

WHAT MAKES ONE WINE SEEM BETTER THAN ANOTHER?

These are the things each person considers, whether the person is aware or not. Certainly there are other matters, but we all evaluate these: (1) Color, (2) Smell, (3) Transparency, (4) Acidity, (5) Viscosity, (6) Alcohol, (7) Familiarity, (8) Price/Reputation, (9) Smoothness, and (10) Depth. We begin in order.

Color is the first thing we are likely to notice about a wine. A significant number of people stop here with a particular wine because the person insists he or she “does not like red wine” or “does not like white wine.” The same might be said about a rose, sparkling wine or fortified wine. It is not my cause to complain. However, once moving ahead, a red may seem a bit brown – perhaps signifying the person is in fluorescent light or that the wine is oxidized, may appear very light – signifying the wine is a “claret” type from West Bank, that the wine is quite mature, or that the wine is watery, and may appear more purple than red – meaning the grape is more likely Syrah or Nebbiolo than Gamay or Sangiovese. For whites, a dessert wine will usually get more golden and then even light brown as it evolves through a few decades of age. A more concentrated look will more often signify a Chardonnay or Gewurztraminer than a Sauvignon Blanc or Riesling, but the same is also true for any concentrated wine over a watery one. Wines from Friuli, Italy (the furthest Northeast region) are often quite orange, since the white grape wines of several wineries there spend a long time – like red wines – sitting with the grape skins before bottling. Color standing alone, then, is generally not a characteristic by which we judge the actually quality of a wine.

Smell. Are there real wine aromas or is there an odor of cork, sulfur, putrefication? While these all signal the need for substantive investigation, a corky or sulfur smell may blow off in a short time. But if these smells persist, then this is a sign the wine is “bad.” Certainly a wine that is “bad” is of low quality; however, it may be the single poorly-stored bottle, not the entire wine production that is off.

Transparency is a part of color, no doubt, but it signals specific characteristics. A wine that is not fined or filtered will often appear cloudy in its youth as the dissolved solids block the light. Certain grapes just provide denser color and others less dense color. Without also knowing the grape(s), how a wine was made, or even the year and area of the world, the transparency or opacity of a wine still tells us almost nothing of its quality.

On entering the mouth, a white wine with detectible **acid** will usually be more pleasing than one without. This is a desired sensation of wines made from the popular Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, and Pinot Grigio grapes. However, the great white grapes also include those most of us will encounter much less often: Marsanne and Roussanne, both native to the Rhone in France, Chenin-Blanc of the Loire, France, the Gewürztraminer, which is grown in Alsace, France and in Alto-Adige, Italy, Viognier of Rhone, France, and Semillon of Bordeaux’s Sauternes region. None of these is particularly enhanced by noticeable acidity. For red wines, it is the presence of acid that allows a wine with tannins to last a long time and thus develop the highly-pleasing complexities of great red wine. So, acid in the mouth is a sign of high quality for some wines, but for many it is a sign the wine can be great. Very low acidity is often a sign that other components will likewise be of low quality.

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