

Chapter 12: Tasting Notes

The tasting note should be a full-frontal analytical description of smell and taste.

Hugh Johnson

Writing wine reviews after one sip and not drinking the wine, is like rating a movie by watching the trailer.

Tim Atkin

And so, it goes. Of all the topics that I have selected to write about in this book, there is none more contentious than the origins, characteristics, and influence of the tasting note. Master Sommelier Tim Gaiser suggests tasting notes are a blessing and a curse, and if you are in the wine industry, a necessity. On the positive side, Gaiser sees tasting notes as a multilayered memory device used by professionals to record impressions of a wine in a particular moment. However, he also calls attention to the potential dark side of these notes due to the florid language used in some notes that can be off-putting at best, and completely alien at worst.

Basically, a tasting note is a short description of a wine that has been tasted and evaluated using some particular procedure or method for analyzing the wine. Tasting notes are usually written by expert tasters to describe their experiences with a given wine. But they are also associated with other artisanal food and beverage industries. Producers and critics of artisanal cheeses, handmade chocolates, marijuana, craft beers, exotic teas all provide extensive tasting notes designed to help consumers make more informed choices. It seems

everyone is getting in on the practice and the language used gets more elaborate or more abstract every year.

Robert Parker, arguably one of the most influential wine critics, favored individual critics writing tasting notes by themselves rather than having them created by a committee of tasters. In 2000, he asserted, "The opinion of a reasonably informed and comprehensive individual taster, despite the taster's prejudices and predilections, is always a far greater guide to the ultimate quality of the wine than the consensus of a committee." Other critics have criticized both Parker's voluptuous writing style and his oversized influence on the wine industry. Some critics have even gone so far as to allude to his tasting notes as a form of *soft-core wine porn*.

In some ways, the tasting note can be compared to the work of a forensic scientist conducting an autopsy. The difference is rather than discovering and explaining the conditions of vital organs from a cadaver, the expert wine writer or critic is discovering and explaining the remains from the vinification process in one's glass. There are those tasters that focus on the role of scientific procedures and statistical reliability, and those that prefer to come at this process from an aesthetic perspective, delving into the terror and artistry of the finished product.

Jonathan Nossiter, wrote in *Liquid Memory*, "in a world that is oversaturated with overdetermined meaning, there's something decidedly cheering about this mischievous drink that resists plausible description." If wine resists *plausible description*, why are so many critics and experts trying to plausibly describe it? On the other hand, are more detailed, full-frontal descriptions of wine what writers should be striving to accomplish? The cottage industry of wine writing, in particular the ubiquitous *tasting note*, has had a long and interesting history

dating back to the early Romans. Wine blogs, advertising campaigns, wine magazines, and wineries themselves provide a wealth of tasting notes that describe, compare, or score hundreds of wines released each year.

XXX Ballester from Dijon, France has suggested tasting notes contain another form of, “elevated language that plagues elite hobbies.” He contends the wine tasting note is just one type of writing that is associated with a particular social class that requires a unique language to set themselves apart from ordinary people and ways of talking. The fancier the wine, the fancier the language! More candidly, the *American Association of Wine Economists*, has suggested tasting note writers are “intrinsically bullshit prone.”

The modern tasting note is an interesting writing genre in and of itself. It requires the use of a specific language or lexicon, is usually brief (100 words or less), and has become an essential genre for contemporary wine writers to master. Tasting notes are used to inform consumers of the qualities of a specific wine, relied upon to increase the sales of particular wines, and have become one form of writing that has elevated particular wine writers or critics to the upper echelons of the wine industry. However, there is much more to consider as one becomes familiar with this form of wine writing.

To give you a sense of the range of tasting notes available, let me share with you two very different tasting notes. The first is a more scientific approach to writing tasting notes. This tasting note is from

Second, is a tasting note from the producer *Sanguis* in Santa Barbara, California. The winemaker is describing one of his white wines.

See Through is a thrill! It is like a gentle Indian-summer sun lowering its gaze from the depths of a sky-blue sky. I love how See Through embodies the opaque transparency of those thick late-season rays and the way it captures all the aromatics of that time - from ripe stone fruits to the dry grasses - with an air of that friendly indifference and underlying wild intensity.

No matter one's opinion on the content of the tasting note, the trail from the wine bottle to the tasting note is forged through the use of a specific lexicon or choice of language that always includes a writer's vocabulary and a style of writing that ranges from the scientific to the poetic.

The writing of tasting notes seems to me to be a fairly incestuous endeavor. Wine writers keep writing tasting notes for other wine writers to read so they will be allowed to keep writing more tasting notes about wine. Does anyone really read all these notes outside the small community of wine writers? Do these notes really influence what wines people buy? I must admit, I am more affected by the limited access to particular wines provided by online and local wine stores than I am by the published tasting notes. Doesn't matter how influential the tasting notes are, if you can't find the wine or can't afford the wines you find, tasting notes are of no value other than offering a self-indulgent romp through the world of wine writing.

Let's try another avenue and consider the purpose of the tasting note? Here is a quick multiple-choice question to help us think about why tasting notes exist:

Do tasting notes:

- a) Provide novice consumers with helpful information.
- b) Should only be written by skilled wine experts.
- c) Need to contain more objective, scientific, jargon to be effective.
- d) Are best when accompanied by a numerical score.
- e) Should be written after blind tasting to increase integrity.

All of the answers provided above were found in actual essays from notable wine critics and writers and published since 2013 in both print and digital formats about tasting notes. I did not have to make any of these answers up, I just had to search for them. And, they are easy to find. A Google search of the term “wine criticism” yields 36 million hits in a fraction of a second. It seems wine critics *are* talking about the way they talk about wine, and they are doing it all the time.

Other wine writers have been less generous with their evaluations and tasting notes. Some wine critics suggest tasting notes: 1) are dreary, untrustworthy, and contain arcane language, 2) allow wine critics a venue for writing fancy words they don't get to use very often, 3) provide comic relief for a troubled wine industry, 4) could use a bit of cleaning up, 5) are thick, gooey, fudge-covered gobs of language, and 6) are used to conjure up unimagined nuances. There seems to be a growing divide among those that see the relevancy and utility of tasting notes and are lobbying for improving the genre by making them more objective and scientific, those that still advocate for the use of tasting notes but suggest writers need to pull

back on the overuse of esoteric language, and those that believe millennials don't give a shit about tasting notes and the genre will fade from existence in the not-so-distant future.

From one perspective, Jordi Ballester suggests the language used in tasting notes should eradicate “fuzzy concepts” by being more specific and analytical rather than relying primarily on personal responses to a wine. On the other hand, it would seem critics suggest the world of modern *winespeak* needs to be reined in a bit in order to serve its intended audience. Do consumers really need to know a particular wine smelled of wet cement, and included notes of graphite and pencil shavings to make informed decisions, or are tasting notes simply a way of establishing a cottage industry for future wine writers?

Barry Smith in an article for the *World of Fine Wine* defends wine criticism and tasting notes, but links its challenges to language and writing as much as tasting when he writes, “there is no guarantee, of course, that those with great tasting skills will be able to articulate the reasons for their appreciation of certain wines. Having the linguistic powers to express what one finds in a young wine is an additional skill, and this is perhaps the key role for the wine writer.” Once again, we return to the fact that it is as much about the way we talk and write about wine than it is about what is actually in the glass.

Like all forms of writing, tasting notes are not objective, context-less, accurate descriptions of the wine in the glass safely protected from the context of the tasting and the writing. Traditionally, the writers of tasting notes work to pare away all of the context of a wine tasting event to arrive at an objective tasting note. Many wine critics taste up to a hundred wines in one day to attempt to cover a particular region, vintage, or varietal. The context of these tastings is certainly different than the contexts where people actually drink the wine

being described, scored, and recommended by these critics. Should the context of the writing of a tasting note align with the context of the actual drinking of the wine?

It seems that it is the age-old battle of the search for objectivity associated most often with *science* versus the subjectivities and aesthetics most often associate with the world of *art*. Is it better to be use more scientific jargon, or more poetic, artistic language when writing tasting notes? On one hand the scientist revels in precise language, language that objectively describes as accurately as possible what constitutes a wine. In science, specificity, accuracy, prediction, and objectivity reigns king (or queen). In art, scientific description falls away to reveal figurative, sensual, language that compares a summer's breeze to the beauty of a wine. Are we sure that one type of language is better than another? From a marketing perspective, the descriptions that increase sales are economically more valuable.

Here is a wine description I recently came across in a tasting note I found intriguing:

On the palate, the wine begins with peeled Laraha orange skin, fresh lemon zest, dehydrated pineapple, fresh black cherries, dried cranberries, chopped bell pepper, and something like the heart and crema of a good espresso shot combined. A snapshot of damp forest floor, mushrooms, black truffle, and wet rock remain on my palate for quite a while afterwards.

Really? Specifying the type of peeled orange skin? What does a wet rock taste like on one's palate? If this type of writing isn't begging for some sarcasm and reconsideration, then you should stop reading this book now and start sniffing some Laraha orange skin so you really

know what this wine reviewer is talking about. Can my palate ever be delicate enough to discern the type of orange and the orchard it was harvested from? I doubt it.

I wonder if wine enthusiasts could work backwards from the tasting not above to identify what varietal the wine is or where it was produced? Probably not. These descriptions are so abstract that they are detached from the reality of the wine drinker and the wine in the glass. Could you imagine asking a sommelier in a restaurant for a glass of wine that tastes of espresso, with notes of black truffle, mocha, and forest floor? I don't think the sommelier would have any idea what kind of wine you wanted to drink with dinner.

One of the biggest shifts in the past twenty years has been the shift from metaphorical and poetic language to largely analytical descriptions used to distinguish one's opinions as more objective or analytical. According to Hugh Johnson, contemporary wine writers are trying to include, "full-frontal analytical descriptions of smell and taste," in their tasting notes. Where wine writers once relied on metaphors, poetic language, or glowing adjectives, has been set aside in favor of accuracy and the search for objectivity. As wine writers have begun borrowing terms primarily used to accurately describe flowers, fruits, and vegetables, their goal seems to be scientific accuracy, using precise language to assess the technical properties of a particular wine. Descriptors like orange peel, honeysuckle blossoms, and pyrazines akin to green bell pepper have become the *sine qua non* of the contemporary wine writer.

Tasting notes, as they are referred to, often use abstract metaphors to make their sensory assessments more enjoyable to read. Some of the more obtuse terms I have found in tasting notes include, wet dog, barnyard, forest floor, mushrooms, and sea shells. Do we really want to drink wine that tastes like a barnyard or wet dog? Apparently, we do because these

words are often used to describe some of the most sought-after wines in the world like Chateauneuf-du-Pape and Grand Cru Chablis.

Marissa Ross, the author of *Wine – All the Time*, is a self-proclaimed, “craven slut” for using abstract, weird metaphors and figurative language when describing wines. In fact, she has made her career as an editor at Bon Appetit magazine describing wines in unusual and poetic fashion. I love reading her descriptions and tasting notes, but I rarely understand how these notes relate to the wines in her glass, however poetic her notes read. Swimming pools and suburban lawns have little in common with white wine, but they seem apt in describing a context for drinking. Suggesting we should find some middle ground in the world of tasting note writing, Rajat Parr warns against tasting notes becoming encyclopedic-like entries or gushing bursts of lyric prose.

Eric Asimov advocates drinking over tasting. Sit down and enjoy the bottle of wine with good friends and good food and maybe you might enjoy more wines than if you taste 200 in one day and spit out each taste to help endure the challenges of over-imbibing. He also suggests evaluating producers rather than vintages and single wines. As the tasting continues to evolve from short, pithy quotes about gender, breeding, and potential ageing to flowery, elaborate descriptions that use technical, scientific language to compare wines to fruits, vegetables, minerals, and cigar boxes, the debate over what constitutes a quality, relevant tasting note will continue.

For many wine critics, tasting notes depend upon developing a common lexicon that they can draw upon for describing and evaluating a particular wine, winery, vintage, or varietal. This common lexicon also requires a common understanding of the terms included, and this is

where the whole industry may go off the rails. How can we be sure that words mean the same thing to everyone? If I say the wine in my glass tastes like strawberries, will that mean the same thing to every wine drinker that tastes this wine? And, if we venture into more complex, unique descriptors like wet cement, pencil shavings, and minerality, will we only widen the gap between words and meanings?

Coco Krumme, a member of the American Association of Wine Economists that studies behavioral economics at the MIT Media Lab, analyzed the language used in tasting notes and compared the terms used to describe cheap and expensive wines. Her analysis demonstrated that reviewers are more likely to create new vocabulary for more expensive wines. Her study also revealed it's possible to predict the price range of a wine based on the words in various tasting notes. She asserted, there are three types of words more likely to be used for expensive wines: 1) Darker words, such as *intense, supple, velvety, and smoky*, 2) words for single flavors such as *tobacco or chocolate* versus *fruity, good, clean, tasty, juicy* for cheap wines, and 3) Exclusive-sounding words in place of simple descriptors. For example, *old, elegant, and cuvee* for expensive wines, rather than *pleasing, refreshing, value, and enjoy*. Her study suggests the deep-seated connection between language and wine tasting that is the focus of this book. No matter what we taste in our mouths or breathe through our noses, it is only through language that we can share these sensory experiences with others. Tasting notes are simply a genre that has a questionable, some would say bullshit, relation to reality.

The same theories hold true for those old high school literature helpers known as *Cliff Notes* in America. Cliff (obviously the smartest man in the world) knows the main idea for every novel ever written and has shared them in his "notes." These main ideas are seen as universal,

objective main ideas or evaluations for Shakespeare's *Othello* and Dickens' *Great Expectations*. They are not presented as Cliff's opinions; they are presented as objective meanings or truths. If you read and memorize the notes, you will do well in school and probably pass your English test, primarily because teachers read these same notes and agree with them. But the real question whether these literature notes give you anything useful to say about these books? In the same vein, it is worth asking whether wine tasting notes give you anything useful to say about a particular bottle of wine.

Coffee, Beer & Wine

In reviewing many of the wine tasting notes for this book, I became interested in how similar these flavor profiles and descriptors were to other beverages. To demonstrate what I am referring to, I have blinded (removed the type of beverage) ten tasting notes that I have taken from commercial websites and written publications that described either a type of coffee, tea, beer, or wine. I invite you to tell me which tasting notes are associated with which beverage. It is harder than you think. I have included an answer key at the end of this chapter to resolve any conflicts that arise from this exercise.

1. Citrus, cocoa and berries are a just a few flavors that strike you first. Some are obvious, and others are subtle. Notes of honey, caramel, and toast are available.
2. The dominant flavors are generally floral, with honeysuckle and bergamot standing out the most.
3. Nutty and toasty accents are present. This (type of beverage) can show a touch of caramel and roasted fruit, often displaying dried fruits such as raisins, dates and figs.
4. One will find notes of buttered citrus, pineapple, smoked meats, charcoal, and toast.

5. Heavy body, and an earthy, woody flavor, at times acidity and complexity can be lacking. We have had some that present really nice tropical fruit flavors, cinnamon, and cola.
6. Thick mouth coating quality with dominant flavors of tomato stew and raisin (or other dried fruit). Some of the best will also offer grapefruit and bubblegum.
7. Honeysuckle, verbena, and chamomile aromas stream out first, followed by notes of yellow apple, white peach, honey and warm plum notes.
8. The palate can expect a degree of sweetness and deep notes of toffee, caramel, toast and black fruit.
9. This (beverage) offers a citrus profile with notes of tangerine, some pear and sweet cucumber, all framed by soft flavors of toasted bread and dried fruits.
10. This (beverage) is chiseled and sharp with blackberry, ripe cherry, grilled herbs and barbeque spices.

As I researched the tasting notes across a range of beverages, I discovered that each of the ones listed here also had what is known as a flavor wheel. Flavor wheels are graphic aids used to visually represent the range and categories of flavors presented in a beverage type. But flavor wheels, like the one developed by UC Davis professor Ann Noble, sides with those who think scientific accuracy and detailed descriptions of smells and tastes are preferable to the gushy prose of previous eras. Davis' flavor wheel contained six dozen descriptors for the smell of a wine, and is based on associating the bouquets, aromas, and flavors in wines with various vegetables, fruits, and other descriptors. Some of these are metaphorical and others are simply

adjectives used to help wine drinkers name the sensations they experience when smelling and drinking wine.

No matter whom you talk to in the wine industry, they probably have an opinion about tasting notes one way or another. Many wine writers love them and have made a living writing them. Others write them, but only begrudgingly. Still others think they should be eliminated from the discourse of wine. I am sure this debate will continue for quite some time, regardless of what the hipster generation says about it.

So What?

Let's begin by considering what could a writer possibly write in a tasting note that would: a) increase the likelihood someone would buy the wine being described, 2) help wine enthusiasts make better choices about what wine to buy and drink, or 3) increase a person's appreciation of the wine being tasted? From this perspective tasting notes would be judged by their relative practicality and rhetorical potential. Do the tasting notes serve a purpose for the wine enthusiast? From another perspective, tasting notes could simply be evaluated as a form of writing susceptible to all the criteria of other forms of writing, practical utility be damned.

Still another way of evaluating tasting notes could be by level of specificity. The most general would be – I like it, or it is good. Not helpful, but pretty clear. The other end of the spectrum would contain the most elaborate, technical jargon one could muster. You will need to decide the point along the “spectrum of descriptions” you find valuable.

Here is how it might go:

1. I like it.
2. It's good.

3. It's a good red wine.
4. It's a good Cabernet Sauvignon
5. It's a good Cabernet Sauvignon from the Bordeaux region.
6. It's a good example of a 2010 vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon from the left-bank, appellation of Margaux.
7. It's a good example of a 2010 vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon from Chateau Margaux.
8. It's a good example of a 2010 vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon from a particular block or vineyard at Chateau Margaux that will probably be worth aging for the next 30 years.
9. It's a good example of a 2010 vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon from a particular block of vineyard in Chateau Margaux in Bordeaux that will age well for the next 30 years that includes primary notes of blackberry, cassis, black cherry, and bell pepper, and secondary notes of vanilla, cigar box, and graphite.

I think you can see where this is going. Does description #9 make you want to buy the wine (if you can find it and afford it) more than #1? If I described the chemical makeup of a wine's aromas and flavors, for example the level of pyrazines, thiols, or terpenes as suggested by writers at GuildSomm in particular Geoff Kruth, would it make the tasting note more explicit or would it simply get more confusing? Does the word pyrazine help wine tasters more than the terms spicy, or green bell peppers? And, do these words work as an enticement to buy a particular wine? The purpose of the tasting note and the audience to which it is directed should influence how they are written, and rightly so.

My suggestions are as follows:

1. If you find a critic that favors the same type of wines that you do, follow their writing, but take everything with a grain of salt.
2. Try not to pay too much attention to numerical scores, focus instead on what the writer is saying about the wine. Ask yourself, "Do I like this kind of wine?"
3. Remember that there is almost as much bullshit in tasting notes as there is in any form of advertising. If the notes help, great. If not, don't sweat it.
4. Pay attention to the wines you like and see if you can find more of them at reasonable prices.
5. Remember, most of the wines people are writing about will be difficult to get ahold of. Make friends with a salesperson at your local wine store and let them help you or order wines for you.