



Why Doesn't My Wine Taste Like You Said It Would?

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I know someone (just who will remain unspecified for soon to be obvious reasons) who used to regularly ask me for the recipes for whatever dishes I had recently cooked for her and unspecified others. For a long time I obliged, even though I am not a recipe cook. For the record, I am a technique cook so, except when baking, I adapt recipes on the fly. Nevertheless, I went to the trouble of sorting out the exact ingredients and the amounts to come up with cookbook style recipes for her.

After she tried to cook the dishes, she would invariably complain "Why didn't my dish taste like the dish you cooked for me?" At first

I just assumed that she was still learning to cook and that eventually she'd figure it out. I don't think her tastes had changed. After all, she'd liked the dish when I'd cooked it and her attempts were soon afterwards. After a couple of years of this, I started asking her to walk me through her cooking process so I could see what was going wrong. It turned out that she was freely substituting ingredients to make the dishes healthier. In one case, she used applesauce instead of butter. We discussed that sort of substitution and agreed to disagree as to whether it was a good idea. Suffice to say, I quit writing down recipes for her.

What does all this have to do with tasting and describing wine? Well, in a sense, there is a tasting recipe that I follow. In this case, maybe the recipe is more of a process. At any rate, I pay attention to how the wines have been handled prior to the tasting. I only taste wines served at the right temperatures, in a good glass, and in a well-lit, well-ventilated room. I am also conscious of not eating or drinking things before tasting that will interfere with my ability to taste. If I stick to this protocol, the wine has the best chance to show well and I have the best chance to analyse it and provide a good description of it. If I ignore one or more of these factors, I am likely to get a less good note than the wine may deserve.

Handling is important because a sample that has gotten too hot (or that has been frozen) will not show well. When I open wines, I check for any visible signs of temperature damage. If a wine shows any heat damage, I want to determine where and how it happened. A lot of the samples that are sent in directly get cooked during the summer months. (By the way, this is my personal bugaboo with direct shipping from wineries to consumers. Too many wines that are shipped via UPS or FedEx arrive heat damaged.) As a company, Spec's insists that all the wines in our control be shipped in refrigerated containers. We keep the wines in air-conditioned environments in our warehouse, stock rooms, and retail areas. Our warehouse and largest stockroom are kept cooler than is comfortable (58°) for most people. The retail areas are around 72° which is OK for short term storage but not cool enough for ideal serving temperature.

Assuming the wine has been stored and shipped undamaged, it has to be gotten to the right temperature to taste. Ideally, I prefer tasting most reds at between 58° (the high end of proper cellar temperature) and 62°F and most white between 45° and 50°F (the very low end of proper cellar temperature). If the reds are too much warmer, alcohol impression rises and fruit impression is diminished. This can be a big problem with a lot of today's 15+% alcohol reds. If reds are served much cooler, they close up and hide their fruit and flavor as the tannins take over. If the whites are served too much warmer, they taste flat and out of balance. If whites are served much colder, they close up behind their acidity. Wines invariably show their best if they are served in these optimal temperature ranges.

Once they are the right temperature, I try to taste every wine from the same kind of glass. I prefer the Riedel Vinum "Zinfandel / Riesling" glass (#416/15) as my all-purpose, everyday tasting glass. While I use up to five different types of glasses (each designed to best show particular group of wines) to drink from at home, I use only one glass for tasting both in the office and at home. Even Georg Riedel, (the king of the line extension) agrees that this (the 416/15) is an excellent all purpose tasting glass. Using the same scrupulously clean glass removes a variable between various wines so my evaluations are as even as possible; each wine gets the same fair shake and I am not influenced by the glass. I often go so far as to rinse the glass with a little of the wine I am tasting so as to remove any off aromas or any remaining character of the last wine I tasted. (I will sometimes re-taste a wine in a different glass or glasses to see how it changes—very geeky, I know—but that is a different article.)

As to a tasting environment, good ventilation, plenty of (preferably natural) light, and a white background (which could be just a sheet of plain white copy paper) are all helpful if not essential. Good ventilation helps eliminate any ambient aromas that might interfere with the evaluation of a wine. And a plain white background allows me to see the real color of the wine. Being able to smell the wine and only the wine as well as really see how it looks gives me a lot of information about the wine.

Finally, if I am going to taste, I avoid eating or drinking strong flavors that might linger in the mouth or on the breath. Spicy hot foods, mustards, vinegars, garlic, chili peppers, onions, candy, and some milk products are all on the no-no list. So are toothpaste, breath strips, and even mouthwash. Unfortunately for me, this also means that I have had to give up coffee completely as it diminishes my tasting acuity. I drink tea instead and find that tea, hot or cold, doesn't interfere with my tasting ability. I also try not to taste when I am not feeling good as I am less likely to get a good note. There. I have now written down for you my detailed recipe for tasting.



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So, back to our title question: Why Doesn't My Wine Taste Like You Said It Would? The simplest and most likely answer is that I took my note under as close to ideal conditions as I could arrange. It is possible that when you tasted or drank the wine, one or more of those conditions may have been less than optimal. Maybe the wine got too warm in the car on the way home. Maybe it was flawed by a bad cork. Maybe the wine was served too warm. Maybe the glass was less than squeaky clean or maybe it was not the best choice for that wine. Cabernet in a Pinot glass doesn't work any better than Pinot in a Cabernet glass. I have drunk great wine out of styrofoam cups and enjoyed it but I'm certain that my sometimes cavalier attitude has cost me at least some pleasure. If the room has a strong ambient smell, it will affect the way a wine tastes just as if a room is too dark, or there is no white background, it can be impossible to evaluate the color. All of these factors taken separately or together can cause a wine to taste different and generally not so good as if tasted under ideal or near ideal circumstance. That's the most likely reason why a wine I recommend might not show as well for someone else. (Sometimes a wine can have an "off" day where it just doesn't show well. Most wines aging curves look more like a sine wave than a straight line. And it is regularly observed that most wines taste better on days with lower relative barometric pressure.)

I would note that I drink (as opposed to taste) a lot of wine in less than ideal tasting circumstances. While I most often enjoy those wines, I don't use those circumstances to produce tasting notes and only very rarely to make buying decisions. There is no telling how much more (good or bad) a wine might show in the right tasting environment. The point of tasting is to know what to buy so that you can drink well in those maybe less than ideal but real life situations. Nevertheless, if you follow the tasting recipe as closely as possible when you are drinking wine, it is sure to show its best.

Of course, not all disagreement about flavor and style can be attributed to not following an idealized tasting recipe. There is always the matter of personal taste ... but we'll get to that next week. ✨