

## PART 2. WHAT MAKES ONE WINE SEEM BETTER THAN ANOTHER?

Last week's column discussed Color, Smell, Transparency and Acidity. In this column, I address (5) Viscosity, (6) Alcohol, (7) Familiarity, (8) Price/Reputation, (9) Smoothness and (10) Depth.

While **viscosity** is a word with specific meaning, it is used here generally as a synonym for mouthfeel. Is the wine's body thick or thin, is the weight light or heavy, and is the texture austere, unctuous, silky or chewy? Generally "thin" is not a word used to describe excellent wine, but all the others are. For me, in the winter I like a red that is heavy and silky or chewy, but in summer I may find more pleasure in a light, austere red even while delighting in a thick, heavy and unctuous white. Some persons – especially Americans drawn to California Cabernet Sauvignon – like a thick and astringent wine, which are characteristics usually associated with young and high-tannin wines. I, on the other hand, do not like astringency, and really want to settle in with a thinner, silky wine, such as a wine made of the tannic Nebbiolo grape that is a ten year-old from Barbaresco, or one using the lower-tannic Grenache grape that can be silky even when younger, such as wines from Châteauneuf-du-Pape (Southern Rhone, France) that emphasize the grape, including, Janasse's Cuvée Chaupin.

**Alcohol.** Usually, higher alcohol is a sign of a wine's inherent goodness. First, we are in a period when drinkers are asking for wines with high alcohol, and so winemakers respond to meet that consumer demand. But, there is a preference of long-standing that of wine from the same production area, higher alcohol is a positive mark of distinction. In Bordeaux, in Italy and in Spain, the word "superior" means wholly and simply that the wine has more alcohol than the same region's wine that may not use the adjective. In Italy, the difference between a "DOC" and a "DOCG" often includes a higher (never lower) alcohol level for the DOCG classification. But, of course, a wine's alcohol level can leave a taster unhappy as well, and thus the wine is called "hot" by the taster. Grapes and regions that often successfully produce higher alcohol wines are Australia's Chardonnay, Shiraz and Grenache, California's Chardonnay and Syrah, Rhone's Viognier and Syrah, Piedmont's Nebbiolo, and Veneto's Amarone made of Corvina blend.

We like that with which we are **familiar**. This matters in the voting booth, in worship, and while eating. Would you highly value a wine made of the Carignan grape or the Furmint grape? Carignan is one of the dominant grapes – although not the main ingredient – of the great Châteauneuf-du-Pape red wines, but it is the principal grape used in a number of the greatest wines we see from Spain today. The Furmint is the grape of the Hungarian dessert wine Tokaji. What about the wines of Bordeaux? Almost uniformly, we as world citizens have a high opinion of Bordeaux wines, and there is a good reason for that: for the past two hundred plus years all red wine in the world is compared to the great wines of Bordeaux. But, with the special exception of 2005 – from which vintage nearly every French wine will be at its best – for the last twenty years, the overwhelming majority of Bordeaux wines have been really poor products. Bordeaux continues with a terrific reputation for its best 5%, not for its entire line of wines. Napa Valley has a justifiably excellent reputation, well known not only in America, but around the world. So, we drink Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa Valley. I recommend these less familiar classic regions: from the Central Coast of California red wines made of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre; Barolo and Barbaresco from Piedmont, Italy; the Ribolla Gialla white wines of Friuli, Italy; Albarino white from Spain; Cabernet Sauvignon from Walla Walla, Washington and from Chile;

and, especially, the white wines of the Rhone, made from either the Roussanne or Marsanne grape.

The **price** of a wine is almost always indicative of one of two separate things: its quality and its scarcity. It is knowing the price-driving reason for a wine's cost that is so important. Unless you are a collector *and* trader, you will not want to pay for scarcity, only for quality. Three dominant factors drive scarcity: very low production, of course; high reputation and public familiarity; and age. The Bordeaux right-bank wines Le Pin and Petrus are very fine products, but their sky-high prices are a function of scarcity, not quality. The Amarone producer Dal Forno commands high prices because the wines are consistently of exceptional quality. Age adds to the price of wine in three ways: the holder of the wine has had the costs of storage in refrigerated space and the loss of use of money used to buy the wine, the increase in quality (if that is true), and the decreased availability from the fact that other bottles are being consumed. **Reputation** works on two fronts: long term and vintage-specific. A reputation made over many years will often lead to familiarity, and this operates most specifically for an entire winery or region, or even for a grape. Many of us know the reputations of Gallo, Kendall-Jackson, Lafite-Rothschild, Chianti, Burgundy, Napa Valley, [yellow-tail], Grange, Rioja, Roederer. A vintage (which is a year) from a particular region is rated. Tuscany is considered to have had exceptional vintages lately in 2001, 2004 and 2006. But among enthusiasts and collectors, a reputation for a specific wine (even from a producer's version from a specific vineyard) is set by the critics, especially through Robert Parker's Wine Advocate, and to a somewhat lesser extent by a handful of other subscription-only reviews. I look substantially at the comments of the reviewers, for the reviewer is speaking directly of the exact bottle I may purchase or pass on.

**Smoothness** and **depth** are two substantial components of mouthfeel. For most drinkers, more smoothness and more depth are positive qualities.

So, what makes one wine better than another? It is the combination of all the qualities mentioned. If there is **balance** of the qualities you like, it will be a good wine for you.

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