

King Edward VII, the most infamous playboy of the Victorian age, said “one not only drinks wine, one smells it, observes it, tastes it, sips it, and one talks about it.” I’d add – we worship with it, we cook with it and we celebrate with it.

When we talk about the taste of wine, we usually discuss four things:

First, what outside the world of wine it tastes like – bananas, cherries, melons, leather, even cat pee. Second, we talk about the attack. The first impression wine gives as it enters the mouth. Third, the acid in the wine. And finally the tannins.

Probably the most misunderstood of those is acidity and so this month let’s focus there. I’ve heard Michael Broadbent call acidity the nervous system of the wine. It gives wine the zing, the crispness and the strength of finish. However, too much acidity is bad for the palate and the stomach!

Acidity also adds to the nose of the wine. Good acidity enhances the wine. Bad acidity leaves the nose flat. Volatile acidity is present in all wine, but too much makes it smell and taste like nail polish, varnish, or antifreeze (yuk!). Volatile acidity is formed by bacteria. It is not part of the grape.

Two often ignored jobs that the acid in wine performs is first to act as a preservative. Ageable wines have good acidity. Second, to stimulate the gastric juices. That’s why champagne, a wine with deliberately high acidity, is such a good starter. The acids actually stimulate our appetite (yum!).

So how do you appreciate the acid in the wine? Well, malic acid can’t be smelled; however, you can taste it and detect it. It creates a mouth puckering effect and a taste of cooking apples. Many wines go through a “malolactic fermentation” to convert the harsh malic acid into a softer lactic acid. This acid conversion usually occurs when the wine is in a barrel.

Sometimes people speak of tartaric acid. This is the good stuff. This is what you taste on the sides of your mouth. This is what you describe when you use the word “crisp”. In some white wines you can see white flakes. This is tartaric acid. It’s harmless and is fully expected in older, unfiltered white wines.

So you’ve also heard that wine makers add acid to their wine. This is usually sorbic acid. It’s not a natural acid found in grapes, but it is added for flavor or as a preservative. It is detectible by a garlic smell, although sometimes very faint.

But now more about how to taste for acidity and enjoy it. The place you taste acid in your mouth is on the sides of the tongue and near the cheek area. Andrea Immer says she’s an “acid freak”. I have to agree. For me it is the single most important element in the wine. First, white wines traditionally have more acid than red. The wine maker in any case is trying to balance all the elements to get harmony. As grapes ripen, the sugar goes up and the acid goes down. Assuming good weather, if you taste a wine with high acidity or low acidity, it was probably the winemaker’s goal in the first place. High acid wines jolt your mouth. You could say they’re “shocking”. They make your mouth water and your lips pucker (good date wine). They make you say “tart”. They clean your palate and so they are good with strong flavored foods. Low acid wines make the wine taste ripe, soft, and smooth. You’d think “round” when you taste them.

One last comment. People talk about the pH levels in the wine. If you want an explanation of that ask your chemistry professor. However, the higher the pH number the lower the acidity. It’s backwards. A good middle number for wine pH 3.4. Less than this equals high acidity. More than this equals low acidity.

A modern day playboy, but not a king, told me this, “Wine is a little like love. When the right one comes along, you’ll know it.”