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## A MATTER OF TASTE

THE PROCESS of tasting wine is the subject of the last article in this series on sensory evaluation. Some novice students declare all wine tastes the same. If that was the case then wine would only be a tool for intoxication, a liquid to wet one's whistle and it would all cost the same as tap water. Analysing a wine on the palate is probably the hardest stage in sensory evaluation as there are numerous aspects to contemplate.

For a start there are five primary taste sensations that can be detected on the palate: sweet, sour, bitter, salt and umami. The last two are only occasionally found in wine. Umami is a Japanese word indicating a savoury or meat-broth/protein taste derived from the amino-acid in wine.

Taste occurs all over the mouth and not just on the tongue, as was once believed. A single taste bud contains 50–100 taste cells and these possess receptors for all five tastes. When we say we like the taste of raspberries it is only the sweetness, and perhaps a little sourness that we can actually taste – the rest is smell. However, taste is still an important

can also be perceived from wines that have higher alcohol and glycerol. Wines vary from dry, to medium dry, to sweet and finally luscious. In Australia dry wines are the norm, however, we are seeing a few more off-dry rieslings on the market. The sweetness cuts the acidity of the wine and helps to broaden and lengthen the palate, and is often accompanied by low alcohol levels.

Acid is a natural component in wine and imparts a refreshing mouth feel. There are a number of acids present in wine, the most important are tartaric and malic acid. Without acid a wine would seem flat and dull to drink. Words like crisp, lively, or zesty can be used to describe high acidity. Acidity causes saliva to develop and makes a wine seem juicy. Think about how much saliva is dripping off the edges of your tongue. Acidity is harder to detect in red wines but remains an important constituent as it contributes to the overall balance of the wine and can offset the drying sensation caused by high tannins.

Tannins are derived from the grape skins, seeds and stalks or from the oak barrel

Alcohol in good quality wine should be a silent contributor to the overall texture or mouthfeel of a wine. In poor wines it will be detected as a hotness or burning sensation. Don't rely on the label, as in Australia we have a 1.5 per cent variance on the label statement and on EU wine it is 0.05 per cent.

The body or weight of a wine is derived from a combination of the fruit structure, sugar, alcohol, acidity and tannin. This tactile stimulus is judged by how heavy the liquid feels in the mouth.

Flavour is defined as the total sensation of smell, taste and touch as perceived in the mouth. It can be similar to the aromas or quite different. The level of intensity is how strong and persistent the flavour remains with you on the palate. Good quality wines need a medium to pronounced flavour intensity that stays with you even after the wine has been consumed. Playing the devil's advocate, wines that display just fruit flavours are simpler wines while the more intriguing and quality driven, but harder to appreciate, wines display more intriguing developed flavours such as animal, earthy and vegetal. You could also argue that this is a new world-V-old world view of wines.

Length is how a wine travels along your palate and how long it lingers in your mouth after it has been consumed. I have yet to find a good quality wine that has a short length. Wines with short length end abruptly on the palate and don't seem to get to the back of your throat. While wines with a long length seem to fill your mouth and the flavours live on after you have swallowed it, which is described as a wine's finish. Good quality wine should linger on the palate from 30 seconds to over a minute.

After you have considered the different components of a wine you need to assess how they integrate together. Good quality wines should be well balanced and in harmony with nothing unduly dominating. There should be a complexity and intensity of flavours. Texture is a lovely word that is a combination of all components and a wine should hold your attention long after the glass has been drained.

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assessment. Scientists have worked out that when taste and smell are brought together, the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain works out the sensation of flavour. This information is conveyed to the mouth and we decide if we like the flavour or not. Flavours, like aroma, come in all shapes and sizes.

Working through the primary taste sensations is our first job in assessing the wine on the palate. With each of the following, a professional taster would determine the level of concentration - low, medium or high. The main sugars in wine are glucose and fructose. Many wines lack sweetness and are practically bone dry. Others have a natural grape fruitiness that may come across as sweetness. Sweetness

in which a wine is matured in. Tannin produces a drying, astringent, mouth puckering effect on the palate, leaving your tongue feeling rough. Fascinatingly, this is due to the union of tannins and saliva in the mouth, so its impression will vary depending on how much saliva a person produces. Tannins can be described in a number of ways, including green, ripe, fine, talc-like, velvet, dusty or grainy. A wine with coarse tannins are immediately obvious when you taste a wine, while fine tannins creep up on you the longer you taste a wine. Many people get put off reds because of tannins, so in some mass-produced wines they have been vinified out, using techniques such as micro-oxygenation.