



A Matter of Taste

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

Over the last three weeks I have heard essentially the same question asked by three different sources. The question is “What do you look for when you taste a wine?” or some variation thereof. A coworker asked it while we were tasting together. A winemaker asked it while I was tasting with her. A customer asked it after reading a few tasting notes. And so on.

Before getting to what I look for, let me note that I have written about the procedure of tasting and even a bit about the physiology of tasting before. I have written about the types of tasting (analytical, blind, vertical, horizontal, etc.) and even the perils of tasting. But none of that is my focus here. Whether while practicing any or all the different sorts of tasting above or while drinking wine at home, there are four primary things I look for: Fruit, Balance, Place, and Pleasure. Whether your taste correlates with mine or not, the same rule applies; start with fruit and let the rest come to you.

FRUIT

Fruit is the first thing I look for in a wine. If a wine has fruit, it has a chance. If a wine lacks fruit, I rarely give it a second sip. When my friend and colleague Guy Stout (a master sommelier, teacher, and very astute blind taster) talks about tasting blind tasting, he refers to the “FEW” rule; look for Fruit, Earth, and Wood. Fruit comes first and everything else follows.

So what is fruit? Fruit is the flavor of the grapes coming through in the wine. We may describe that fruit in a number of different ways. In white wines, we may describe fruit in general terms as citrus or tree or stone or tropical or some combination of two or more. We can also get more specific and say lemon or lime, apple or pear, peach or cherry, pineapple or mango. We may describe the fruit in red wines as red or black or some combination. And we may get more specific and pin that fruit down to red cherries (think Pinot Noir) or dark berries (ripe Cabernet Sauvignon) or even to blueberries (tooth-staining Petite Sirah) or black raspberries (dense Shiraz).

Where does all this fruit come from? Well, from the fruit – which is to say from the grapes. Each grape variety has in it the potential to produce the same chemical compounds that make up the aroma and flavor in certain other fruits. The primary reason wine is made out of grapes and not blueberries or pears (both of which produce juice that can be fermented) is that nothing other than grapes has the potential range and depth of possible flavors as grapes.

As grapes get riper, the fruit evolves. Pinot Noir can go from bright red fresh cherry fruit to almost black fruit with a mix of cherry and berry characteristics. By the same token, white grapes can go from simple citrus flavors to tropical fruit depending on the degree of ripeness and acidity. It is important to remember that as sugar ripeness rises, acid levels in the grapes are falling. If the acid gets too low and the wine is out of balance, it can prematurely lose its fruit.

So how do you “look for fruit”? When you nose the glass, what does the wine smell like? Whatever else is there (and there could be not much or quite a lot), here should be the smell of fruit. Then, when you put the wine in your mouth, you should taste fruit. Maybe the fruit is simply grapey or maybe you can describe it using some of the descriptors above. In any case, the fruit must be present. If it is not, you are tasting either a flawed wine or a poorly made wine. In either case, don’t waste any more time on it. Move on. Ok, what about very young wines? If you think there might be something there, pour a bit more in your glass and set it aside so you can come back to it in a few minutes. Or even in 30-40 minutes. Some very young wines need a chance to breathe so they can open up. That’s fine if they open up but even the most reticent wine should be showing you at least some fruit after a solid 30 minutes in the glass.

The fact that a wine has fruit doesn’t make it a great or even good wine. However, the lack of fruit precludes a wine from being even good, much less great. And the quality of the fruit is still another consideration. Unless I am tasting Tawny port, I don’t ever expect to taste raisins and I never expect to taste prunes in wine. And yet I sometimes do, especially in wines made from grapes grown in excessively hot conditions. Lodi and the Sierra Foothills both sometimes offer raisiny, prune wines. They are out of balance.

BALANCE

Balance is harder to define or really pin down than fruit but you generally know it when you see it. The wine in the mouth is all about balance. Balance between ripeness and acidity. Balance between acidity and tannin and sweetness. Balance between natural grape flavors and fermentation or winemaking flavors. Balance between development and freshness. Balance can be about fit and integration or it can be about tension. A seamless, perfectly integrated red can satisfy and a vibrant sweet-fruit-balanced-with-vivid-acidity Riesling can thrill. They are as different in style as two wines can be but both are in balance.

And balance doesn’t just come in the wine. Balance starts in the vineyard. If the crop load is too high, the wine made from those grapes will lack concentration and taste dilute and so be out of balance. On the other hand, a vineyard that is not carrying enough of a crop can yield grapes that make awkwardly concentrated wines that also are out of balance. If the grape grower gets the balance wrong, the winemaker is unlikely to be able to fix it and so is unlikely to be able to make a balanced wine.

PLACE

After fruit, the next thing I look for is Place. Or maybe place (or a lack of place) jumps out at me. Does the wine taste like where it is from? Is it from somewhere? It may be from so many somewheres that no place is discernable. Sometimes place is not evident no matter how hard you look and other times you don’t have to look at all. Sometimes the wine introduces itself; “Hi, Cabernet Sauvignon, from Rutherford, nice to meet you.”

CONTINUES ON PAGE 2



Good terroir (a lot of which is place) is what distinguishes great wine from merely good wine. Some terroir don't offer enough distinction or quality to be featured and so the grapes grown in it are best blended with grapes from other areas to make anonymous blends. Most commercial wines show no sense of place and are likely better for it. (Nevertheless, even the most commercial wines should still show fruit.)

Earlier today, I tasted three wines that screamed "Lodi" at me. To my taste, none of them were any

good at all (although I suppose there are some folks who would like them). I also tasted some wines labeled "California" that each contained some Lodi grapes. All of them were perfectly palatable and none of them had any particular Lodi character. They were commercial but they were commercial in a good way. A good Napa Valley floor Cabernet will show the "dusty" character we associate with Rutherford and Oakville. A Pauillac will show the classic gravelly notes and a great white Burgundy will offer notes of limestone minerality. Each of these characters of place is independent of the grape variety. Rather, they are specific to where the grapes were grown – which is to say to Place. Generally speaking, the best wines from the best terroirs speak most clearly of the place from which they come.

If a wine has fruit and balance, it can be good or even very good. If the fruit and balance mix well with the place, it can be better or even great.

PLEASURE

The other thing I look for when I am tasting wine is pleasure. I can't say it is the last thing. I can't even say it is the last of these four primary things because as I discover the fruit, I should also be discerning pleasure. As I find the balance and the sense or lack of place in wine, my sense of pleasure should also be growing. Pleasure comes from the fruit and the balance of the wine as well as from the feel of the wine. Does the wine feel good in the mouth? Does it give you pleasure?

The feel of the wine is tactile and temperature based. The tactile part comes from grape-growing and winemaking decisions. Riper grapes produce higher alcohols which produce a richer feel. More concentration or extraction provides more texture but too much extraction can lead to a chalky or even gritty feel that, at least for me, takes away from pleasure and indicates a balance problem.

Even the most commercial wines should (and usually do) offer some pleasure to the taster. Wines of place should offer real pleasure to the taster. If they don't, it is time to look some place else for wine.

As to temperature, that aspect of pleasure is under your control. Serve your red wines cool between 58 and 65°F. Serve your white wines between 45° and 50°F. You can do it. And your wines will taste better and give you more pleasure for it.

Taste the Fruit. Taste the Balance. Taste the Place. Taste the

Pleasure. All are important to me when I am tasting or drinking wine. One is the most important because without it, the others are not even relevant. Last week, I had a visit from a potential new supplier. The fellow was a sommelier who had been hired to travel around the US pushing an Australian producer's wines. After tasting a few, I opined aloud that the wines seemed to lack fruit. The sommelier "instructed" me that they intentionally lacked fruit because they were supposed to be a new style of wine for Australia that reflected the terroir. And they did show minerality but the fruit wasn't there so they were out of balance.

The wines were a product of a pendulum swing in the Australian wine industry from wines with too much fruit (remember pineapple juice Chardonnays?) and not enough other character. And even though they tasted of minerals, I would never have guessed where the grapes were grown. They were out of balance and so were not good. We did not and will not buy that line of wines. Even if the fruit is intentionally restrained, it is still all about the fruit. It all starts with the fruit and, in the end, the rest is all a matter of taste. 🌿

