

Last month was a dream for a wine lover. I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. And as I write, I am on my way to France, to tour Champagne, Alsace, Burgundy, and Bordeaux with Jim Clendenen (WGWM) and Keith Pitts. It's a boy's trip, and our next few days' future is so bright, I gotta wear shades.

Last month I tasted 48 vintages of Lafite, 13 vintages of Cheval Blanc, I was at a dinner at the Wild Boar where \$30,000 worth of Burgundy was served (all donated by collectors) and I was in Memphis to taste every Beringer Private Reserve and Howell Mountain Merlot ever made with guy who made them, Ed Sbragia.

At every single event, someone asked what a specific wine term meant. A word they had heard, but wanted more information about. Here are some of those words and their definitions, in case you are too busy to look them up or too embarrassed to ask. Each term refers to a flaw in a wine's quality. Here is some information from David Bird (MW) and Jancis Robinson (All-Knowing Wine Goddess).

Volatile Acidity: sometimes incorrectly regarded as a derogatory term, when in fact it is a descriptive one. VA is that acidity which is due primarily to acetic acid, the acid of vinegar. All wines contain a certain amount of acetic acid, which adds to their complexity. It is only a fault when in excess, which can be prevented by good housekeeping.

Acetic acid is produced by the oxidation of alcohol, particularly under the influence of acetic bacteria.

The bacteria need oxygen to do their dirty work so quality control is simple. The wine should be kept free from bacteria and away from oxygen... (a well equipped modern winery with efficient filtration) Wines suffering from excess VA do not usually smell of vinegar, but of nail varnish remover or cellulose thinners because of ethyl acetate. White and pink wines very rarely exhibit excess VA, principally because the grape skins, which are the prime source of bacteria, are removed early in the process of winemaking.

Brettanomyces: A wine can develop a smell of mouse droppings, often more apparent on the aftertaste than on the nose. This is due to an infection of a particular yeast of the Brettanomyces genus. These organisms are easily controlled by sulfur dioxide and can be removed from the wine by membrane filtration prior to bottling. A mousy smell is a sign of poor hygiene, and once it has affected the wine there is little that can be done in the way of rescue.

Oxidation: Oxidation can occur in any wine and should be distinguished from a wine that is simply beyond its shelf life. Oxidation occurs in wines when they lose their protection of antioxidants, both natural and added, and oxygen from the atmosphere attacks the wine, causing the fruit components to simply break down, leaving the wine dull and lacking in any character. The bouquet of the wine becomes tired, losing its freshness and smelling of caramel or even "meaty". The palate confirms the impressions of the nose. Ultimately, the wine takes on the character of Madeira, which is not surprising, since Madeira is a deliberately oxidized wine.

Corked, Cork Taint, TCA: A tasting term for a wine spoiled by a cork stopper contaminated with cork taint. This is one of the most serious wine faults as in most cases it irrevocably imbues the wine with such a powerfully off-putting smell that it cannot be drunk with any enjoyment. The unpleasantly, almost mould-like, chemical smell is occasionally present in smaller doses that may initially be noticed only by noses particularly sensitive to it, but the odor usually intensifies with aeration and it is difficult for tasters to enjoy a wine once their attention has been drawn to its existence.

It is commonly, but erroneously, believed that a wine with small fragments of cork floating in it is "corked". This may be a serving fault but it is certainly not a wine fault.

So now you know what each flaw in the wine is or can be. So now start looking for them. You won't find them at first every time. I can't find them every time. But it helps to know what you are looking for.

Remember what the signs say, "Life's too short to drink bad wines" and "Friends don't let friends drink bad wines".