

4 Easy Steps to Wine Tasting

Knowing a few simple tips about tasting wine can enhance your wine experience by leaps and bounds and easily transition you from a wine lover to a wine expert.

Legend has it that Cleopatra once promised Marc Anthony she would "drink the value of a province" in one cup of wine, after which she drank an expensive pearl with a cup of wine. Marilyn Monroe is rumored to have bathed in a bathtub of champagne. The lure of wine is cross-cultural and going strong. Enjoying wine, once surrounded by pomp and circumstance, is now something that many of us do on a daily basis to enjoy food, friends, and family. There is no reason each experience shouldn't be as exceptional as taking a bath in Champagne. Knowing a few simple tips about tasting wine can enhance your wine experience by leaps and bounds and easily transition you from a wine lover to a wine expert.



STEP 1 - LOOKING

Fill the glass about one-third full, never more than half-full. Pick it up by the stem. This may feel awkward at first, but there are good reasons: Holding the glass by its bowl hides the liquid from view; fingerprints blur its color; the heat of your hand alters the wine's temperature. Wine experts can usually tell right away how much a person knows about wine by looking at the way they hold their glass.

Focus on the hue, intensity and clarity of the wine color. The true color, or hue, of the wine is best judged by tilting the glass and looking at the wine through the rim, to see the variation from the deepest part of the liquid to its edges. Intensity can best be gauged looking straight down through the wine from above. Clarity-whether the wine is brilliant, or cloudy with particles-is most evident when light is shining sideways through the glass.

STEP 2 - SWIRLING

Next comes the swirling. This too can feel unnatural, even dangerous if your glass is too full and your carpet or clothing is new. But besides stirring up the full range of colors, it lets the wine breathe a little and releases some of the aroma for examination. The easiest way to swirl is to rest the base of the glass on a table, hold the stem between thumb and forefinger, and gently rotate the wrist. Right-handers will find a counter-clockwise motion easiest, left-handers the reverse.

Move the glass until the wine is dancing, climbing nearly to the rim. Then stop. As the liquid settles back into the bottom of the glass, a transparent film will appear on the inside of the bowl, known as the wine's "tears" or "legs." You will often hear people pondering about the legs or showing them off, "Hey look at the legs on this wine!", but in truth they're simply an indication of the amount of alcohol in the wine: the more alcohol, the more tears or legs.

STEP 3 - SMELLING

When you stop swirling, and the legs are falling, it's time to take the next step: smelling. Swirling the wine vaporizes it, and the thin sheet of liquid on the sides of the glass evaporates rapidly; the result is an intensification of the aromas. I'm sure you've seen wine snobs do this and you have laughed at them, but stick your nose right into the bowl and inhale.

There's no consensus about the proper sniffing technique. Some advocate two or three quick inhalations; others prefer one deep, sharp sniff. I've seen tasters close one nostril, sniff, then close the other and sniff again. It really doesn't matter how you do it as long as you get a good sniff in. With practice, and keen attention, you'll learn how to maximize your perception of aromas, and then how to decipher them.

The world of smell is vast and bewildering. First of all, our olfactory equipment is incredibly sensitive; we can distinguish aromas in quantities so small that laboratory equipment can scarcely measure them. Second, our analytic capacity is extraordinary; estimates of the number of different smells humans can identify range up to 10,000!

As with color, wine's aromas offer insights into character, origin and history. Because our actual sense of taste is limited to four simple categories (the well-known sweet, sour, bitter and salt), aroma is the most revealing aspect of our examination. But don't simply sniff for clues. Revel in the sensation. Scientists say smells have direct access to the brain, connecting immediately to memory and emotion. Like a lover's perfume, or the scent of cookies from childhood, wine's aromas can evoke a specific place and time with uncanny power.

STEP 4 - TASTING

With the aromas still reverberating through your senses, put the glass to your lips and take some liquid in. How much? You need to have enough volume to work it all around your tasting apparatus, but not so much that you're forced to swallow right away.

Because you don't want to swallow, not just yet. It takes time and effort to force the wine to divulge its secrets. I keep a pleasant wine in my mouth for 10 to 15 seconds, sometimes more.

Roll the wine all around your mouth, bringing it into contact with every part, because each decodes a different aspect of the liquid. Wine provokes sensations, too: The astringency of tannins is most perceptible on the inner cheeks; the heat of the alcohol burns in the back of the throat.

First, as you hold the wine in your mouth, purse your lips and inhale gently through them. This creates a bubbling noise children find immensely amusing. It also accelerates vaporization, intensifying the aromas. Second, chew the wine vigorously, sloshing it around in your mouth, to draw every last nuance of flavor from the wine.

Don't forget the finish. After you swallow, exhale gently and slowly through both your nose and mouth. The retro-nasal passage, which connects the throat and the nose, is another avenue for aromas, which can linger long after the wine is finally swallowed. You'll find that the better the wine, the more complex, profound and long-lasting these residual aromas can be. With great wines, sensitive tasters and minimal distractions, the finish can last a minute or more. It's a moment of meditation and communion that no other beverage can create.

About The Author

Jennifer de Jong is a long time wine drinker, enjoyer of wine, and non-wine-snob. She is the founder of Vino Vixenz. A snob-free zone to learn wine tasting.

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