

There's a new wine for us old guys; it's not Pinot Gris or Pinot Noir. It's Pee no more.

Last weekend in New York I spent tasting some unbelievable wines with some of the oldest, biggest collectors and most knowledgeable sommeliers in America—boy, did I learn a lot and also got to taste some great wine. All weekend long we tasted blind. No, we didn't wear blindfolds or even close our eyes—we just experienced the wine without knowing beforehand what it was.

Master sommeliers and masters of wine make a game of this. You can't earn either designation without being somewhat proficient at this. I don't believe it adds to the quality of your enjoyment and it certainly doesn't improve the wine, but there are some benefits.

First, it's just plain fun. It's a good theme for a party (I'll explain how to do it later) and snobby wine experts can be brought to their knees quickly. Second, you're not influenced by reputation or by the label or the price. It's the only true way to judge a wine. Totally absent of outside influence. Third, it should help you develop your enjoyment of all the elements of wine because you have to concentrate so damn much on what you're drinking.

I taste about 2,000 wines a year and I only get three or four a year totally right. That is, grape variety, vintage, and maker. I can identify about 75% of the wine's grape variety. Every wine geek has sweet spots, and mine is Bordeaux and white Burgundy. I do better with these. So don't expect instant success.

On one particular afternoon, Jim Clendenen, the world's greatest wine maker, (yes, he received the award in 2004.), got seven of nine grape varieties. That's great because we were all over the world with the wines we were tasting.

How do you taste "blind"? First, someone has to know what the wines are. That person, the facilitator, puts them in paper bags or aluminum foil to cover the label and even the foil on the top. Next, you pour the wines in glasses that are neutral. If you use a Pinot Noir glass for Pinot Noir, that's a big tip off. Next, you start evaluating the wine.

You have three senses to go on plus intuition. The color of the wine (visual) is your first clue. If it's white wine then you have a range of colors from very white to yellow. The color will give you a hint as to grape and age. Remember, all white wine gets darker with age. Riper fruit is usually darker than less ripe fruit. (Northern climates have ripening challenges that southern climates don't.) With practice you'll be able to identify a new world Chardonnay (Australia, United States, South Africa, etc) almost by sight. The same is true for reds. A dark red wine might be Cabernet, Syrah, or Zinfandel. The masters of this art ask themselves at each step what it can't be. For example, dark red wine probably isn't old world Pinot Noir.

The second sense for evaluation is smell. If you do this at home or at a party, ask the participants to leave the perfume and cologne at home. This is the death knell for a blind tasting. So what do you smell? It's simplistic, but white wines usually smell like white fruit; apples, pears, peaches, melon, pineapple, etc. The also often smell like white flowers or honey, sometimes nuts, even petroleum or diesel. Red wines smell like—you guessed it—red fruit. Strawberries, raspberries, cherries, blackberries, blueberries, etc. Sometimes they smell like leather, dirt, cigars, cedar, or road tar.

If you want to improve your recognition of these smells, both white and red, then go to the produce section of your grocery or better yet, to the farmer's market and just wander around smelling the produce. Anyway, there is no one with a magical nose except Samantha in "Bewitched". All good noses in the wine world are developed by practice.

So you've eliminated what wines aren't in your glass based on sight and smell. Now you finally get to taste it. Well, there is a right and wrong way to taste your wine. The wrong way is to gulp it or taste it with strong flavors in your mouth. The right way is to sip it, draw air over it (this enhances the flavors) and then swallow it. Now comes the fun part.

There are at least three parts to the taste. The initial impression (the attack), the middle palate, and the finish. The attack will tell you about the sweetness of the fruit, the middle palate about the complexity and acidity, and the finish about the structure and tannins in the wine.

Is it expensive to blind taste? It can be, but in my monthly tasting groups we usually taste thirty wines by category (California Chardonnay, for example) and most are under \$15 a bottle. For \$100, you can taste seven value wines and decide what you like and have some fun too. You can also spend more.

Here are some tips: 1) Use a white background to look at the wine—it shows the wine's color better, 2) Have plenty of light in the room, 3) Start with the wine varieties you're most familiar with, 4) Swirl the wine in the glass—it makes the smell of the wine come into your nose better, 5) Really stick your nose down into the wine glass—don't be shy, 6) Swish the wine in your mouth to get a lasting impression and to touch all taste senses on your tongue, 7) Don't taste around food—the smells will mix, 8) Ask the facilitator for hints (ha!), and finally, 9) Don't bet any money on your guess.

Above all, don't get discouraged. I have seen the greatest wine experts in the world stumped. One must be intimately familiar with the wine to name it correctly. For a real challenge, use a covered glass so you don't know the wine's color, then guess. Someone told me that sixty percent of wine students at the University of California-Davis couldn't tell red from white blind.

So now you know something about blind tasting—so go try it. One last thought from an old Irish saying; "Any thing that can't be healed with wine or butter can't be healed."