



Typicity

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From Wikipedia ...
Typicity (French *typicité*, Italian *tipicità*) is a term in wine tasting used to describe the degree to which a wine reflects its varietal origins, and thus demonstrate the signature characteristics of the grape from which it was produced, i.e., how much a Merlot wine “tastes like a Merlot”.

While “typicity” has its own entries in several online dictionaries as well as on Wikipedia and even has its own Facebook page, neither the Oxford English Dictionary nor the spell-checker on my copy of Microsoft Word recognizes it (although the OED entry for “typicality” is close). Those that do recognize “typicity” as a word all seem to relate it to wine tasting. While I do use typicity in other realms, wine tasting and description is where it most often comes to mind.

When I taste and identify something from that taste, the thing I tasted must have expressed at least some typicity. Without typicity, I have no way of recognizing what my senses experience. When tasting wine, typicity is the friend of the blind taster and without it, blind tasting is more guessing or luck than skill. Without typicity, we have no way of determining place or variety.

Typicity of place means the wine tastes like where it came from. Typicity of variety means that the varietal character of the grapes comes through in the finished wine. If both of these – typicity of place and typicity of variety are present, a taster can begin to accurately place and identify the wine. If neither is present (or if the taster has no frame of reference), the blind taster is limited to a qualitative judgement but even that is suspect because of the lack of a frame of reference.

Of course typicity is not static; rather, it is an evolving target. To someone from Thomas Jefferson's era, modern red Bordeaux wines would be unrecognizable. Jefferson wrote that red Bordeaux should be drunk fairly young and that white Bordeaux wines should be kept and aged. At that time, he was correct as the red wines got hours rather than weeks of skin contact (vatting) so they were more along the lines of what we today would consider a dark Rosé (sort of like today's Bordeaux Clairét or just a bit more red) rather than the much darker wines we've had since World War II.



And the typical Red Bordeaux of today is, while maybe not unrecognizably so, different from what was made in the 1970s. Again, longer vatting allowing polymerization of tannins and other phenols - as well as more color saturation and more extraction. Did your eyes just glaze over as you read “polymerization of ...”? This is actually a big deal, but little understood factor. In modern red wine making, Emile Peynaud, a famous professor of enology at the University of Bordeaux, came up with the idea of leaving the wine on the skins for an extra 14 days after fermentation to allow the phenols (tannins, anthocyanins, and other flavonoids) to form longer molecular chains (polymers) so they become polyphenols sooner. This is important because these polyphenols give the wine all the benefit of having lots of tannin but not the overly harsh taste and feel in the mouth. The polymerized tannin molecules don't fit in the tannin receptors (taste buds) on your tongue and so the wine feels rich but not harsh (no “bitter-beer” face). This process would happen anyway in the bottle (and now continues in the bottle) which is how the sediments you see in older red wines form. Peynaud figured out how to move much of this ongoing process of polymerization up from taking several years in the bottle to taking a couple of weeks in the tank. The immediate result of this change is that red wines made this way taste better sooner than red wines that are drained off the skins as soon as fermentation is complete.

Peynaud's technique – called “extended-post-fermentation-maceration” – was in wide use for the great 1982 vintage in Bordeaux and has since spread to most regions around the world where tannic red grapes are grown. It is used on wines made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Malbec, Tannat, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, and more. It is not used on lighter grapes such as Pinot Noir or Gamay. While it does not affect the varietal character or the expression of terroir in the finished wine, it does make that character and expression more accessible (and more enjoyable) at an earlier stage of development. Everywhere it is used and in all the varieties it is used, extended-post-fermentation-maceration has become part of the typicity of both the area and the variety. (How's that for a digression?)

So typicity of place is what comes when a wine expresses its terroir. Gravel soils give a wine a particular sort of dusty-minerally nuance that can be identified “gravelly”. Limestone can give a mineral note not unlike the smell of children's vitamins (think Flintstones or Ninja Turtles). Sand can give a subtle elegance unlike any other terroir. With regular tasting, place can be recognized. It is said that Madame Bize Leroy (owner of Domaine Leroy) can taste the grapes as they come into her winery and tell which of her vineyards produced them.

The typicity of oak barrels (and now oak chips and inner-staves, if done with a skilled hand) is dustiness and spice and vanilla. When it doesn't mimic French (or European) oak, American oak can add notes of Bourbon (which gets its flavor from American oak barrels), dill, and/or toasted coconut. Specific forests (Allier, Tronçais, Never, Limousin, etc.) and coopers (Demptos, François Freres, Seguin-Moreau, Boutes, etc.) can add their own nuance.

The typicity of Cabernet Sauvignon includes the aromas of both red and black (depending on ripeness) cherry and berry fruit, tobacco and tea (herbal), cedar, graphite, and black pepper and can include green pepper notes as well as the “weediness” some winemakers call the “reek” of Cabernet. The typicity of Syrah includes red and black raspberry fruit along with white pepper and coffee (sometimes coffee grounds) notes. The typicity of Malbec includes black fruits with black pepper and coffee (usually coffee grounds) notes. The typicity of Pinot Noir includes generally red fruits with notes of cola and dark floral with a sort of non-terroir dependent indeterminate earthiness (that can be supplemented and enhanced by terroir-based earth and mineral notes). Zinfandel's varietal typicity is a mix of red and black fruit (from its “Hens-and-Chicks” clusters featuring both big, ripe and smaller under-ripe berries), briar (the essential Zen of Zin), and black peppery spice. And so on.

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What are the enemies of typicity? Over-ripeness and multi-regional blending are the two biggest culprits. Blending varieties can be either a bane to (Burgundy, Pinot Noir) or part of (Bordeaux, Meritage blends, Zin-blends) typicity depending on region, variety, and tradition. Excessive or inappropriate blending (Pinot Noir and Sangiovese?) can also void typicity.

Blending wines from several regions blots out or muddies terroir to the point where it is unrecognizable. If the component wines have any terroir characteristics (and not all do), the blending of them at best makes the resulting wines taste merely “earthy” or “minerally” with no specificity of place although varietal character may come through unscathed. If this is all that happens, this is perfectly OK for lower-priced (say \$12 and under) commercial wines but (with few exceptions) it is not OK for what is being passed as “fine” wine.

Over-ripeness and full-ripeness are two different things. Fully ripe grapes are those where the phenols, sugars, and acids are in balance and there is no green left on the seeds. They tend to be plump. Overripe grapes have begun to lose acidity and even shrivel a bit. The problem is defining where the line between ripe and over-ripe is for any one variety or area. Fully ripe grapes express the character of the variety. As a red grape (almost regardless of variety) moves toward over-ripeness, the wine it yields moves through the cocoa range into the chocolate range and whatever varietal character it has begins to drop away. Cabernet Sauvignon picked at 24-25° Brix generally has the typicity of Cabernet. Cabernet Sauvignon picked at 29-30° Brix generally has the aromas of only black fruit and chocolate syrup. The balancing tobacco or other herbal notes all go completely away. As Pinot Noir moves to over-ripeness, its cola notes fade away and its bright red fruit darkens to black fruit as coffee, cocoa, and even chocolate aromas develop. As Syrah moves to over-ripeness, it loses its red fruit character and its raspberry becomes more generic black fruit even as its coffee notes and white pepper give way to chocolate. This high level of ripeness tends to wipe out any sense of place. Where is the line between ripe and over-ripe? How many prunes is too many?

While a lot of people like these wines and there is a market for them, they are not typical of their varieties. It would be the rare taster who could identify one of them by taste – because they lack typicity.

Just now, there is a big debate in the world’s wine media about ripeness and over-ripeness and its effect on typicity. Some feel (hope?) the current trend toward over-ripeness is the extreme end of a stylistic pendulum swing while others feel that the new higher levels of ripeness are an evolution (as opposed to a fad), not unlike extended vatting was an evolution in style. While I don’t advocate a return to shorter vatting or harvesting under-ripe fruit, I do feel that, as with most things, there are limits and that some producers (in both Napa and Bordeaux for Cabernet Sauvignon and in Australia mainly for Syrah) are pushing ripeness too far. I truly hope that the aroma of a freshly opened can of Hershey’s chocolate syrup does not replace the nuance of tobacco and pencil shavings as the primary varietal identifier of Cabernet Sauvignon. The world would be a sadder place.

Here’s to Typicity! ✨

