



Who hasn't been in this situation: You want to buy a nice bottle of wine for dinner, you are in front of the supermarket shelves, but simply don't know which one to choose? There is no one to advise or no option to try before you buy, you're somewhat stuck. You could of course just go by price It's fairly safe to get a well-made, decent bottle from £10 upwards (and then buy in the half price offer), but price is no guarantee you will like the wine.

The solution to the problem is simple and enjoyable, but not instant: You'll need to drink your way through it. There are oceans of good wine out there, but in the end it's up to you to judge whether you like a certain wine or not.

You may find a perfectly acceptable solution on your first foray and stick with it. You may decide that the experiment is more fun than the result and never tire of the search for new tastes.

To establish some structure to your comparisons have a look at our guide about occasion, country and grape varieties and the art of tasting wine.

1 – WHICH WINE FOR WHICH OCCASION?

This is not always a question of budget – but depends on your preferences and whether it is to go with food or by itself.

Sparkling is not only for celebrating special occasions, it's simply a great way to start a perfect evening: light, refreshing and fun.

White wine often goes with appetizers and traditionally with white meat and vegetable dishes, while the heavier reds are saved for red meats, pasta or the cheeseboard afterwards.

A sweeter dessert wine can complement the finale to a meal or present an alternative to a fortified wine or liquor.



2 – OLD WORLD VS. NEW WORLD

Now that you have decided for the left or the right aisle, the second clear category is the country or region of origin. It used to be quite easy to compare old versus new world wine producers. As the area where wine was first cultivated European producers tend to stay with old traditions and legislations and change can be frowned upon. This contrasts with the innovative, university-trained approach from the new lands in Americas and with the areas of South Africa and Australasia who experiment with new methods to produce easy-drinking wines with sweet, fruit flavours.

Although the traditional countries are slowly adapting new methods or other grape varieties, you will still find that the new world countries are more likely to produce fruity, less complex flavours. Each country has, to a certain extent, a 'typical' style of production and flavours and/or grape varieties that have traditionally grown and been cultivated, adjusting to the climate, soil and weather.



3 – WHAT'S WRITTEN ON THE WINE LABELS



Wine labels contain different information depending on local regulations. If you look at the New World wines, labels can be a bit easier to understand: grape variety or blend, producer, where the grapes were grown and the alcohol content are clearly marked.

Sometimes the Old World can be a bit trickier to decipher if they put the location and not the grape as the primary information. It seems they almost expect the consumer to know that Chablis is made of Chardonnay grapes and Bordeaux is based on Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

However, basic information like alcohol percentage, amount and country of origin will be on every wine; after that it's either variety of grape, the region or the producer which will be predominant.

The year of production or vintage is displayed on the bottle if the contents come from the same year's harvest. There is only ever one grape harvest per year, but grapes can be picked in late summer through to late autumn depending on their variety, the production method, the territory and the prevailing weather. A good year is usually represented by a wet spring and a long hot summer without the intervention of any rogue frosts.

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4 – PRINCIPAL WHITES

CHARDONNAY

A light, crisp dry wine with lots of tropical fruit flavours. Hugely popular at all levels of the wine-buying public with Chablis and Champagne giving it a real kudos.

It's an extremely versatile wine, suitable for a wide range of food.

Typically light and crisp for old world producers, but much more fruity and often oaked (matured in barrels over a specified time to inherit a further depth of flavour) in the new world wines.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Light and tart dry wine, lots of 'gooseberry' flavours. Pedigree versions to look for are from the Sancerre and Pouilly Fume areas of the Loire in central France.

Unlike many white wines, the acidity accounts well for itself accompanying strongly flavoured dishes.

Originating in Bordeaux, it has recently discovered a new and significant base in New Zealand.

SEMILLON

Luscious dessert wines or rich, oily-textured, dry wine; often blended with acid grapes like Sauvignon Blanc for balance.

As a dessert wine it's great with any rich dessert or also pate or blue cheese; as a dry white is great with fish.

Used in Bordeaux, Sauternes wines are dessert wines, while Australia produces unique, dry wines, often paired with Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

CHENIN BLANC

Crisp and dry with lots of acidity, but quite often over-cropped, where the yield of grapes from each vine is too high and the flavour per grape is diluted as a result. A good Chenin Blanc tastes of tropical fruits.

The lighter styles will go well with chicken or white fish; the sweeter styles with blue veined cheese and desserts made with fresh fruit.

Coming from the Loire Valley, this is now also a staple of South African vineyards.

PINOT GRIGIO/PINOT GRIS

Pinot Grigio is gaining more and more popularity and, although originating from Alsace as a Pinot Gris, it is now Italy's most successful white wine where the originally luscious honeyed rich wine is made into a dry, light, crisp white wine with delicate flavours, sometimes subtle citrus fruit.

The pink skin of the grape has also prompted some winemakers in Italy to make it into a rose wine, or even sparkling rose.

The dry crisp wine will go well with light chicken or fish dishes, the rich styles from Alsace can demand richer dishes. This grape is also grown in the cooler climates of New Zealand.



5 – PRINCIPAL REDS



CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Rich and fruity; pure and simple blackcurrant flavours and aromas. Rich in tannins and colours due to thick skins of the grape, making it an ideal partner to blend with other, often local grapes and giving it rich colour and flavour.

Best drunk with any grilled meats to compliment to its rich fruity flavours.

Not just blended in the classic Bordeaux style, in Australia it is often matched with Shiraz and in Italy with Sangiovese to produce the 'Super-Tuscans'.

MERLOT

Known for its soft and plump characteristics with cherry fruit flavours, Merlot goes with a wide range of food – very nice with ripe brie and camembert.

Originally a Bordeaux variety, it has found new popularity in the US due to its softness and low tannin, but needs to be grown in cooler areas to fully develop its flavours.

PINOT NOIR

Light with variable fruit and delicate floral flavours it produces fine, red wines, but excels at producing some of the best sparkling wines and is an essential component in Champagne. It comes as a surprise to some that a red grape is used in producing a white wine, but with the skin removed from the maturation process it has no bearing on the colouration.

Tasty in Champagne drunk by itself, or as a still red wine depending on whether it's a lighter style (grilled salmon) to game casseroles for the fuller-bodied wines.

'The' grape of Burgundy is now also being produced in the New World.

SYRAH/SHIRAZ

Fruity and slightly spicy with a smoky or creamy feel. This rich grape demands rich dishes – venison or roast beef make a good companion, also good with a BBQ.

Syrah wines from the Rhone Valley in France tend to be smoky, perfumed and fruity, while Australian Shiraz is creamier with chocolaty sweetness and ripe berry fruits.

6 – A WORD ABOUT SPARKLING WINES

Sparkling wine has got significant levels of carbon dioxide in it which makes it fizzy. Carbon dioxide can either come from natural fermentation within a sealed container - in bottle ('methode champenoise') or bigger tanks ('Charmat') - but can also be injected, a much cheaper method, usually for the cheaper styles.

Champagne is the classic example of sparkling wine; its name is protected by legislation and has to be exclusively produced in the Champagne region of France. It is the benchmark wine against which all other sparkling wines are measured: crisp, apple flavours with fine bubbles.

It's slightly under-ripe grapes from cooler climates that make sparkling wine so lean, crisp and refreshing and the best sparkling wines are therefore being produced in the cooler regions of France and New Zealand.

Other terms for sparkling wine which hasn't been made in the Champagne region are "Mousseux" or "Crémant" in France (especially Loire and Alsace), Spumante in Italy (Prosecco being a region and grape), Cava in Spain, Sekt in Germany and Austria.

Sparkling wine is usually white or rosé but can also be produced from red grapes like Australian Shiraz; its sweetness anything from very dry ('brut') to sweeter styles ('doux').



7 – TASTING

Formalised tasting consists of 3 steps involving the 3 senses of sight, smell and taste.

STEP 1: SIGHT

In the first step, tilt the glass at a 45 degree angle against a white background. Young white wines are greenish yellow while the full-bodied wines are more golden/amber; young red wines are equally coloured until the edge, older wines look watery at the edge. Look at the 'legs' of a wine (the pronounced rivulets where the liquid holds the side of the glass after tilting). Pronounced legs indicate a full bodied wine and higher alcohol content.

STEP 2: SMELL

Swirl the glass, then take 2-3 sharp sniffs inside the glass to smell aromas. It is often not easy to describe what you smell, but the more often you do it, the more you will be able to identify the different aromas.

STEP 3: TASTE

Take a sip and 'slurp' to bring it into contact with air and swish it around in all parts of your mouth. Flavours will be picked up by the retronasal passages, the tongue senses taste sweet, bitter, tart, savoury; tactile sensations in the mouth, heat from alcohol in the back of your throat.

A last final step is to judge the overall impression and what aftertaste it leaves. A tasting chart is a useful tool to document and record your findings.

| TASTING ORDER | what to look for | how to describe |
|---------------|-------------------------|---|
| SIGHT | Colour | white: green, lemon, straw, gold, amber red: purple, ruby, garnet, amber |
| | Intensity | pale, dark, inky, opaque |
| | Legs | pronounced and persistent, faint |
| SMELL | Intensity of the aromas | faint, intense |
| | Aromas | fruit, herbs, floral, spices, oak |
| TASTE | Temperature | too cold could disguise fruit flavours too warm will make it seem alcoholic |
| | Body | light, medium, full (creamy) thin, lean, delicate, rich, big, heavy |
| | Flavour | What flavour? Is it the same as the aromas? |
| | Taste and Mouthfeel | Sweetness: rich, thick, sweet Savoury: rich, thick, savoury Acidity: crisp, refreshing, steely, tart Tannins: silky, smooth, velvety, astringent |
| | Balance and Structure | balanced, disjointed, concentrated, elegant, round |
| SUMMARIZE | Finish | short, moderate, long, lingering |
| | Quality | poor, good, excellent |
| | Preference | don't like, like, love |
| | Value | good, ok, overpriced |
| | Overall impression | Describe in one sentence |

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8 – OTHER TIPS

HOLD A TASTING EVENING

Tasting wine in a group can be a very social event. One of the best ways of exploring wine is to invite a few friends for a tasting party. Themes could be by grape: buy a certain grape from various countries and try to compare old and new world wines – you'll be surprised how different the same grape can taste.

Or by country: read up which grapes are typical for the chosen destination, maybe a bubbly to start, followed by a couple of whites, then a couple of reds and a dessert wine to finish it off. Accompanied by typical food of the region, maybe even some elements of music and dress and you're on your way.

Follow the basic wine tasting etiquette of sight, smell and taste and record your observations in a basic tasting chart. Not only will you soon be able to drill down to what you like, the activity is sure to demonstrate how diverse people's tastes are, even across a small group of friends.



VISIT WHERE THE WINE IS BEING MADE

Once you have found out about grapes, countries and your preferences, why not consider travelling to your favourite wine country and try to arrange a visit to your favourite vineyard? Being shown round the vines, meeting the vintner or eating some local food together with the wine

will make it an unforgettable experience and give the wine an additional dimension. There might also be some organised tours around that you can easily book into without having to worry about transport or language.

Setting out to expand your wine knowledge is a culinary adventure without an end. No-one can hope to know everything about wine, but it can be richly rewarding journey to let your taste buds guide you around the world's vineyards, cellars and kitchens.

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