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Wine 101 Experts answer your most basic questions about the fruit of the vine

By

Don't know a Grenache from a Gewürztraminer? Relax, you're not alone. We are not born with a taste for wine, rather we acquire one over time. Don't let a wine snob make you feel self-conscious. We were all babes in the vineyards once.

And don't feel intimidated when choosing wine in a store or restaurant. So-called rules about wine may not be as rigid as you think these days. Plunge in and learn as you go. To get started, listen to what these wine experts have to say about choosing, storing, drinking and loving wine.

ÿ Paris native Marcel Flori teaches classes at Harper College in Palatine for adults who want to learn about wine as well as for students pursuing a degree in the food and beverage industry. He is a former sommelier at Le Titi de Paris restaurant in Arlington Heights and has won several awards for his wine knowledge.

ÿ Jody Lay is a wine consultant and certified sommelier, formerly of Niche Restaurant and 302 West in Geneva. She has been enjoying fine wines and creating award-winning wine lists for 14 years.

ÿ Lisa Ayllon is the general manager of Cab's Wine Bar Bistro in Glen Ellyn where her husband, Luis, is the chef.

ÿ Lisa McCoy is the assistant manager at Hillgrove Wine Cellars, a boutique wine shop in Western Springs, and, until just 10 years ago, was a wine novice herself.

What should I look for on a wine label?

Lisa A.: "The house or brand name, vintage, varietals, percentage of alcohol, place of origin, estate, reserve, description."

Jody: "Variety or region; American, South American and Australian wines all state the grape variety clearly on the label, usually the biggest font type. French, Italian and Spanish wines are classified by the region they are grown and produced in, but the region is a valuable indicator to what grape variety is used to make the wine."

Marcel: "I think if you are looking just at the label and you are not really knowledgeable about wine, you are victimized by the label." Just because a bottle has a pretty label doesn't make the wine inside good. "For people who are a little more knowledgeable, they begin to build the taste of the wine in their mind. It's not just the wine in your mouth, it starts when you look at the bottle."

Lisa M.: "Look for region, varietal, alcohol content — bigger wines have a higher content."

Are the most expensive wines the best quality? Are the oldest the best?

Lisa M.: "The best is what you like; it's always subjective to your personal taste, but the higher-priced wines are going to be the most complex wines." As for vintage wine, use the Internet to find out which years were the best

at particular vineyards, and check Wine Spectator and Wine Advocate. “You have to do your research. You really want to know what the good years were in that region.”

Jody: “You don’t necessarily have to spend a lot to get a lot. There are many great, inexpensive young wines under \$10. Not all wines are intended to age. Beaujolais is meant to be drunk young, usually as close to harvest as possible. And many whites are freshest and easy drinking right after release, or a year old. Any more time and they can lose their bright flavors.”

Marcel: “You can have a wine that is \$5 or \$6 that is absolutely great.” In Bordeaux or Napa Valley you are paying for a premium location, but “price is not really an indication of the wine. If you look at a wine that costs \$2 and one that costs \$100 you may think that the more expensive one is 10 times better and that’s not the case.” Old wines are not always the best, either; some might be “completely dead” in the bottle. “Only a few wines are good for aging; it depends on the grape. In Bordeaux, a person might buy a case of wine at the birth of their child, and open it on his 20th birthday — that’s the old school. Most wineries nowadays concentrate on making wines that you can drink right away.”

Lisa A.: “There are great wines in just about every price point. Depends on what you are looking for and the occasion. Are you looking to impress your boss, or are you sitting out on your back porch? Older wines if stored properly and not kept past their prime are lovely. However, if you’re looking for a fruity, lively wine, you are better off with a younger vintage.”

At a wine tasting, what is the proper way to sample? What should I notice about taste, smell and appearance?

Jody: “You’re looking for the five important components of wine: color, clarity, bouquet, flavor and length. You swirl a small pour of wine in your glass, usually two to three ounces, to see the color and clarity of the wine. You can watch the ‘legs’ of the wine run down the side of the glass. This can be a clue to the age, body and alcohol level of the wine. Look at the clarity of the wine, are there particulates? Dark sediment at the bottom can indicate an unfiltered wine or an older wine; either way they’re harmless. You are also examining the color to determine age. If the color dissipates and lightens at the edges, it is older, whereas younger wines have bolder, richer color. You smell the wine to gather the bouquet of aromas; you need to take in excess air at the same time you smell the wine, either through your mouth or through the other nostril. That way your olfactory senses process the aromas and use your sense memory to identify the aromas. Believe it or not, the mouth is an important component of your sense of smell. Using your sense memory you can pick up traces of herbs, fruits or elemental aromas, like charred wood or sea air. Likewise when you taste the wine you need to take in excess air and move the wine around in your mouth. Each section of your tongue tastes different aspects of the wine. This will help you isolate the different flavors and match them to myriad different things your mouth has tasted before. Hold the wine in your mouth for at least 15 seconds to get *all* of the flavors. And finally, enjoy the finish of the wine, the length of time the flavors stay in your mouth.”

Lisa M.: “To get more of the bouquet you would swirl it, move it around in the glass to get some air to it. When I bring it into my mouth, I breathe air through my teeth so it aerates more in my mouth.”

Marcel: “The only thing you should be looking at is your own pleasure. Don’t listen to anything else, just your mouth and your brain. It’s really just you and the wine. It’s the same when you listen to music; you don’t need to have someone coaching you.”

Lisa A.: “After a small amount of wine has been poured for you, notice the color — variation of red, white, dark, light, opaque, dense” Give your glass a nice swirl and smell. Dick Stelzner of Stelzner Vineyards taught me that everyone has a dominant nostril in which to smell. Take a small sip and swirl in your mouth to coat your taste buds. Then swallow. “The second sip usually tells the whole story. It’s just as important to find characteristics in a wine that you don’t like as well as the ones that you do.” The aroma and the taste indicate the kind of fruit as well as how those flavors are intertwined with spice, smokiness, leather, earthiness, etc. In white wine, look for colors such as pale yellow, straw, light green, golden or amber and note the kind of fruit and how those flavors are intertwined with grass, smoke, caramel, vanilla, spice, etc.

Does the shape of a wineglass matter?

Jody: “Only if you like to enjoy the bouquet of the wine. The shape of glass really can bring out more flavor and aroma from the wine. Many stylish wineglasses really aren’t that functional for highlighting the greater attributes

of wine. A good Riedel or Spiegelau globe glass can open up a whole new world of wine." Glasses should be clear, not colored, with a big bowl and a stem to swirl.

Marcel: Choose a thin glass to "see the wine floating in the air."

Lisa M.: The glass should be wide enough to get your mouth and nose in it at the same time.

Lisa A.: For white wine or lighter-bodied reds use a medium-size glass designed with a slightly larger opening to allow for swirling and oxygen. "Big red wines need to more room to aerate and breathe, therefore the glass tends to be more substantial with a wider opening."

Is it wrong to drink red wine with fish or white wine with beef?

Lisa A.: "You can never be wrong. That is the beauty of wine."

Jody: "There are no rights or wrongs — drink what you like. But if you are really concerned about drinking what goes with your food, pair your wine with the sauce, not the protein."

Lisa M.: "It's never wrong to drink whatever wines you like with what you are eating. It's subjective. If you like sauvignon blanc and you're going to have steak, that's fine."

Marcel: "People have rules for everything, but it's not really correct. The rules are limiting your experience. Red wine with fish, even though it has been taboo with French people, now it can go very well," though a red with a fatty fish may leave a tinny taste in the mouth. "With bouillabaisse, I drink a red wine, such as a Cote du Rhone and I find myself in heaven. If I had listened to the rules I would not have found my pleasure in it."

In a restaurant, why does a server pour a small amount of wine I've ordered for my approval? Does wine ever go bad?

Lisa M.: The server wants you to make sure the wine is not corked, meaning the cork has failed and air has gotten to the wine.

Marcel: "Wine can go bad. It happens quite frequently. It has happened in my classes. It will be very woody, very musky in the smell."

Jody: "Wine can go bad, but most of the wine you see in restaurant isn't old enough to be bad, or oxidized. The server pours you a taste to determine if the wine is 'corked' or contains TCA (trichloroanisole), which comes through as a wet cardboard aroma and leaves the wine with absolutely no fruit flavor." Some people are more sensitive to the aroma than others. "If you detect any inconsistencies in the wine, or if it isn't what you ordered, you should send it back. Restaurant wine is expensive, so make sure you get what you pay for!"

Lisa A.: "In every type of wine on the planet, there is a small percentage that, for one reason or another, becomes 'corked.' It doesn't matter if the wine is white or red, old or new from Europe or the U.S., the experience is the same: yuck." It is proper to return the bottle. Don't feel bad; the restaurant or store can return a bad bottle to the distributor.

At what temperature should I store and serve wine at home?

Lisa A.: Optimal temperatures for red are 52 to 65 degrees, white 45 to 50 degrees. Serving temperatures are slightly higher for both red and white. Generally, if you take out a wine to be served about 15 minutes ahead of time you are good to go."

Lisa M.: "I really like the 20-minute rule for serving: Take your whites out of the refrigerator for 20 minutes and put the reds in the refrigerator for 20 minutes before you serve them." Different varietals can be served at different temperatures. A light red, such as a pinot noir, might be served cooler than a heavier red, such as a malbec. As for storing wine, "I store mine in the basement. My guess is that it is about 65 down there."

Marcel: Store wine at 50 to 55 degrees. Serving temperature depends on the type of wine: 70 degrees for the most tannic wines, which is about room temperature in a chateau in France. "In France our palate is geared to a warmer temperature. In the United States, people like ice cold drinks."

Jody: “Ideal wine cellar temperature is 55 to 58 degrees, but really anything between 48 and 65 is still acceptable and suitable for aging. More importantly, you should avoid severe temperature changes — chilling a wine and then allowing it to return to room temperature — and vibrations, like storing a bottle on top of your fridge. These two things can destroy a wine, especially if a wine gets too hot. If a wine is ‘cooked,’ the cork will start to pop out of the top of the bottle or wine will start to seep out of the foil. These are things you can look for when shopping for a wine as well. Keep in mind that once you buy wine, you should get it home and in a secure spot as soon as possible. Never leave wine in your car for too long; think of it as a living, breathing thing.”

Why should I decant or open a bottle to breathe before serving? For how long?

Lisa A.: “Some wine can tend to be ‘tight’ or ‘tanic.’ Decanting helps the wine to breathe.”

Jody: “Decanting a wine serves two purposes: in younger wines to ‘open’ the wine by increasing the surface area and exposure of oxygen to the wine, for older wines decanting is used to separate the sediment by pouring off the wine. If you are trying to open up a wine I would decant the wine about two hours before serving, but many people decant the wine when they start drinking it and continue to enjoy the wine as it opens up. If you are decanting an older wine, it usually should not be decanted too far ahead of time. Older wines are more delicate and can fall apart with too much oxygen. If the wine is really old you have about an hour to drink the wine before you lose most of the fruit.”

Marcel: “For the white wines, you don’t need to decant.” For the red wines, the nose, the aroma, is always changing. As the time goes, different elements evaporate.” Decanting a bottle is better than just uncorking it because it lets more air in; the opening of a wine bottle is only the size of a nickel.

Lisa M.: Decanting a red wine is best, but the length of time varies by the type of wine and your own taste. “We had a merlot that needed to be decanted for two hours.” It’s just trial and error; pour a little out, taste and then taste again 45 minutes later.

How long can I keep an open bottle of wine before it loses taste?

Lisa M.:

Some bottles lose some of their good qualities overnight. Some get better if open for 24 hours. “A big red will last longer than a light red” and a white will last longest of all.

Marcel: “There are some wines that will die in the next half-hour. That will happen with a very old wine.” Most wine will turn and have a vinegar taste after a few days. Pouring a half bottle into a smaller container and sealing it will help keep air from getting to it. “Air is the worst enemy of wine.”

Lisa A.: If it is pumped or kept in a cool place, one to two days. The more full-bodied, the longer it will keep.

Jody: “That depends on the wine and where you store it. If you keep your open bottle with a tight seal on it in the refrigerator (that goes for red or white), it will keep a lot longer than sitting out on your counter. I have kept open bottles and continued to enjoy them for up to two weeks. You can also purchase products like Vineyard Fresh that replaces the oxygen inside the bottle with nitrogen and that will extend the life of your open bottle another week or so.”

Only inferior wines have screw caps rather than real cork, right?

Lisa M.: “That’s crazy. I lived in Australia from 2004 to 2006 and all their bottles are screw caps whether they cost \$100 or \$5.” Screw caps don’t fail. “There is really no good reason for a cork anymore” aside from the ceremonial effect of pulling a cork. “I wouldn’t judge a bottle by whether it has a cork or is capped.”

Jody: “Absolutely not! I look at a screw cap as a tiny metal guarantee! It is the best way to get exactly what the winemaker bottled at the winery: good, bad or otherwise. Yes, natural cork and synthetic cork are more romantic — the sweet hiss of the air as it leaves the bottle and the pop once the cork is out — but they are also a risk. Studies estimate that 10 percent of bottles sealed with a cork contain traces of ‘corkiness’ or cork taint.” A screw cap reduces the risk of corked wines. “Ideally, I prefer screw tops on wines I will consume in the next five years.”

Marcel: Screw caps are fine for wines especially those that don't have to be aged.

Lisa A.: "Some of the highest ranking wineries are utilizing alternative closures."

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