

Wine tasting wisdom

I spend much of my life trying to expose others to some of the treasures of the grape vine I've found by venturing off the beaten path. In almost all cases, my greatest enjoyment comes from feedback along the lines of "How did I get to be this age, believing that wine was so important to my life, only to discover that there's so much I didn't (don't) know which gives me great pleasure?"

With this backdrop, I believe the best way to explore the unknown is to do wine tastings with your friends, whether scheduled formally or impromptu. Many wine shops allow customers to try several wines to aid in choosing wines of merit. These events can be very pleasurable but the times and dates are prescribed and you may or may not be in the best frame of mind to evaluate and find pleasure in the event. Also, you may know some of the people there but would prefer to be with closer friends, and rarely does one get to drink at these scheduled events with proper stemware. Accordingly, if you arrange an event of your choosing with your targeted audience, all you have to do is select the wines and have decent stemware. A further bonus comes if complimentary food is served.

With the plethora of wine today, it is easy to do either a red or white tasting. However, I like choices, so having a few bottles of each color allows those who drink only red or white a comfort zone. One of the things I like to do is to minimize the comfort zone. While a chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon tasting can be very rewarding, a wide range of white and red varietals works very well as an initial tasting. Then, if tasters want to do a vertical (same varietal, same producer, different years) or horizontal (same varietal, different producers, same year), these can be arranged to follow later.

There are many variables dictating how many bottles are appropriate but for example's sake, I might arrange for 10 couples to taste 10 wines — five whites and five reds.

These would be tasted in roughly this order—lighter to heavier. In order to make it both fair and interesting, you could do the same event a

month later suggesting a \$15–\$20 limit on each white wine the first time and then a \$25–\$35 limit the next time. This would be very educational as to the incremental value of \$10–\$15. You could have each couple bring one wine with an identical backup in case a bottle is corked.

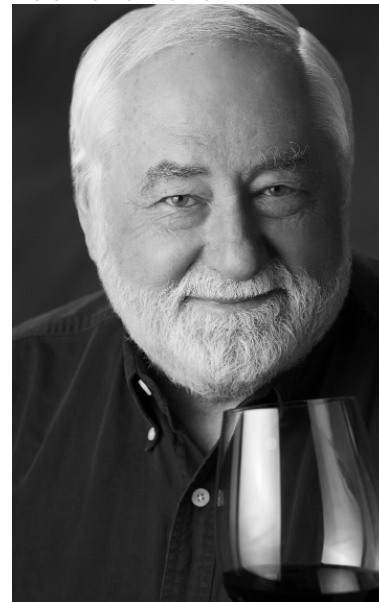
A wine is determined to be corked if the cork comes from the bark of a tree that is infected by a compound called trichloranisole. There is no known way to determine if the cork is infected until it comes into contact with the wine, and when it does, it smells like a combination of odors: mildew, wet dog and old, wet newspapers. While the affected wine will not cause bodily harm, since most of wine's appreciation is through smell, such a wine would not be enjoyable

Even if none of the wines are corked, group favorites might lead to a second bottle being opened. There are enough worthy reds and whites that you could do two tastings of each color to include all varietals. As in the case with the white wines, you could do the first event with a \$20–\$30 limit and then move up to a \$40–\$60 level. For the last five reds, the two ranges might be \$40–\$60 and \$80–\$100 to discover the differences prices can (but may not always) make.

To make such tastings as described above more enjoyable, suitable food pairings would enhance the wines' enjoyment. I suggest each couple bring an appetizer or cheese to go with their wine (the Internet is great for giving options by varietal and many books focus on this as well). Bread or water crackers work well to cleanse the palate between wines. Remember to drink lots of water and make use of the "dump bucket" to pour out excess wine, particularly if a wine is not to your liking. As an aside, one tasting group of which I'm a member has a designated secretary who takes notes relative to the wine (we all chime in) and food. He then duplicates and brings it to our next tasting. This helps us all remember better than we would otherwise.

I hope you take my challenge to venture forth in this rich and rewarding world of wine. If you have comments or questions, please let me know how I can help. Santé!

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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WHITES MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Verdelho
- Albariño
- Sauvignon Blanc (Sancerre and New World),
- Riesling (Kabinett/Germany and Dry Riesling/Australia),
- Viognier
- Chardonnay (Old and New World)
- Roussanne
- Marsanne

REDS MIGHT INCLUDE:

- Pinot Noir
- Merlot
- Tempranillo
- Zinfandel (red)
- Sangiovese (Chianti)
- Malbec
- Grenache(Chateauneuf-du-Pape)
- Sangiovese Grosso (Brunello di Montalcino)
- Cabernet Sauvignon (New and Old World)
- Syrah (Hermitage &/or Côte-Rotie and Shiraz/Australia)
- Neббиоло(Barolo and Barbaresco)