



Develop your wine palate with practice

By Len Napolitano

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Question: How do I learn to appreciate fine wine?

Answer: Recently, a friend of mine admitted that he knows nothing about wine or what makes one wine better than another. He was clearly frustrated that he could not communicate exactly what it is he likes or dislikes in a wine. But when he tastes something that he does find appealing, it seems to him that the only descriptive word he can conjure up is "smooth."

I explained that learning to appreciate fine wine is a process that can take years. The good news is that it involves tasting a great number of wines. He simply didn't drink wine often enough to build a mental database of wines and their flavor profiles. From an extensive personal history of wine tasting, he would be able to draw comparisons among wines and be more discriminating.

Learning to appreciate fine wines starts with identifying the prominent flavors and components in a wine, whether they are individual fruit flavors, or degrees of sweetness, acidity or tannin. Evaluating how they all balance out overall on your palate is part of this step. Over time, you begin to know what to expect from a cabernet sauvignon versus a pinot noir, for example.

The first requirement of a fine wine is to be true to the grape varietal. A cabernet should have noticeable tannin structure, dark fruit flavors and mild acidity. A pinot noir should be delicate, with medium fruitiness and acidity. There are countless variations of each, which is what makes wine tasting interesting, but when a cabernet starts tasting like a pinot noir, or vice versa, this should raise a red flag in your mind.

The process of identifying fruit flavors and components can be enhanced by also thinking about the wine's personality and style. Consider the wine's power from alcohol, its texture on your palate, how quickly, or not, the flavors present themselves and how long they linger afterward.

Store these impressions into your wine memory bank. The next time you taste a cabernet sauvignon, think back to your impressions of previous tastings of cabernets. Ask yourself if your general impression of the wine is better, worse or the same as most other cabernets that you've tasted.

To some, this may seem difficult, but it really is easier than it appears. If you taste with focus and frequency, you eventually will be more discriminating in your wine opinions and more eloquent than my good friend who finds his favorite wines to be just "smooth".

My recommendations for this week are:

Red:

Clos Du Val Cabernet Sauvignon, Oak Vineyard, Stags Leap District, Napa Valley, 2002. Super rich and concentrated with black fruit aromas, this is a full-bodied example of cabernet at its best. \$62. <http://www.closduval.com>.

