Ewan Lacey's

Guide to

Wine Basics

Wine Unscrewed

There's one phrase I hear more than any other when I talk to people about wine. Whether I'm hosting a wine event for a company or tutoring a wine workshop for people who want to learn a bit about wine, the phrase that refuses to go away is this: 'I don't know anything about wine.'

If I believed that, I'd just pack up and go home. But I don't believe it.

It's my belief that everyone who's ever tried wine knows something about it. If you too can accept that, then the next task is simple. It's just a case of organising that knowledge. That's the purpose of this Guide to Wine Basics; how far you choose to take this organising process is then up to you.

When it comes to wine, most people find themselves in one of three categories. There are those (the great majority) who aren't bothered about finding out everything about it; rather they want a bit of memorable information that they can use next time they're in the supermarket or wine shop looking for something to drink with dinner. If you are in that group, then the following information will set you on your way and help you to figure out where you want to go.

Then, there's a more enthusiastic set, interested in knowing the fundamentals of wine and wine-making and who will remember wines they enjoy and seek them out at their wine merchant or will chat with the sommelier about them at the restaurant. This short guide will help give you some directions and if you take them, I hope it will help you and show you a couple of short-cuts.

Finally, these are people who know about wine and are confident enough to say so. They know what they like and are often very specific about it. Not just grape, country or style. They know all the information right down how much rain fell on their favourite

vineyards in the year of their choice. If you see yourself in that category, then I hope you enjoy a short and diverting trip through this guide and can find a good excuse to open a bottle or two.

The Scope of the Subject

The scope of the subject is just vast and the aim of this simple guide is to sketch it's dimensions and encourage you to explore.

To fully experience the sheer scope for yourself; why not grab a bottle of something dry white and flinty – a Loire Sauvignon perhaps – and a bottle of something red, oaky and muscular, maybe a Syrah/Grenache blend from the Southern Rhone. Then taste them one after another. Instantly you're faced with the enormous scope of the journey from one point on the compass to it's opposite. Yet both are wine. It's a joy.

What's all the fuss about wine?'

At it's most basic, wine, as we know it, is just fermented grape juice. That simple statement, at the same time, both conceals a near miraculous event and conveys what a straight-forward, natural process wine-making is.

As any drunken elephant will tell you, fruit will naturally ferment all on its own and the origins of man-made wine can be traced back to this phenomena and the behaviour of yeast – a microscopic fungus that turns sugar into alcohol.

Yeast grows wild all over the world and loves to live on the skins of fruit – that fine, milky-white powder, easiest to see on the skins of blueberries and plums is yeast. When the fruit becomes ripe and the skin splits; it's time for the yeast cells to feast on the

sugar. As they gorge themselves on sugar, they produce alcohol, carbon dioxide and heat.

This turns the sweet grape juice into a drier more complex liquid, that we call wine. It's as simple as that. In modern wine-making things are more sophisticated, but the basics would happen with or without the addition of a wine-maker.

Let's turn our attention to the basic steps in wine-making so that we can get a good idea of which processes are most important to us, as the consumer, in making the wine that we will enjoy.

Vineyard

Wine is made in the vineyard and what happens there will stay with the wine for the rest of its life. Good wine can only be made with good grapes and this is the ultimate goal of any wine grower – to produce good quality fruit.

Recently, there have been some huge advances in technology and know-how that help to ensure that decent crops can be produced consistently: knowing which plants to plant; where to plant them and how many to grow has made a vast difference to the health of vineyards worldwide. So too, understanding the symptoms of disease on the vine and reacting quickly to treat maladies means that the hard work in the vineyard is less likely to be undone by what was once thought of as bad luck.

'Terroir'

This is a French word and essentially a French notion. It is however, tricky to translate exactly. In the simplest terms it's the effect on the wine which the combination of soil and climate dictate.

If you have a garden you'll know that nothing grows in the shade and it's the same with grapes. They have to be planted in locations that get plenty of sun, are warm and reasonably dry.

Furthermore, grapes that produce good wine work hard, but not too hard. If the soil is very poor, water scarce and the weather hot, then the grape vines will get stressed (it's not an exclusively human problem) and they'll shut down.

If on the other hand the soil is rich and the water supply plentiful then the vines become lazy: they'll produce vast amount of foliage that will shade the grapes which may well end up being unripe.

So we're looking for conditions that sit in between those two extremes. The best soils for good wines tend to be moderately fertile ones which drain quickly thus forcing the roots to work their way down to find a stable water supply.

Wine-making

Once the grapes are ripe they are picked and taken to the winery where they are sorted to remove unripe or damaged grapes before the stalks are removed in readiness for the wine-making to begin.

Red wines and white wines are made in a different way. The reason for this is the skins. Wines get some of their flavour and all of their colour from the skin. For this reason, white grapes can only ever make white wines. On the other hand, it is possible to make white wine from red grapes (as they do in Champagne.) To do this, the skins of the red grapes have to be removed from the juice as soon as possible.

When making white wine, the grapes are pressed. This forces the juice out whilst leaving the skins and pips relatively intact.

When making a red wine, the grapes are crushed. This forces the juice out and breaks up the skins, pips and any remaining stalks, thus extracting the most colour and flavour from the solid material. The juice will then be left in contact with the grape pulp.

For both reds and whites, yeast is added to the resulting squashed grape juice or 'must' as it is called, it is then left to ferment. This can be done either in wooden barrels (which will impart some flavour) concrete vats (which won't) or in stainless steel tanks, which are also neutral and have the advantage of temperature-control.

Jargon busting

Before going on any further, it's worth explaining what a couple of wine-related terms mean.

Tannin

I'm very well aware that no word in the lexicon of wine can induce yawns faster than the word tannin. So here's my simple low down on tannin – I hope your eyes don't glaze over.

Tannins are present in plants. Essentially, they exist as a form of chemical warfare. Plants can't move and so to save themselves from being eaten at inappropriate times by wonton animals, they produce these bitter tannins.

For a very quick, simple and life-long understanding of what tannins taste like, simply chomp down on a grape pip. That gum-drying, astringent flavour is tannin. In a grape vine tannins are found in the pips, skins and stalks of the plant. Given time, the tannins in the skins will ripen and lose some of their bitterness. These mature tannin flavours are good in red wines as they contribute to the wine's structure.

Structure

Essentially the structure of a wine is what stops all the flavours flooding into your mouth at once. Just like the supporting frame of a building keeps the first floor from falling to the ground, so too the structure of a wine helps us to enjoy the flavours one at a time. Structure comes from broadly two things: tannin (as explained above) and acidity. For as long as your palate is busy experiencing the sharp taste of acidity or the bitter taste of tannin, it's able to digest the other flavours in sequence.

Wine-making continued…

Quality reds will often be placed in large open-topped vats; the skins and pulp will be forced to the top of the vat by carbon dioxide and will form a cap which protects the must from oxidation. The cap is regularly plunged down to give added colour and structure to the juice. The juice is then run off, normally into smaller barrels and the cap is then taken to be pressed. The pressed wine will be more tannic and can be either mixed in with the other juice to give it more structure, or kept and sold separately.

At all stages of the process, the underlying aim tends to be to keep white wines as fresh as possible; the trick being to balance the vital acidity a white wine needs with weight of fruit. Reds need as much structure as they need to harmonise with the fruit. Some, made in stainless steel, will be clean with no oak flavours to distract from the flavour of the grape; whilst others will benefit from being beautifully wrapped in soft, smoky, toasty oak – we'll touch on this, in more detail, later on.

Knowing what goes on in these processes can help you in your understanding of wine and ultimately, form the basis of what you'll look for in a glass. Bear in mind, however, that the only generalisation that works when talking about wine is that it's impossible to generalize.

Grape Variety

Grapes are quite unique, in that there are tens of thousands of different kinds – compare them, if you will, with bananas.

In Germany, I'm told that people prefer small bananas to bigger ones. They are, indeed, very particular about the origin of their bananas and feast on the small fruit cultivated in Latin America and shun the larger bananas grown in African and Caribbean countries – favoured by the Brits. However, because it's fairly simple to tell the difference between small and large, no law of appellation control has broken out. The Germans prefer small bananas and everyone just has to cope.

It's not like that with wine. It's more complicated. This is partly because there are more grape varieties and also partly because of the French.

No one nation has done more to baffle the buying public than them. The reason? They name their wines after places.

At this point I must confess a great admiration for their zeal and conviction that the wine tastes of the land. But it's really confusing for people outside of France. Especially since some of the places wines are named after are big (Champagne) some are a bit smaller than that (Chablis) some are mere villages (Meursault) and some but patches of exceptional vine-land (Le Montrachet.) In other ways the rest of Europe is just as guilty – the Italians with their corrupt and often meaningless laws of origin and control; and the Germans with Deutschwinenamesbeingverylonganddifficulttosay.

Wine makers from other parts realised that bamboozling the customer isn't always the best strategy. They then embarked on selling wines by focussing on the grape variety and it lead to Australian wines becoming the biggest sellers in the UK. All other countries of the 'old world' are now following their lead to a greater or lesser degree.

So what is a Grape Variety?

It's a type of type of vine. Think cats. There are all manner of different cats – small ones, big ones and medium ones: just like a lion and a tiger are two different kinds of cat; so too a Chardonnay grape and a Merlot grape are two different varietals. Both look different, they're different sizes and they taste different (I'm referring to the grapes here, but if you're reading this and you know what different kinds of cats taste like then please take yourself down to your local police station.)

There are thousands of different grape varieties. In Italy alone, it's estimated that there are 10,000. However, I'd be surprised if most people ever taste more than around 30 and if you ever get to 100 then you've done very well.

What difference does the grape make?

Grapes are either red or white; or Blue and Green depending on your colour impairment – I've even seen yellow ones. As mentioned, it's the skin that gives the wine a lot of it's flavour, tannins and it's colour.

Knowing that grapes look different is one thing, by the time they're bottled that's not much help. But those physical differences do eventually have a huge impact on the resultant wine.

Some grape varieties ripen slowly and the wines that are made from them will reflect this and be tart and refreshing. Some grapes will ripen more easily and will produce more generously fruity wines. Remember too, that as the sugar content increases, so too does the alcohol level – apart from taste, that's the other reason why wine is worth drinking.

Some grape varieties are thin skinned and will produce delicate, aromatic wines, whilst others are thick skinned and darker. These will make more tannic wines, wines with a great deal of structure. It's this structure which raises wine from alcoholic Ribena to something worth drinking.

Nature in wine making is also important. So, a chardonnay grown in northern France where the summer is relatively cool and short will be a touch acidic; austere and dare I say it classy. A chardonnay from the hotter climes of California might be a touch bigger, more obvious and alcoholic. I will at this point avoid the lazy practice of comparing wines to famous women.

White Grapes

Chardonnay

The only white grape of Burgundy and Champagne and the most widespread of all white varieties. Its image has suffered a little lately although it still produces the World's finest white table wines.

I must state at this point that the apocryphal story of the customer in the restaurant/shop/wherever who ignorantly stated she hated chardonnay but loved Chablis has now been flogged to death.

Sauvignon Blanc

A high-acid grape with a very distinctive aroma. In France and cooler climates it smells of nettles; herbs and grass. In New Zealand it makes more graphic wines smelling of lychee, gooseberry and cat's pee (so I'm told.)

Riesling

Its reputation crashed a couple of decades ago because of it's association with filthy cheapo German wines and it's popularity remains in the doldrums; although I hear it's making a comeback (again.) Yet it's the choice of a huge number of people in the wine trade because of it's ability to reflect the virtues of the land from where it was grown whilst still remaining forever a Riesling.

Red Grapes

Cabernet Sauvignon

From it's home in Bordeaux where it makes some of the world's greatest wines, it has travelled the globe and is cultivated in every wine growing country. It's trade mark is it's blackcurrant aroma and flavour. It's thick skinned and the wines are highly tannic (rough) when young which has lead to Cabernet being blended with other varieties, most notably, Merlot to great effect.

Merlot

The other great grape of Bordeaux; responsible for the wines of St Emillion and Pomerol. Castigated in the film 'Sideways' and pronounced Mer-low in the United States. Plush, soft and chocolatey; although it's greatest wines are blends.

Pinot Noir

The red grape of Burgundy and one of the red varieties of Champagne. It's thin skin makes it a high maintenance crop and the resulting wines are both expensive to buy and too expensive for growers to ditch in bad years. This can lead to a lot of disappointing experiences. But when it's good it's great.

Buying Hint

Almost invariably, when buying wine you will get better value by choosing wines which are not made from any of the above varieties. These, most popular, grapes have themselves become brands and as such find their path from the vineyard to the table easier than wines which are less well known. So for the best value look for unusual grape varieties (Albarino, Gruner Veltliner and Verdelho for whites; Malbec, Carmenere and Dolcetto for reds.) There are also certain areas which make tremendous wines without being fashionable – Austria; Germany and Alsace for whites and Portugal, Argentina and Chile for reds.

What kind of wine should I like?

There's obviously a lot of snobbery associated with wine – and it's very off-putting to people who like wine and want to learn a bit more. This rather stuffy and staid behaviour may be a kind of projection of insecurity. The wine snob may have invested a lot of time in learning about wine and require a dividend: making other people feel awkward or even foolish might be just that.

But on the other hand, do they have a point? Is there such a thing as a wine that you should like?

I hear plenty about the idea that we should just drink what we like. But what if you like sour, pippy, astringent reds? Or sickly sweet lolly water rosé. Are you then entitled to your opinion. The answer is, of course you are – but please bring a dessert not a bottle of wine when you come to my house for dinner.

The counter argument to this is that there are some objective standards when it comes to wine, some wines are simply better than others.

The idea of being better

To explore the idea of 'betterness' let's step away from wine for a moment.

If you've got kids, you might attend the school play and love it. However, if you were to compare your children's production of 'The Wizard of Oz,' to the West End version, you'd probably have to admit that the professional version was better – even if you liked your kid's play more.

There are other examples in the worlds of sport and music where we can see that some things are better than others and it's the same with wine. There are objective standards.

Objective standards

A book could quite easily be written on this subject. Let's make do with a cursory look at things we can measure or easily judge.

A major component of wine, most noticeable in whites, is acidity. Wines can be tart, bland or perfectly balanced. The components to balance in a white wine are acidity, weight of fruit, degree of alcohol and tannin.

Tannin is rarely prevalent in whites, but can be found in wines that have been raised in oak barrels. The key balancing act, then is between acidity, fruit and alcohol. If a white, any white, displays this balance of having enough structure for us to appreciate the fruit with an appropriate level of alcohol, then we have to say that objectively it is a good wine, even if we don't like it's flavour.

Reds are a bit more complex because tannin plays a bigger role. Our taste buds are acutely tuned to tannin and so it has a major impact on whether or not we judge a wine as being good or not.

So the perfect red must balance the bitterness of tannin with the sweetness of fruit, sharpness of acidity and the warming effect of alcohol.

No discussion of balance in wine could leave out a mention of oak. Some wines are fermented in oak barrels, some are aged in oak casks and some have oak added to them in the form of chips. The purpose of this is to add a degree of flavour to the wine. if you visit your local DIY shop or timber merchant, you can smell wood and this smell lets you know that wood has a flavour and oak barrels will impart this in the wines they come into contact with.

The oak influence can be understated, judged perfectly, or it can be over-done. If it's over-done, we lose the delicate flavour of the wine to the spicy, vanillin flavours of wood and could, in a sense be drinking anything.

Finally, varietal character is another factor which can be scrutinised, after all, what is the point in growing Pinot Noir in the hotter climes of the Pays d'Oc and ending up with a wine that tastes more like cherry jam than wine? Texture, is another important consideration, wines can be concentrated or delicate; they can be overly extracted or they can be puny.

The downfall of objective standards

Think tea or coffee. If we had a vote and asked every reader: who takes their tea with milk? Who takes sugar? Who doesn't take either? The answers would be many and varied. So why should you like a dry white wine with crisp acidity when you actually like something round and sweet? The answer is that you shouldn't. You should just like what you like. It's horses for courses and no one is right or wrong.

Famously, however, there are wine experts and writers known for their taste preferences. What happens when what they like influences the wines coming out of the vineyard and flying off the shelf? That's another well trodden path, and not for discussion here.

Experience and Mood

This is, in some ways, more relevant to most of us. When you've had a hard day at work, you might relish the idea of a crisp, cleansing white wine when you get home. If you've been out in the freezing cold and want a bit of warming up, or you're snuggled up close to someone in front of a roaring fire you might be in the mood for a round, voluptuous red. That's where the mood can make a difference to your enjoyment of wine. That's also when you'll create the strongest memory associations that re-enforce what you like and will shape your taste.

But one common problem with a bottle of wine is that it never seems to taste the same as last time you bought it. I'm talking about proper wine here. There are 'wines' on the market which are homogenous not only from bottle to bottle, but vintage to vintage and will taste the same on each occasion to the boring bugger who buys them. Real wines, properly made will be different each time, it's like going back to a great books or watching your favourite films time after time. The fact is that we change and they seem to change in response to us.

Since wine changes with us and our moods, the best way to enhance your enjoyment of wine, any wine, is to invite a few friends round when you want to experiment with new, unfamiliar wines. Nothing will make a wine taste better than good company. Nothing, that is except for good food and good company. Here are a few, simple food and wine matching tricks that you can use to enjoy what you drink even more.

Wine and Food Matching Principles

If you open a bottle of crisp white and you find the acidity is searing down your throat, there is help at hand. Anything from a bag of salt'n'vinegar crisps to a salad dressed

with a lemon vinaigrette – in fact anything with some acidity in it – will dull the perception of acidity in the wine.

On the other hand, if you are eating something very acidic and you're drinking a big, oaky Chardonnay, you'll probably find that the wine begins to get a bit cloying and heavy after a while. That's because the sweetness of the oak plus the acidity in the food counteracts the acidity in the wine and all that you're left with is big, blousy fruit.

Reds with a lot of tannin can taste bitter: these too can be "corrected" by eating something which will dull the tannin and bring out the fruit in the wine: blue cheese or rare meat does exactly that.

The experiment

Try doing the following with a few friends (well, enough to drink three bottles of wine!): get a slice of lemon; a sweet and juicy, ripe peach; and a piece of blue cheese with plenty of blue bits. Open a bottle of sharp white like a Sauvignon from the Loire, a big oaky Chardonnay and a tannic, young red like a Cabernet Sauvignon. Try each of the wines and make a few notes about each. The notes can be really simple. Things like: "High, teeth-tingling acidity", "fat, round, oaky white with a bit of sweetness", "lovely flavours of blackcurrants but dries out the gums".

Have a good suck on the lemon slice. Try the acidic white again. See if it still tastes so acidic. It won't. Have another slurp of the Chardonnay – it will have become even fatter (and quite unattractive to many). Nothing much will happen to the red.

Now eat some of the peach. Try the Chardonnay: it'll be much more lively and will taste fresher because the sweetness in the peach will have heightened the perception of

acidity; the Sauvignon will taste even more acidic that it did to start with and the red will taste so bad that it almost hurts – the equivalent of a sort of Wine S&M.

With the blue cheese, the red wine suddenly becomes far softer and quite delicious. The blue – which is uncooked protein (as would be rare meat and fish) – virtually wraps its arms around the tannins and stops them from doing nasty things to your gums.

So what about reality?

The above are just simplifications but you can adapt them to suit occasions when you actually want wine to work with a meal.

For example: if you're enjoying a piece of salmon but find that the wine you are drinking with it is too sharp, squeeze a little lemon juice over the fish and see what a difference it makes. Use fruit chutneys, blue cheese dressing, vinaigrettes and pickle amongst other things to recreate the experiments.

Wine snobs

If you ever come across a wine snob (and I can assure you that they are not an endangered species) why not borrow one of the following fairly memorable phrases from Waugh's Brideshead Revisited?
Having followed a wine tasting ritual they find in a book (apart from spitting the wine out) Charles and Sebastian parody the kind of conversations they've heard from wine bores.

'It is a little, shy wine like a gazelle.'

'Like a leprechaun.'

'Dappled, in a tapestry meadow.'

'Like a flute by still water.'

'. . . And this is a wise old wine.'

'A prophet in a cave.'

'. . . And this is a necklace of pearls on a white neck.'

'Like a swan.'

'Like the last unicorn.'

Whenever I meet a wine snob and they begin to recite the vintage years of wines they know to be impressive, I stifle my yawn and wait. I wait for them to ask me my opinion on the wine from such and such Chateau from whenever it was. Then, I put on a ponderous expression and begin to nod, 'It's a shy wine,' I say and wait to see how they react.

Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed this very brief introduction to Wine Basics. The great thing about wine is that there's so much of it to enjoy, and so much to discover. When you find a wine that you like, I urge you to find out why you like it. Do you like it for the grape variety it's made from? Do you like it because of the country it's from or the producer that made it? Whatever it is, experiment: try similar wines, pair them with food, and get to know what you really like.

As the T-shirt says, life really is too short to drink crap wine.

Cheers!

Ewan