderful version of Pinot Gris, called Grauburgunder, and so does France with its Alsatian style Pinot Gris. There is a lighter sweeter version, usually from Italy, called Pinot Grigio. It can be a refreshing libation, but if you try an Italian PG, go for the **Santa Margherita** label or the offerings from the Alto Adige region (the German-speaking part of Northern Italy); I have found others to be less expensive, but also not memorable.

A full-bodied Pinot Gris pairs well with serious fish dishes like grilled salmon or sturgeon and also with oysters on the half-shell. Try it with roast or grilled pork.

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is a lush, full-bodied white wine, medium dry to dry, and particularly enjoyable when it is a white Burgundy from France. American Chardonnays used to be made layered with lots of oak, and only recently have American vineyards begun to produce a more open version, clean, crisp and with an aftertaste of fruit. Alcohol content is about 13.5%. It is a very popular wine, ordered in restaurants with any dish by people who can think only of Chardonnay when they want a white wine. Chardonnay goes especially well with cream-sauced or buttered dishes; it is a must for lobster.

Misc. Whites

Gewürztraminer is primarily grown in Germany, Alsace France, and to a lesser degree in California, Northern Italy, and Australia. Gewürztraminer tends to be a fruity white wine with a dry finish. The aroma is a flowery, spicy one, with particular bouquets of roses and honey. While you often drink Gewürztraminers young, some can benefit from 2-4 years worth of aging. Alsatian Gewürztraminers are the driest and, in my opinion, the best.

Another great white wine is the **GrünerVeltliner** from Austria. A light to medium dry wine, it is crisp and clean and very palatable with many dishes. My favorite pairing is with Wiener Schnitzel, but it would go well with any dish that is not heavily sauced.

Try a **Torrontés**, practically the signature white wine of Argentina, an aromatic medium dry wine, slightly spicy, with some effervescence. Pair it with seafood dishes like shrimp scampi, or a calamari risotto.

Sample a **Chenin Blanc** from South Africa. A good example from the USA comes from the **Pine Ridge Winery** in Napa.

Equally interesting and worthwhile is an **Albariño** from Spain; also medium dry, crisp and flavorful. It would pair well with mild vegetarian dishes.

RED WINES

Cabernet Sauvignon

Cabernet Sauvignon (called simply Cab by aficionados) is known as one of the world's finest red wines. With its depth of complexity and richness of flavor it is the favorite red wine of collectors and entire cults have formed around certain vineyards. In France this grape produces some of the best Bordeaux wines, whereas in the US the best Cabernets are grown in Northern California, in Napa and Sonoma, with Mendocino catching up fast. During a blind tasting in the late 1970s, Napa Cabernets won the tasting over French Bordeaux wines. Alcohol content is generally from 13.5-14.5%.

Depending on their origin (terroir), Cabernets can be mellow and mild, or hearty and rich, but any Cab worth its grapes is a structured wine. It has a deep red color, with the primary taste being black currant. Other overtones can include blackberry and mint, even chocolate, leather and smoke. Traditionally aged in oak, the wine also takes on an oaky, vanilla flavor. Higher quality cabs age extremely well (although a bit slowly), developing complexity with a sprinkling of five or six tastes within it. In my experience, this is one wine where climactic conditions can really make a difference in the wine from vintage to vintage. Cabernet pairs well with beef (Prime Rib and Steak), but is not limited to expensive meats. Trust it to be an excellent companion also to beef stews, roasts, or even meatloaf and burgers.

Syrah/Shiraz

This grape is called Syrah in the US, France and many other countries. In Australia it is called Shiraz, where it is considered the finest red wine grown there. Shiraz is certainly the most widely planted red grape in Australia. Now that Shiraz has become well known and popular, some wineries in the US that are making an "Australian style wine" with this grape, are calling their wines Shiraz as well.

The more I drink both Shiraz and Syrah, the more I become convinced that the two styles, while the same grape, are actually made into different wines and should be considered as such when pairing with food. Shiraz is a fruity wine, almost reminiscent of a full-bodied Beaujolais. A Syrah is still big, but drier and more structured, and with a more complex bouquet.

The Syrah grape is a native of the Rhone valley in France, where it is best known for its usage in Hermitage or Chateau Neuf-du-Pape. The grape creates a heavy red wine that is rich and full in the mouth and literally wraps around the tongue. Some classic examples of American Syrah now

come from mid-California, Santa Barbara area, specifically from the Santa Ynez Valley, rivaling the offerings from Sonoma. Alcohol content can be as high as 15.0+%.

Syrah is known for its spicy blackberry, plum, and peppery flavors. Often there are additional notes of licorice, bitter chocolate and mocha. Syrah is even affected by growing temperature - warmer climates bring out the mellower flavors of plum, while cooler temperatures spice up the wine. Some wines are actually labeled 'Cool Climate Syrah'. Syrah pairs very well with beef, lamb, buffalo, and other hearty foods. It could also be served with Indian, Mexican, and other spicy dishes.

Petite Syrah

The Petite Syrah grape creates a rich red wine. It is different from the syrah / shiraz grape even though the names are similar. The name Petite (small in French) comes from the smaller size grape. Petite Syrah is well liked by wine enthusiasts because of its full, peppery taste. Petite Syrah is predominantly planted in California, where it does well. Even more spicy than Syrah, Petites are anything but petite - they tend to be big, strong, muscular, and, well, peppery. Alcohol content typically about 14.5-15.5%

Classic flavors include plum, raspberry, blackberries, and black pepper. The wine tends to go well with stronger meats - game, beef, lamb, and spicy sauces. Petite Syrah can be drunk young or aged for a mellower flavor - its high tannin content makes long aging worthwhile.

Pinot Noir

Pinot Noir is a medium to heavy red wine that can be intense yet velvety soft. A Pinot Noir's color can be any of a range of hues - from cherry red to purple-red and even brown as the wine ages. Typical flavors include earth, leather, vanilla (from the oak), and jam. The fruity flavors are a mouthful and often taste like raspberry, strawberry, and plum. American Pinot Noirs began to be produced in the 1970/80s in Oregon, still a strong producer of this wine. Stiff competition is being mounted by California's Sonoma Russian River Valley area, where outstanding, and correspondingly expensive, Pinot Noirs are now being produced. Alcohol content can be anywhere from 13.0-15.5%.

Pinot Noirs are a must for duck breast, sauced venison, or sauced beef dishes like Beef Stroganoff. Also, serve it for any local game dish you might have, or even roast goose would be a good match. While some Pinot Noirs are meant to be drunk immediately, a fine Pinot Noir can easily age for 10 years or more.

Zinfandel

Red Zinfandel is a full-bodied, 'Big' wine, truly an "American Classic". It was even originally thought to have been made of native Californian grapes. Research has now shown that the Zinfandel grape originated in Italy where it is called Primitivo, but this wine is nowadays primarily grown in California. I prefer the robust, intense style of Zinfandel first produced by the early (1890s) Italian vintners in California over the

current, so-called 'elegant' versions. Try some of the 'Old Vines' offerings which are even more intense than the regular version. Drinking these is truly a 'mouthful'. Many locations in Northern California, like the Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma County, produce good Zins but I like Amador County, in the foothills of the Sierras, where the vines are not irrigated and they bake in the full sun all summer. Alcohol content can go as high as 16.0%.

The color of a Zinfandel wine is deep red, bordering on black. Zinfandel is a spicy, peppery wine, with a hint of fruity flavor - berries or dark cherries are often the taste range. This truly American wine goes well with "typical American" food - ribs, burgers, and obviously great with steaks or any hearty meat dish. It's big enough to match up with thick red sauces.

Merlot

Here I am not talking about French Merlot which is unmarked as to its varietal, but is offered by august estates from the appellations like Pomerol or St. Emilion. They are superb and pricey wines. My remarks concern American Merlots, and since this varietal does appear on wine shelves, I feel that I should say something about it. I am not here to offend Merlot growers or enthusiasts, but in my opinion it is generally an undistinguished wine. In the past, Merlot was used as a blend with Cabernet, but in recent years marketing efforts have tried to establish it as an alternative wine choice. I have tried Merlots, and I think this effort has mainly failed because truly good Merlots demand a high price and for the same money you can get a better value by choosing another grape. Suffice it to say, it is one of your options. It is a mellow red wine, try it and if you like it, by all means continue to enjoy it.

Misc. Reds

There are many more good red wines available, not only from here in the US, but from all over the world. And many of these are excellent selections at relatively low prices. Check out the **Tuscan Sangiovese** wines from Italy, try the Spanish and Portuguese reds, and by all means do not forget the Australian reds. I recommend trying a **Malbec** from Argentina. Chile also produces some satisfying red wines. If you feel adventurous, pick up the red '**Bulls Blood**' (Egri Bekaver) wine from Hungary or taste some reds from South Africa. Among the US wines I would suggest to sample some of the excellent red blends that are on the market, '**Marietta Cellars Old Vine Red**' comes to mind and it is delicious and a good value.

Rosé Wines

These wines are relatively light and refreshingly dry, pretty much all-purpose wines that go with just about any food, whether you go on a summer picnic or drink it with a Thanksgiving dinner. They used to be primarily summer wines, but are now enjoyed year-round. The best Rosés are the classic ones from the Provence region in the South of France. In the last few years very good American Rosés have come on the market, so there is no excuse not to have a delicious Rosé on

hand. Rosés are made from a number of grapes: pinot noir, cabernet, grenache or sangiovese. One of my personal favorites is the Mouvedre Rosé from **Cline** vineyards.

As you would with a white wine, buy the most recent vintage and drink a Rosé young; also chill it as you would a white wine. And do not confuse a Rosé, which should be dry, with a sweet Blush wine (White Zinfandel/White Merlot). Sometimes even the staff at the wine store does not know the difference, and they even display these two different types of wine in the same shelf area. Do me a favor, do not embarrass yourself by asking for White Zinfandel in a restaurant. That liquid is a sweet abomination which unscrupulous merchants have foisted on an uninformed public, and in my opinion it should only be drunk with the bottle hidden in a brown bag.

Champagne/Sparkling Wines

Again, choice here is a matter of taste and pocketbook. Francophiles will make a huge case for Champagne, and to be sure, these wines are good. Of course, only those sparkling wines from the champagne area in France – a relatively small geographic area – may call themselves Champagne. There are many great sparkling wines even from the rest of France, the Alsatian Crémants for instance, and other regions excel as well.

From the USA, my recommendation is **Gloria Ferrer** from Napa or, if you can spend a bit more, the sparklers from **Iron Horse**. If your pocketbook is truly stretched at holiday time, try a sparkling wine from New Mexico named **Gruet**. It is a total winner for the money (\$13-16). For the same price Germany's '**Henkell Trocken**' is fairly good if a foreign label is what you seek. Other countries like Italy and Spain make sparkling wines, but for my taste they are too sweet and most cannot sustain bubbles.

'Brut' is the driest category of Champagne/Sparkling wine. Even if the Champagne is labeled 'Extra Dry', it will be sweeter than the 'Brut' version. I would encourage you also to try the 'Blanc de Noir' and 'Rosé' variations of Champagne/Sparkling Wine.

All of the above wine descriptions are generalizations. You must remember that any wine, regardless of its grape, is influenced by these factors of its origin: Location, soil, general climate, site-related annual weather conditions, vintner's skill. For that reason, there are likely to be differences in any wine from vintage (year) to vintage, creating a totally new tasting opportunity each year. Aside from the gustatory pleasure of just drinking the wine, these differences every year in wines all over the world make finding and tasting wines such a fascinating adventure. Furthermore, the preparation of the dish for which the wine is intended could (and should) influence your wine choice.

At first you may want to rely on an experienced wine professional or connoisseur for advice, but as you gain experience and establish your personal bases for comparison, strike out on your own and begin to trust your individual taste. No matter what you are told about a wine, no matter how much or how little it costs, you have to like it and be able to enjoy it. Wine is like art. Yes, there are general standards, but ultimately the judgment is subjective and it is yours alone. So, learn, build memories, enjoy, and **Cheers!**

Wine is Fine...
(with apologies to Ogden Nash)

**Wine is fine,
but Vodka can Polka.
Yet wine can Tango,
put on quite a show.**

**As anyone knows,
Wine - red, white, or both
is made everywhere;
an annual taste fair.**

**Wine, choice of the Gods,
will beat all the odds.
In moderation
it is a sensation**

**Some labels and name
are totally lame.
They market image
rather than vintage.**

**But the proven estates
offer wine that elates,
meet every measure.
Each bottle a treasure.**

**If you're in the mood,
wine complements food;
for every dish,
from rib roast to fish.**

**Taste is important;
change is constant.
So don't be a dork
and go pop a cork.**

**Whatever the reason,
no matter what season,
to really feel fine
it's got to be wine.**

