



# Personal Taste

## by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Last week, I wrote about one reason that a wine might not taste the same or as good as what I describe in a tasting note - that I taste under ideal or near as possible to ideal conditions as I can. I make sure that I am tasting samples that have been

kept and shipped properly and that they are served at the correct temperatures. I taste from clean, high quality glasses in a well-lit, well-ventilated place. And I try to make sure that I am not fatigued or ill when tasting and that I haven't recently eaten or drunk anything that will interfere with the flavor, aromas, or texture of the wine. Meeting all of these conditions gives the wine its best chance to show well and gives me the best chance to get a good tasting note on it. If some of these conditions are not met (say the wine is served too warm or in a soapy glass or it hasn't been stored right) when you taste it, then it is possible or even probable that the wine will taste different to you than it did to me when I tasted it under ideal conditions.

But lets say, you are tasting an unflawed bottle served at the right temperature in a high quality, scrupulously clean glass, etc. and it still doesn't mesh with my tasting note. Since you are tasting under near ideal conditions, there are three possibilities: 1) bottle variation. 2) wine development or evolution. 3) Our tastes are different.

As to bottle variation, it happens and for a number of reasons. Two bottles could be from different parts of a bottling run or could be from different bottling runs. One bottle might have a bit more air in it or a tighter fitting cork. Wine is an agricultural product so it will vary a bit - as do most all agricultural products.

As to development, a tasting note is a snap shot of what a given wine tastes like on a given day. On any other day, it may well vary a bit - or even a lot. And as time passes, most wines continue to develop in the bottle. The more time between my note and when you drink the wine, the greater the opportunity for change

As to personal taste, well, I try to be as objective as possible in writing my tasting notes but I also have to indicate whether and how much I like the wine I'm tasting. And taste does vary between people.

I enjoy reading Alison Cook's blogs and restaurant reviews in the Houston Chronicle. (Go with me on this; I'll get back to wine in a couple of paragraphs.) She writes well and clearly knows a lot about food and cooking and restaurants. (I also enjoyed reading Robb Walsh in the Houston Press except when he dialed up his curmudgeon-factor too high.) In many - maybe most - cases, I find that I agree with Alison but sometimes she leaves me scratching my head. I especially like reading her "Burger Friday" features but I do not like her favorite burger joint. She raves about the Hub Cap Grill and I have to say it leaves me cold. Based on her recommendation, I tried it for lunch one day and thought it was mediocre and that the burger was over-cooked and a bit dry. Thinking I must have caught them on a bad day, I went back a few weeks later with the same result. After several months and several more good mentions, I tried 'em a third time. Same result. I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that Alison Cook likes the Hub Cap grill and I don't - which is fine. While we disagree on burger joints, Alison Cook and I do still agree on lots of other restaurants and food and drink styles. It is all a matter of personal taste.

(I don't think I have ever met Alison Cook - if I have, she has kept her newspaper anonymity intact - although we are "friends" on Facebook. And for the record, the best burgers I've eaten in Houston were served at Pappas Burger on Westheimer and at the Mucky Duck. Pappas Burger can be a bit hot and cold; when they are on, they are the best and when they are off, they are still at least very good. The Mucky Duck's burger is consistently excellent.)

At any rate, a lot of that same sort of personal taste comes into play in tasting and enjoying wine. I know what my tastes are. Yours may be different. I'll tell you mine and you can see how we match up. I prefer ... well that's hard to pin down. I like wine. I like red and white and sparkling. Within each category, I like dry wines and sweet wines. I like oak aged wines and un-oaked (aka un-wooded) wines. I enjoy 20% alcohol Port and 4.5% alcohol Moscato d'Asti. If I have to pin down a wine characteristic that defines what I am looking for, it comes down to balance. I look first for fruit because if the fruit isn't there, I'm done. If the wine has fruit, then I look for balance.

So what is balance? Balance in wine can be hard to define but you generally know it when you find 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. I enjoy both styles. While they are as different as two wines can be, both are in balance.

And balance doesn't just come in the finished, bottled 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.

What does all that tell you about my taste in wine? In terms of California Zinfandel, I generally prefer the Ridge style over the Turley style. Also in Zin, I'd generally rather drink Dry Creek or Russian River wines than Paso Robles or Sierra Foothills wines. For Cabernet, I tend to favor wines like Alexander Valley Vineyards at the everyday level and wines like Quintessa and Araujo at the luxury level. Nevertheless, I also like the riper Shafer Hillside and Phelps Insignia and the riper still Caymus Special Selection. While I am not generally a fan of flashy horses, occasionally one or two catch my eye; this is very much the same scenario.



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For Chardonnay, I like the un-wooded Lioco wines a lot and I prefer the Mer Soleil (Silver), Bouchaine, and Iron Horse un-wooded Chardonnays to their oak-fermented-and-aged counterparts from the same vineyards. Nevertheless, I also love fine white Burgundy which is invariably fermented and aged in oak barrels. And I'm a sucker for Chardonnays from the Hudson, Hyde, and Ritchie vineyards as made by the likes of Ramey, Patz & Hall, and Paul Hobbes. And that doesn't even get me started on Chardonnays from the Dutton ranches in the Russian River Valley or the Bien Nacido Vineyard in Sta. Rita Hills I so enjoy.

If you think all that makes me a Chardonnay slut, wait 'til you hear what I like in Pinot Noir. I like at least something in just about every style camp on the Pinot spectrum. Austere red Burgundy from the Hautes Cotes de Nuits? Check. Elegant, powerful Burgundy from Gevrey (say from Louis Trappet)? Check. Minerally, focused, classic premier cru from Beaune (say Bouchard Beaune Greves). Check. Classic, elegant, fruit driven but restrained and even quiet Pinot from Russian River Valley (say Joe Swan). Absolutely check. How about Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noirs (think Sleepy Hollow, Pisoni, or Gary's vineyards from whichever winemaker or the riper style Belle Glos Las Alturas). Check, again.

All of these wines have balance in common as that is what I like. If you're a balance fan, you'll most likely like the same wines I do. If you prefer the fatter, riper, higher alcohol wines, your preferences may line up better with Robert Parker.



A sample note:

**ARAUJO, Napa Valley,  
2006 6x750ml**

**\$261.99 \$1,475.71**

Tech: 14.8% Alcohol. 88.5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Cabernet Franc, 4% Petit Verdot, 1.5% Merlot all from the Araujo's Eisele Vineyard, hand picked at night, fermented using pump-overs and aged in

100% new French Oak for 24 months. (The grapes are certified 'Organic' by California Certified Organic Farmers and certified 'Biodynamic' by Demeter) Sensory: Purple-black-red in color, with well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity and moderately chewy phenolics. Elegant, delicious, supple, integrated but thrilling. Mixed red and black fruit with a nice Cabernet bite,, subtle pencil shavings and tobacco notes. Expands and lengthens in the mouth. The oak and terroir are present but completely integrated. Evolving and delicious. The finishing note is pencil shavings with the fruit perfume lingering on. **Outstanding. BS: 98+.**

Keeping in mind that different people like different things in wine, I try in my notes to give as much objective information as possible. The tech section of each note – alcohol content, varietal content, technique, time in barrel, percent new oak, etc. – is all completely objective. If the tech info I pass on is less than complete, it is because the winery was less than forthcoming. Sometimes winemakers are coy with blend and technique information. In any case all the tech info is objective so it can be quite useful no matter whether our tastes agree as long as you know that you like, for example, barrel-fermented, oak-aged, full malo-lactic California Chardonnay over 14.5% alcohol - or not.

The sensory information is as objective as I can make it. I try to indicate the balance of fruit character – citrus versus tree fruits in whites and red versus black fruit in reds – as well as the relative impression made by a sweetness, acidity, tannin, phenolic content, richness, body, and length of finish. As far as all that goes, it is an objective analysis but each person has different sensitivities and so perceives these things at different levels. Some people have a higher or lower tolerance for phenols (tannins) than others. The same is true for acidity, alcohol, etc. In some cases it may be mostly a matter of what you are used to. So this part is less objective but it is still useful if you know what you like and can correlate your tastes with mine.

Finally, I indicate how much I like the wine. This part is the most subjective but it is also quite important. We used to have a fellow in the wine department who took incredibly detailed but completely dispassionate tasting notes. They were amazing records of the wine but I could never tell from reading his note whether or not he even liked the wine, much less how much he liked it. By the way, the "BS" in my tasting notes stands for "Bear's Score" although some have implied that it might be my editorial comment on the whole idea of the "hundred point scale". Hmmm.

Occasionally, my subjective notes can get maybe a bit too personal. I recently described a particular Viognier as tasting like a "fat tabloid-photo drunk Kyrstie Alley in a flowery moo-moo." The sales rep showing me the wine more or less agreed – the wine was a sloppy, over-the-top, unbalanced mess. We didn't buy it so there is no point in publishing the note. I have been known to describe certain old-style northern Rhone wines as smelling like "pumping diesel fuel into a hot tractor sitting in a wet barnyard on a steamy hot summer afternoon." Suffice to say that I don't like that style of Syrah.

I know there are wine drinkers who enjoy what I consider to be sloppy fat Viognier - maybe they think of it as "rich and unctuous". And others who like diesel-fecal notes in their Syrah - which they may think of as "classic, earthy, and rustic". I suppose that is all a matter of personal taste. Each person perceives wine for themselves and each wine tastes just a bit different to each person. Finding a someone who tastes a lot – whether a wine critic or buyer, or salesman, or sommelier - with whom your tastes closely agree makes it easier for you to find wines you will like. ✨

