

Noise In My Glass¹

Is Too Much Information Spoiling My Wine?

BY THOMAS M. CIESLA

Wine lubricates conversations, spawns scintillating debates, and uncovers hidden truths. Pliny the Elder's famous quote: "In Vino Veritas" – *in wine there is truth* – alludes not to a truth realized by the drinker, but to the truth revealed to others. The more wine we drink, the more we reveal about ourselves. Philosopher Roger Scruton perhaps best described wine as 'a virtuous intoxicant'. Despite the burden of philosophical, theological, and sybaritic layers developed over the centuries, wine remains surprisingly approachable. Enjoying a glass of wine is one of the life's simplest pleasures.

As the volume,²variety,³and quality of wine has increased in modern times, so



too has the amount of information about wine. There are hundreds if not thousands of books and articles written about wine, and more recently an equal number of websites, blogs and podcasts dedicated to the subject of wine. Mixed into this milieu are wine critiques, competitions and seminars. For some, this unending stream of words is a distraction from the simple enjoyment of the taste of wine.

¹ Originally published on www.charmingwinegeeks.com

² In a report titled 'World Vineyard, Grape and Wine' (Jan. 2007) by the California Wine Export Program, global wine production in 2005 reached 6.34 billion gallons.

³ Today there are an estimated 4,000 wines to choose from around the world, according to Buddy Harrell of Bennett Vineyards. (Beaufort Observer: Wine News; Feb, 2008)

So I ask the question: 'Does knowing about wine make my wine taste any better?'

Is Ignorance Bliss?

As a matter of survival, the human palate (as with our sense of smell) has over the millenia, developed a predilection to good tastes and good smells. If it smells good and if it tastes good – it's probably safe to consume. It's no surprise that most individuals entering the world of wine are likely to first enjoy the sweeter, fruitier wine such as Rieslings, Chardonnays, and Merlots. These wines are pleasant and approachable, that is, they inherently taste good.⁴ Give these same individuals a glass of an acidic or tannic wine and they would probably scrunch-up their face and say "yuck!" No education or knowledge required here, just a natural human response and the essence of causality: negative input, negative response.

Developing a taste for different wines isn't about reading, it's about tasting numerous wines to get accustomed to an increasing array of flavors from a broader range of grape varieties and the unique components inherent in each. After trying several white wines for example, a person may find that they have a preference for perhaps a Chenin Blanc or a Sauvignon Blanc. Does someone's ignorance of the fact that the molecule 'mercaptan-4-methyl-4-pantano-2-one' gives Chenin Blanc that guava-like smell, or that compounds called 'methoxyphenols' give Sauvignon Blanc that "grassy" taste reduce the enjoyment of those wines? Unlikely!

⁴To explain why sales of sweet wine surpassed dry wines at his Texas winery tasting room, the CEO of the winery jokingly said, "We Texans talk dry, but we drink sweet." Then on a more serious note, he added that the majority of visitors to his tasting room (located in a popular tourist area), were not wine drinkers, so they naturally gravitated towards the sweeter wines.

Though it's easy to derive a level of pleasure from something without knowing anything about it, human nature inevitably drives us to learn more about something we enjoy – be it wine, cigars, scotch, apples or chocolate. As Aristotle said in the opening of his 'Metaphysics', "*All men by nature have a desire to know.*" Knowledge, of course, can be a double-edged sword. When someone, ignorant of wine except for the fact that they enjoy 'Liebfraumilch', decides to start reading about wine, intimidation inevitably follows. Suddenly the individual is thrust into a world of 'winespeak', wine experts, connoisseurs, sommeliers – and even snobs.

Much of what is written about wine is done from a reductionist⁵ viewpoint, dismantling a wine into its component parts and assigning often obscure or fanciful terms to each component. For someone new to wine – and sometimes even for more experienced tasters – reading an 'experts' tasting notes can leave a person confused. This reductionist viewpoint is at odds with the holistic way that humans actually experience the flavor of wine. As the famous French oenologist, Emile Peynaud acknowledged in his book: "The Taste of Wine", "it is impossible to describe a wine without simplifying and distorting its image."

While enjoying a glass of wine may be one of life's simplest pleasures, that veneer of simplicity masks a complex interplay of disparate influences, regardless of your level of wine knowledge. No individual tastes wine in a bubble of isolation. Inadvertently, your perception of a wine's taste is influenced by a variety of inputs and issues, as we shall see.

⁵Reductionism is the splitting down of a system into its component parts and then studying the components in isolation. While proven useful in the sciences (such as biology and physics) this process does have its limitations.

A Matter Of Taste

When someone is said to have ‘good taste’ in something – be it artwork, music, or cuisine - it usually refers to the fact that an individual has a studied, reflective understanding of the topic, a discriminating perspective. Like wine, each of these categories can be enjoyed by someone possessing no knowledge of the subject. However, unlike a painting, a musical performance, or a four-course meal, every flavor and texture (both subtle and profound) contained in a sip of wine is revealed in a matter of seconds. It’s often been said that a wine changes with exposure to oxygen and the drinker believes the wine tastes smoother over time. In reality, it’s the drinker that is changing faster than the wine as the ethanol anesthetizes the taste buds. Which taste is the one you are impressed by: the first, the last, or the evolutionary average? I have often opened a bottle of wine only to be disenchanted by the first sip. On taking a sip a few minutes later, however, the wine suddenly appeals to me.

The above phrase, *‘the wine suddenly appeals to me’*, brings up an interesting question about taste and wine: Am I tasting the same wine you’re tasting? That is to say, with all things being equal, (we both like the type of wine, it’s poured from the same bottle, same cleanliness of glassware, same exposure time to oxygen); does the wine in my glass taste the same as the wine in your glass? Perhaps, but it may be impossible to ever know.

Part of the problem in sharing tasting experiences is how many things effect how we taste: sex, age, genetics, the distribution and density of taste buds. Some would argue that overall, the sensitivity of our taste receptors in the general population varies within an acceptable range, thus assuring that each of us is having the same taste experience. But it’s important to remember that the world around us as revealed by our senses is actually an edited

edited version of reality. Each of us has a unique ‘take’ on our reality and therefore the wine in our glass.⁶ What we describe as ‘taste’ is really a multimodal experience processed by the brain structure called the orbital frontal cortex that brings together taste, smell, touch and vision, to create a unified sensation.

Speaking of taste, there is also the more ambiguous issue of the difference between the taste of a wine and what I like about the taste. Wine has three flavor profiles as it washes over our palate. First is the initial slap to our taste buds as the wine enters our mouth – an expression of the dominant components such as sugar and alcohol levels. The second profile introduces some of the more subtle components of phenol compounds, such as hints of leather or oak, and



⁶ This unique ‘take’ on something is often referred to as the ‘*umwelt*’, a German phrase that originally meant environment, but today is generally referred to as ‘subjective universe.’ For example, a bee, a cow, and a human would have very different perceptions when entering a room containing a vase of flowers. In Martin Heidegger’s work, ‘*Being and Time*’, the *umwelt* represents the everyday world of human activity: its cares, concerns and ends.

notes of lavender. The final profile is what remains on our palate after we've swallowed the wine – the 'finish' as it's called. Remember, all of these flavor profiles are experienced and processed in a matter of seconds. The flavor profile that most impresses someone determines the taste they like in a wine.

So Many Words, So Much Confusion

In Act 2, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet', Polonius asks Hamlet, "What do you read, my lord?" Hamlet replies, almost despondently, "Words, words, words!" Yet words are the only tool we have to communicate what we taste in a glass of wine. We tend to describe wines in terms of the taste and smell of other things such as licorice, leather, asparagus, cherries, plums. Rarely do we say, "This wine tastes like a Merlot."

The language used to describe wines is also a reflection of society at large. In the early twentieth century wine tended to be characterized by class, "considerable distinction and breed," as well as gender, "assertive and masculine," or "delicate and feminine." Today, descriptors have shifted towards food, especially fruits, vegetables, and spices. We also tend to personify wine. Wine has a 'nose' instead of a smell. It has character and can be sexy, generous, bold or aggressive, shy or demure. In one tasting instance a wine was referred to as, "a real slut of a wine." Occasionally, there's the somewhat enigmatic tasting note referencing, "aromas of black cherries and wet dog." Call me crazy, but I don't think I want 'wet dog' in my wine glass.

Describing wine is a surprisingly difficult task. Most of us would have little trouble describing a scene or painting with enough detail to allow the reader to picture it for himself or herself. Yet, when it comes to describing a taste or smell, there seems to be some sort of

disconnect. One can never find the words to accurately convey the essence of that smell or taste. For example, you can read numerous descriptors about what a 'corked' wine smells like, but you will never really know the essence of that aroma until you have smelled it for yourself. Your first 'corked' wine encounter is an unforgettable experience: you swirl the wine, lift the glass to your nose to take in the aromas and immediately jerk away. Then and only then do you truly know what a corked wine smells like. Words pale in comparison to the reality.

How important are words for enjoying wine? For the average wine drinker – and the average wine – not so much. It's better to speak in generalities such as: "nice fruit flavors," "not too tannic," "nice nose," or "nice finish." Surprisingly, words can also influence your perception of wine. If I were to hand you a glass of wine and simply say, "Here, try this," you might taste and say, "Hmmm, that's nice!" If, however, in a parallel universe I were to hand you that same glass of wine and say, "Here, try this, it's a young wine with hints of cherry, raspberry, and oak," would you then find those qualities? Were those qualities there in the first scenario and simply unnoticed or unspoken? Would the wine taste any better in the second scenario?

Research done by Antonio Rangel and associates at the California Institute of Technology underscored just how easily we can be influenced on judging the taste and quality of wine. They asked 20 people to sample wine while undergoing frontal MRI's of their brain activity. The subjects were told they were tasting five different Cabernet Sauvignons sold at different prices, though only three were served; two of the wines were represented at two different price points. A \$90 wine as provided marked with its real price and again marked at \$10, while another was presented at its real price of \$5 and also marked \$45. Results showed that the subject's brains

howed more pleasure at the higher price than the lower; changing the price changed the actual pleasure of the wine experience.

In another experiment conducted by cognitive psychologist Frederic Brochet, the same average-quality wine was served to people at weeks interval. On the first tasting it was packaged and served as a *'vin de table'* (common table wine), and the second it was served as a *'grand cru'* (quality) wine. On examination of the tasting notes, the *grand cru* had superior quality over the *vin de table*, even though it was the same wine.

Is Knowledge Bliss?

Have you ever been intimidated by a wine list in a restaurant? Have you ever walked into a wine store and froze in your tracks when confronted with endless racks of wines – most with names you can't pronounce? Perhaps some knowledge of wine just might be helpful after all. Even our sophisticated movie persona, James Bond, often leveraged wine knowledge to his advantage. In a scene from the movie 'Dr. No',⁷ Bond grabs a bottle of Champagne from the dinner table to deliver a heavy dose of whoop-ass to one of Dr. No's henchman. Dr. No interrupts him, "That's a Dom Perignon '55. It would be a pity to break it." Bond shrugs, places the bottle on the table, sits down and replies, "I prefer the '53 myself." Apparently Bond has no qualms about sacrificing a '55, but he may hesitate when faced with a '53. Even in the face of danger, Bond is a vintage-obsessed wine geek. Fantastic!

⁷Directed by Terence Young in 1962, this was the first in the long series of 'Bond' films. Despite the 'shaken-not-stirred' mystique of the character, wine always played a significant role in most of these films. In 'Diamonds Are Forever' (1971), Bond exposes an assassin posing as a waiter who doesn't know that Mouton Rothschild is a claret.

Scary wine purchasing scenarios and arch-enemy confrontations aside, in what circumstances does knowing something about wine enhance the enjoyment of your wine? Let's say you like German wines you've tasted at a friend's house, but don't know all that much about them. Since these weren't sweet wines, knowing the difference between a label containing the word Kabinett (a dry wine), versus Spatlese or Eiswein (which are very sweet), will save you from wasting your money the next time you buy one of these wines. When confronted with a glass of Viognier, some knowledge of Chardonnay and Viognier wines will allow you to appreciate the Viognier for what it is, since you already know it won't (or shouldn't) taste like a Chardonnay. You may not enjoy the Viognier, but at least you'll know what it won't taste like beforehand.



There is one arena where knowledge of wine is undeniable helpful – pairing wine with food. Here knowledge of acidity, sweetness, texture and flavors of both wine and food are

essential for a pleasurable match, but this is beyond the scope of this article.⁸

For the more serious wine drinker seeking more than just the most simplistic of pleasures, knowing and identifying the subtleties in a wine, or comparing one wine to another gives the tasting a certain complexity the casual drinker will never know. Here, knowledge combined with experience allows the drinker to enjoy both intellectual and sensory components when tasting a wine. Does this mean the serious wine drinker is getting more pleasure from tasting the wine compared to the casual drinker? Is the intellectual component truly pleasurable? Some may argue that it depends on your overall approach to life: sensory or intellectual. One side simply enjoys the experience, while the other has to think about and discuss what's being experienced. Perhaps these wine drinkers also experience a 'noise' in their glass, but a noise of a different nature: putting up with those boorish devils whose ignorance and lack wine terminology prevent them from engaging in proper conversation about the wine they are drinking.

In the wine-soaked movie, *'Sideways'*,⁹ the two male characters, Miles and Jack epitomize the extreme ends of the wine knowledge spectrum. In one scene, Miles the oenophile, seems to talk non-stop about the color, clarity, density of the wine, the scents of citrus, strawberry – and as he holds a finger over one ear – “the faint soupcon of asparagus.” All the while his buddy Jack looks on in wonder and can only say, “Wow!” Jack, the wine neophyte, simply takes a big gulp and exclaims,

⁸ Some excellent reads on wine and food pairing include: 'Wine and Food Pairing: A Sensory Experience' by Robert J. Harrington (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2008); 'Renaissance Guide To Wine & Food Pairing', by Tony Didio and Amy Zavatto (Alpha Books, 2003); and 'What To Drink with What You Eat', by Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page. (Bulfinch Press, 2007)

⁹ A 20th Century Fox, Michael London production (2003)

“I like it!”¹⁰ Obviously, both men enjoy the wine, but if sheer volume of words is used to determine enjoyment level, Miles is clearly ahead of Jack. For Miles, talking about what he's drinking is an essential part of tasting wine, so for him there is indeed an intellectual component to wine enjoyment. I wonder, however, if Miles covers one ear because subconsciously, he's tired of listening to himself.

So what is this irritating noise in my glass? Alas it comes from many sources. It's often been said the best wine is the wine you like, be it a Gallo, a Raffanelli, or a Petrus. I believe that taste, as with beauty and truth, is highly subjective.¹¹

Therefore, when we read a wine review or an 'expert's' tasting notes, what we're really reading about is the reviewer's personal interaction with the wine. Humans are not calibrated scientific instruments of taste. Remember we said earlier that our senses give us an edited version of reality. A critic's review of a wine is simply a report on the perception of his personal experience with the wine's taste. When someone attempts to translate that personal experience into words, it's that translation that creates the noise in my glass.

A second source of noise revolves around the culture of wine. If someone from a region where wine is usually mixed with a sweet, carbonated beverage were to taste a rich, higher alcohol based wine from California, they would likely find the wine somewhat unpalatable, as would western wine

¹⁰Peypnaud would likely classify him as a 'glutton', someone who is a "staunch consumer of quantity, unable to control his tastes and inclinations, will simply soak up the mediocre wines."

¹¹Immanuel Kant thought that the pleasures of tasting wine were only personal and idiosyncratic. Food and wine registered only personal preferences because of our senses of taste and smell "more subjective than objective."

drinkers find their sweetened mixed wines. For someone who loves California wines, comments from this visitor would simply amount to noise in the glass. Noise also arises from within the industry itself with rapid shifts in the 'varietal-of-the-decade', and even the wine style of the varietal, as with the change from heavily oaked, buttery California Chardonnay, to the drier, crisper style of the Old World.¹²

I said earlier that drinking wine is one of life's simplest pleasures. Therefore, it's not difficult to imagine that for millions of wine drinkers around the world their approach to wine will always be a casual exercise, viewing the wine in their glass as simply a pleasurable experience. Should they be looked down upon for their less 'civilized' approach to wine as Penyaud might say? I think not. Becoming a student or perhaps expert of wine is not a goal for everyone; there are more 'Jacks' in the wine world than there are 'Miles'. However, when these casual wine drinkers feel pressure to become more knowledgeable of wine, this contributes to the noise in their glass.

Most philosophers would agree that while wine itself is objective (as are all things outside of ourselves), our individually perceived taste of wine is truly subjective.¹³ Is the taste of wine *in* the wine, or is it within you? A delicate question indeed; perhaps the answer is *both*. Whether your approach to wine is sensory or intellectual, the wine in your glass is what it is. It asks a simple question: "Do you like this taste?" A simple response is appropriate. Anything more and the beauty¹⁴ is drowned out by the noise.

¹²Some of these changes are linked to the globalization of wine, and the desire for winemakers around the world to garner 'Parker Points'. The valued ratings of uber wine critics such as Robert Parker, among others, force winemakers to produce wine in a style that will receive high ratings and thus guarantee better sales.

¹³Philosopher Barry Smith provides an enlightened argument for the existence of the objective taste in wine beyond our subjective interpretation in his chapter: The Objectivity of Tastes and Tasting, in the book, 'Questions Of Taste: The Philosophy Of Wine' (Barry Smith, Ed., Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ In a report on the conference 'Philosophy and Wine: From Science to Subjectivity', James Goode asked, "Can wine be beautiful? We make aesthetic judgment about wine all the time, and while it's not all that common to hear wine described as beautiful, I don't see a reason why this shouldn't be the case."