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HOW TO CHOOSE WINE



Discover the joys of wine drinking...

How to Choose a Wine

There is nothing like a glass of wine for just about any occasion. Some would even decant a bottle for no apparent reason other than to simply enjoy a quiet evening with a glass of vino that others fondly call “the sweet nectar of Zeus.”

A lot of people today are beginning to discover the joys of wine drinking. And this number is set to increase...because that's just how the cork pops!

So whether you are drinking for health reasons or simply because you want to savor the sensual and cerebral bliss of downing a glass of your favorite red, white or even blush, rest assured that you are never alone in this endeavor.

But first, let's talk wine.

Know Thy Wine

“Wine is the most civilized thing in the world,” according to Ernest Hemingway.

The great American novelist also wrote in one of his best works, *A Moveable Feast*, that “in Europe, we thought of wine as something as healthy and normal as food and also a great giver of happiness and well-being and delight. Drinking wine was not a snobbism nor a sign of sophistication nor a cult; it was as natural as eating and to me as necessary.”

These two quotes pretty much cap it (or shall we say “cork” it?). Wine is so much a part of human history it is difficult to think of a world without this viniferous drink.

Why, the drink could even trace its history way back to the Neolithic Period in 8500-4000 B.C. in Iran where excavator, Mary M. Voigt discovered 6 wine jars at the site of Hajji Firuz Tepe in the northern Zagros Mountains. The relics are the oldest known signs of our ancestor's enthusiasm for wine and serve as an attestation to our present and very real love for the 'Drink of the Gods.'

Wine is great as a standalone drink, as something to go with dessert or the main dish, or as something you add to your cooking for that extra "punch."

Whether you are looking for wine to pair up with food or drink alone, or you are merely out for a bit of culinary adventure, choosing the right wine to do all those things is an important task that needs a closer look.

But before we begin, take note of the following necessities:

- Make sure there is a **local wine store**, or at least a wine shop that is a short drive from your neighborhood. It should be one that carries something besides jug wines.
- A **cork pull**. But, of course, how else are you going to take that first spectacular sip if you haven't even popped the cork?
- A **notebook**. This one is merely optional but advisable if you are serious about wine hunting. Taking down notes as you browse through wine racks will help you remember your preferences.

While these three things won't make a wine snob (sorry, we meant "wine aficionado") out of you, they do give you a good foothold when it comes to choosing the right wine.

And now for the all important question...

How Do You Choose a Wine?

Three words. And they all start with the letter “p.”

1. Price

This is one of the first concerns people have about choosing a wine. It may have something to do with the myths surrounding wine, the most popular of which is that wine is a drink for the elite.

But this is just that – a *myth*. There is no truth to it. In fact, many good wines are at prices that us po’ folks can afford. And while some of the most expensive wines are high quality, it does not mean that you would have to mortgage your car just so you can enjoy a bottle of great Cabaret Sauvignon. With today’s market, you can find a great number of good wines for as little as \$15 and even lower.

Here’s a tip: ***Try setting a budget before going wine hunting.*** The wine merchant should be able to give you some good suggestions for the price range you’re after.

2. Preference

But, of course, preferences are an all important factor when selecting good bottles. Certainly, we all have preferences and they can vary from person to person so it does not necessarily mean that what is good for some people will also suit your fancy or what you think is right is right for other people. It depends on

personality, on style, and your eccentric taste, not on what some wine magazine is saying.

But note that preferences in choosing the right kind of wine also do not necessarily mean *personal preferences*.

Think: what are you planning to do with the wine? Are you having a dinner party? Pizza night? Or just a quiet evening with no one but family and a few close friends?

And then think: With such an evening in mind, who are you going to spend it with?

And finally, think: Will the wine you've chosen suit their tastes?

You can then work from there and choose a wine that speaks not only to *your* preferences but those with whom you are planning to drink the wine with.

3. Pairing

Most people looking for the perfect bottle of wine are actually looking for wine that specifically goes well with a particular food. If you are one of these people, then you must know that the ingredients are the key.

The golden rule of thumb when it comes to pairing wine with food is: ***balance the weight and body of a wine with the delicacy or richness of a particular dish.***

Or more simply: red with meat, white with fish or fowl.

Follow this rule and the right kind of wine will bring out the flavor and richness of the food you are serving.

So you have learned the answer to the all important question of how to choose a wine. They should not be hard to remember. Just think of the 3-P factors – **P**rice, **P**references, and **P**airing.

And now for the step by step guide to choosing a wine:

Step 1: Classify Them by Regions

There are as many kinds of wines as there are people who love to drink them. To start with, ***classify them by regions***. The regions are the areas where the grapes, where wine comes from, are cultivated.

France in a Glass

France is one of the old world countries that mass produced wine and many of the wines we know today still bear the name of the French wine regions.

France's long standing history with wine making dates back to the Ancient Roman times when the empire spread across Gaul, the old name for France. Then the Dark Ages came. As the Roman legions withdrew back to Italy, the clergymen were left to cultivate and tend to the vine gardens for their supply of sacramental wines. And from these pious beginnings, French wine was born.

There are nine major wine regions in France: ***Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Corsica, Cotes du Rhone, Languedoc-Rousillon, Loire Valley, Provence, and the South West.***

The region of Bordeaux is home to the “noble” variety of vine, the Cabernet Sauvignon, which produces such famous French wines as the Petrus in Pomerol, a favorite of the Kennedys, and the Margaux in Medoc district. Another famous French wine is the Chateau d’Yquem, a luminous white wine fermented from Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon grapes in Sauternes.

The red wine, Pinot Noir, and the white, Chardonnay, are produced from the grapes in the small region of Burgundy. The best of the French red wines come from Cote d’Or which is a tiny hilly district running along the narrow strip of the Saone River. Cote d’Or is traditionally separated into the stronger type of red wines, the Cote de Nuits, from which the French wine Nuits-Saint-Georges arose, and the lighter, more delicate type, the Cote de Baune, which is made famous by the Pommard French wine and the Volnay. French wines of equal repute are the dry white Burgundies like the Chablis from the northern region and the Meursults from the southern part of Cote d’Or.

The finest sparkling wine in the world unquestionably comes from Champagne, France. Champagne is fermented from Chardonnay grapes or sometimes called the “Blanc de Blanc.” Thick and delicately dry, chardonnay can be aged for several years, depending on its source. Other good sources of sparkling French wines of lesser stature are Burgundy, Savoie, and Loire, which incidentally produces practically all styles of French wines from fruity reds to flinty whites.

The Loire Valley produces three famous dessert wines, namely, Bonnezeaux, Coteaux du Layon, and Quarts de Chaume. These exquisitely sweet French wines are made entirely from Chenin grapes which are left in the vine until they become overripe and begin to acquire that so-called “noble rot.”

Countless other French wines are mass-produced in the country every harvest season.

California Dreamin' and Winin'

Many countries besides France produce fine quality wines. Among these countries is the United States, specifically the State of California. While Washington and Oregon states are also gaining popularity in terms of fine quality wines produced from their vineyards, California has long had a strong foothold in worldwide wine production.

A single bottle of California wine recounts the Golden State story: The lush of spring in a vineyard. A European who risks a fortune on a dream. The ancient study of cultivating flavor from soil. And then, the rejoicing when the vision became a successful reality embodied in a California wine bottle.

“California can produce as noble and generous a wine as any in Europe, more in quantity to the acre and without repeated failures through frosts, summer rains, hailstorms, or other causes,” Count Agoston Haraszthy de Mokcsa, the “father of California wine,” affirmed after an extensive tour of Europe and the Americas in search for the perfect land to plant his dream vineyard.

This declaration was spurred when the Count saw the warm days and breezy nights of the temperate valley of ***Sonoma***, the state’s premier producer of California wine, and found in it a dormant resource for planting excellent vineyards.

In 1975, ***Napa Valley***, a close neighbor to Sonoma, had about 20 California wine-making industries. Today, it has well over 200 and that’s only counting the California wine industry giants like Hess, Pepperwood Grove, and Beringer. Development in Sonoma County has the cool Carneros region carpeted with several vineyards. These wineries produce some of the best of California wines: Pinot Noir, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Zinfandel.

Wines from Down Under

Unlike the traditional wineries of France and Spain, Australian wine names are not based on the regions from which they are produced. So no “Champagne wine” for Champagne, France in Australia. Australian wines are named after the actual grapes.

The delicate art of wine-making was first introduced in Australia in 1788 by Captain Phillip of Her English Majesty’s First Fleet. It is understood that the first vines were planted in Farm Cove, which is now called the Sidney Botanical Gardens, thus setting the foundation of a long and interesting tradition of Australian wine and wine-making.

In the following years, many others followed in the steps of the British ship captain and soon, the first of Australian wines emerged. Because of its quality and better market price, the fledgling Australian wine industry got great reception overseas.

The country’s best known Australian wine region is in ***Barossa Valley***. Located in the southeast and just north of Adelaide, Barossa is one of the older regions for Australian wine growing and is recognized for its fine reds like the Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon. It is also home to a varied mix of winemakers, from the industry heavyweights like Penfolds to one-person ventures.

Near Barossa ***is Clare Valley***, another of Australia’s oldest wine regions and also one of the most scenic. With its hilly landscape, dry climate, and low irrigation, Clare Valley produces strongly flavored Australian wines, like the famous white wine, Reisling, as well as other red varieties.

Just a one-hour drive from Adelaide is ***Coonawarra***, considered the center of the Australian wine growing industry of the South East region what with its total

of 21 wineries just along the road to Penola. This red strip of land is best known for its Cabernet Sauvignon, indeed the commonest of Australian wines.

The most visited of Australian wine regions in the country, ***Hunter Valley*** is found just two hours away from cosmopolitan Sydney. It was originally recognized as the leading producer of Shiraz, but later on, it was known for producing the best kinds of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

In ***McLaren Vale***, south of Adelaide, the main wineries can be found in Langhorne, Reynella, incidentally, also home to the first winery in 1838. Because it spreads across a territory of varied soil types, McLaren Vale can produce an infinite variety of Australian wines from full reds, sweet dessert wines, to delicate whites, like the Sauvignon Blanc.

Australian wines tend to have a fruitier, more prominently sweet flavor which lends charm to even the lesser wines. Aussie winemakers are also shrewd in blending wines from various regions and carefully applying cellar treatments to create a more personal stamp on their products.

Of course, there are several other regions where vineyards thrive with most of them in Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, to name a few). Browse through your local wine shop for some good selections and don't hesitate to ask the merchant for some good advice.

Step 2: Identify the Grape Variety

Another way of knowing your wine is to ***identify the grape variety***. As you probably know, wine is a type of fermented drink made from crushing grape fruits together.

Ever seen a Latin movie or at least one that features a scene in rural Mexico or Spain where a bunch of peasant women dance barefoot on a huge wooden basin while the men stand outside, likely ogling as they strummed their guitars or clap their hands in accompaniment? One such scene was featured in the movie, *A Walk in the Clouds* with Keanu Reeves on it.

Anyway, the point is that while the whole scene looks like an expression of childish fun, you are actually looking at a fine example of wine making in progress. Not all wineries follow the same procedure, of course, but you get the drift – that wine comes from grapes and the wine varies according to the variety of grapes used.

Note that wine grape varieties represent a very small portion of the more than 600 kinds of grapes around. With each variety, the characteristics of wine may include a unique combination of the following distinctions: color, size, skin thickness, acidity, yield per vine, and flavors. Generally, wine grape varieties are classified under two broad categories:

- White grapes which yields Muscat, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Riesling, Semillon, Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, among others
- Red grapes which yields Merlot, Petit Sirah, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, to name a few.

Naturally the white category yields white and sparkling wines like champagne while the red ones produce the heavier-bodied, more flavorful red wines.

Now, you might ask: What about these so-called “pink” wines? Sometimes called rosé, pink wines are actually made from red grapes but because the grape skin

was removed before all the color could set in, the resulting wine has only a dusky pink color like blush.

Not many wine lovers like pink wines but they may turn to be nice treats for the summer.

Step 3: Recognize the Vintage

Lastly, know which wines are good and which are ones are better by *recognizing their vintage*.

Vintage, in wine lingo, means the yield of wine or grapes from a vineyard or district during one season. Or simply stated, it is the overall condition of the grape harvest of the specified region in any given year.

There are good years and bad years for wines. “Off” season generally means that the wines are so bad they don’t even deserve mention from sophisticated wine lovers.

Before the 1950s, wine makers were completely at the mercy of Nature. Climate changes like if it rains too hard or too little could result in subtle variations to the grapes, affecting the taste, flavor, aroma, and body of the wines they yield. So a knowledge about vintage might just be your ticket to picking up the good bottles from the local wine shop.

And these are the steps to choosing a wine that is just perfect, whether it is for a dinner party, pizza night with your friends, or a quiet evening alone.

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