

SPORTING QUESTIONS

"TASTING" VS. "DRINKING"

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

In this sports issue, it may seem a stretch to discuss wine as it relates to the competitive spirit. Considering that egos bounce around the sale, marketing, auctioneering and production of wine, surely this wonderful beverage should be protected from other forms of competitive intrigue?

Nevertheless, we gained our most valuable experience as wine tasters in blind-tasting competitions where the aim of the game is to guess a wine's origin. You and your team silently note down as much information as you can about grapes, country of origin, sub-region and vintage, with no labels, prices, grape varieties or regional data to go on.

Admittedly, "blind-tasting" is not much of a spectator sport. But perhaps the most bizarre competition we ever did was in the darkened cellar of Château Lafite-Rothschild as participants of the "20 sur Vin" contest. Our team was announced by trumpet fanfare as we competed with such French schools as the Sorbonne in a Bordeaux face-off. Each French university had brought a band of supporters, who sat in silence as we tasted our way through various wines and answered

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increasingly obscure questions about the history and production of Bordeaux wines. To our right sat the chateau-owning judges of the Commanderie du Bontemps in full medieval robes. The world of wine was never weirder.

But how do you "taste" as opposed to "drink" wine? Is serious tasting just a form of arcane "wine etiquette" or can you really enhance your pleasure of wine by learning a little more about tasting?

A suitable tasting glass need not be large, but should be tulip-shaped to capture the wine's aromas. The ISO, an internationally standardized glass made by Arcoroc, is ideal, but the Chinese Stone Island range has similar glasses. When you pick up the glass, always use the stem or base – don't touch the bowl, lest you influence the wine's temperature. The only case where it makes sense to cup the bowl is if a red wine has been served too cold.



Next, take a sniff. Wines that have immediately pronounced aromas are usually made from distinct grape varieties like Gewürztraminer and/or come from warmer countries. Next, swirl the glass, again holding the stem or base. This oxygenates the wine, releasing further smells. Finally, take a good mouthful, swirling the wine around like mouthwash. This is to enable your palate to taste the acidity, sugar or tannin which only the tongue can detect. If you really want

to enhance the flavor, try slurping the wine back across your palate. Finally, and most importantly, make notes on everything you taste. Then you'll start to see what you really like and improve your vinous memory.

Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker run Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting (www.longfengwines.com), Beijing's first independent wine consultancy, and are authors of the Dragon Phoenix Wine Blog.

SELECT SIPS

One to quaff
2008 Argento Sauvignon Blanc, Mendoza, Argentina (RMB 88)

With grapes planted at the higher elevation of Mendoza's Uco Valley, this aromatic white punches above its weight. Medium-green in color with distinctive guava and gooseberry aromas, this example has refreshing high acidity and balanced alcohol. (Available from Mercuris; contact Olivier Gilles at olivier.gilles@mercuris.com.cn)

One to drink
2007 Montana Chardonnay, Gisborne, New Zealand (RMB 145)

New Zealand is a fantastic source of refreshing whites and this wine represents good value in China. Green-gold in

color; the nose has attractive citrus and melon fruit which really sings. Lifting acidity and good length. (Available from Pernod Ricard; contact Jane Liu at jane.liu@pernod-ricard-china.com)

One to savor
2003 Parker Estate "Terra Rossa" Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra, South Australia (RMB 364)

This is an early maturing vintage of a superb Australian red from the "red earth" suited to Coonawarra Cabernet. Garnet in color; the nose is packed with mellowed black fruits, mature oak, leather and eucalyptus backed by softened chunky tannins, lifting acidity and great length. (Available from The Wine Republic; contact James Hutchinson at james@thewinerepublic.com)