

How To Select Wine

By Curt Hagedorn

There's probably no single beverage more surrounded by myth, both urban and otherwise, than wine. It's no accident that wine appears in just about every religious mythology, from Christian sacrament to Bacchanalian indulgence, and that even today choosing a wine is a task that causes any aspiring connoisseur anxiety. Well, guess what? It turns out to be primarily about individual choice and taste – if you think a wine tastes bad, really bad, it's probably a bad wine. With so many countries now producing wines and so much variety on the market, it was probably inevitable that wine became more populist but, even so, that doesn't mean that grabbing a screw top bottle of Boone's Farm Strawberry Blush is going to do anything for your image as a wine expert. There are certain things you need to know to help you accomplish what wine, at least good table wine, is really all about – pairing with and enhancing food.

There's a great wine store in New York City called Best Cellars that has devised one of the “best” ways of choosing wine – and one which makes a great deal of practical sense – by flavor. They categorize their wines as: Fizzy, Fresh, Soft, Luscious (primarily whites) and Juicy, Smooth, Big and Sweet (primarily reds.) The advantage to this method is that it gives you some key to what you might want to be pairing it with – a “Big” red wine might be the perfect accompaniment (or addition) to a hearty beef stew or even coq au vin (chicken in wine) while a Fizzy white (of course) is for celebrations, perfect with hors d'oeuvres or wedding cake. A Fresh or Soft white might pair perfectly with fish or chicken, while a Luscious one might be an excellent partner for a creamy pasta dish or good old fashioned mac and cheese. The key is that once you have in your head what certain wines generally taste like, it's far easier to choose among than trying to first pack your brain with vintages and growing regions and the like.

Of course, the only way to really learn about wine is to taste it, and that's where your local wine merchant, Best Cellars or not, can be of tremendous value. Most quality wine shops will offer some kind of course or occasional tastings to bring in customers, or at least have someone on staff with a passion for wine if not the rank of sommelier. Ask questions, find out about some of the newest wine growing regions – Australia and Argentina are both hot right now, as are Washington and Oregon in the United States. Also, if you can afford it, take advantage of dining at a fine restaurant with a good wine cellar to quiz the sommelier about various wines on the list – after all, for the premium price you pay for a bottle in a restaurant, you deserve a little of the man's time and expertise. Also, if you particularly like a wine, save the bottle or carefully remove the label (there are kits available for this purpose) and save it in a Wine Journal or photo album set aside for the purpose. Since you're never going to know everything about wine, you can at

least develop a repertoire of wines that you like – this will also help you if you begin buying wines for the home table – that 1998 Gallo Zinfandel you paid god knows what for at a restaurant is certain to be quite a bit less at the local wine store.

Finally, you can hold your own tastings at home for very little money if you scour the wine stores and shop for specials. One of the most enlightening things you can do is to try similar wines from a variety of regions and in a variety of price points – purchase a case or half a case of wine, buy some good fruit, crackers and some cheese and a selection of appropriate glassware and have an informal tasting – you may find that you like that Australian Shiraz at 15dollars a bottle just as much as the similarly “big” California Cabernet at \$30, or that Italian Barolo at \$55.

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