

Red, White and You: Appreciating Wine



Don't fret that it's not on Wine Spectator's top ten list—trying "off" brands can uncover a diamond in the rough.

Many moons ago, I was asked to discuss how to pair wine and cigars for this, the holiday edition of On Course. This is, after all, the season for gift-giving and entertaining.



The author (right) and husband/ MAGCS member Dan Anderson enjoy a glass in California wine country.



Make sure you have plenty of glasses, as wine-tasting can last HOURS.

While I know a fair amount about wines, my knowledge of cigars is limited to those rare occasions when I consumed too much wine and found myself smoking a cigar. At one point in our married life, my husband must have found this happening with increasing regularity, as he started carrying mini-cigars for me! So I started to do some research on cigar and wine pairing. Needless to say, practically no information exists, or at least none that I could find. So, here I am, exploring not the matching of wine and cigar but the art of enjoying wine, period!

My love of wine began back in college, not because I was sophisticated enough to understand the nuances of wine (I must admit I'm still not), but because it was a course offered in my major. Yes, back in the day in radical Southern California, anyone enrolled in the Hotel and Restaurant Management Program had to take a course on wines. Our instructor came in that first day and promptly told us that if we had a class scheduled after this one, drop it—you will never go! This ended up being wise advice, as we students consumed more than our fair share during that two-hour period. Since then, my career in the hospitality industry has allowed me to continue expanding my knowledge and I now even teach the much-anticipated wine class to up-and-coming hospitality students.

I have thought long and hard about what information is most critical to impart, because the one thing that I have learned about wine is that the more I know, the more I have to learn. It can get complicated, technical, in-depth, but never boring. So, I will start with the basics . . . how to taste wine.

When handed a glass of wine, the first thing that you want to do is look at the wine. This will tell you not just whether the wine is white or red, but it will offer a hint of things to come. For instance, in white wines, a very pale, almost colorless wine will probably be very light and fresh-tasting. Whites with more color will tend to have bolder flavors. The same holds true for reds. Anything very dark purple will probably have lots of pronounced flavors. Lighter-colored reds will often taste lighter; however, since reds lighten some-

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what as they age in the bottle, a lighter-colored wine might be more complex. The vintage will help you determine whether it's an aged wine or not.

Now that you've been looking at the color of your wine, it is time to swirl. You may want to practice swirling with your glass on the table in the beginning to avoid the very pesky and permanent stain that a spill will leave on fabric. We swirl wine for several reasons. The first is to release the aromas of the wine. Second, it helps us determine the body of the wine. This is where you hear people referring to the legs of the wine. This describes how the wine slides down the side of your glass after swirling. If it's slow and holds to the side of your glass, it is either high in alcohol, sweet or fuller-bodied.

The next step in the process is probably the most important one. Smelling! What we normally think of as our sense of taste is really to a large degree our sense of smell. If you remember back to your high school days, you'll remember being taught the tongue only distinguishes between salty, bitter and sweet. So . . . don't be afraid to stick your nose into your wine glass and take a good whiff. This might be a good juncture to remind you that when tasting wine, you don't want to pour your glass all the way full in the beginning.

This is the stage where people can start to sound fairly pretentious. As far as I'm concerned, whatever adjective or descriptive works best for you is okay. In class, I hear things like "it smells like grape Sweet Tarts" or "it smells like fresh-cut grass." If you're just starting out, think of herbs, flowers, fruits, spices and earthy scents. If you're looking for a tool to help you distinguish or narrow down the common smells found in wines, you can go to the local library and copy an aroma wheel. Don't worry if in the beginning you don't get much of anything; the sense of smell is something that becomes more defined with use.

Now that you've looked, swirled and smelled, it's time to taste!



Always make sure you have plenty of wine—you may find one or two you like, and it's cheaper by the barrel.

At this stage of the game, you may have heard people slurping their wines. I wouldn't bother with it for now, or else you might find it going up into your nose! When you taste a glass of wine, you are looking for the weight of the wine in your mouth (the body). The best way to think of it is by relating it to milk. Light-

bodied equates to skim milk, medium to 2% and full-bodied to whole milk. Once you've determined the body, you're going to think about how it feels in your mouth. Is it smooth, acidic . . . does it make your mouth pucker, are there tannins (only found in red wines and the source of that feeling you get at the roof of your

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mouth). You might use terms like jammy, big, mellow, chewy and a host of others.

Now that you've gone through the steps of tasting the wine, it's time to figure out what wines go with which foods. There is no magic answer, but I will try to give you a few tips to make the decision a little bit easier. In a nutshell, you never want to choose a wine that will overpower the food, and vice versa. But to help narrow your selection a bit, here are a few helpful hints.

- Serve chardonnay or red wines with butter-based dishes and cheese.
- To make a food seem less spicy, serve a white wine.
- To make a food appear spicier, serve a red wine.
- Serve a more acidic wine with olive oil-based dishes.
- If a wine is earthy in flavors, serve it with root vegetables.
- Anything really goes, as long as you enjoy it!

Regrettably, I have said little if anything about the marriage of cigars and wine, but don't let that stop you from experimenting. There has been many a summer evening where my weary husband has come home from a long day at the course and found solace in a good glass of wine and a good cigar! If he can, you can, too.



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