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## THE SCIENCE AND SUBTLETY OF SNIFFING OUT A GOOD WINE

FLICKING through the pages of *Winestate* is one good way of determining what to go out to buy. The ratings are an indication of quality, awarded by the members of the tasting panel. But what do they look for in deciding the attributes of a quality wine? Can you test their results and play the role of judge and jury? The answer is yes, as long as you know what to look for when tasting a wine.

Obviously, we consider sight, smell and taste. To observe the colour you look down on the wine, tilting the glass at a 45-degree angle, and analyse the colour against a white background. White wines often range in colour from water-white through to lemon and finally gold. The darker colours may indicate some ageing or oak maturation. Red wines can be dark, intensely coloured or light and transparent. A purple or ruby colour indicates a youngish red, while garnet reveals lengthy oak or bottle ageing. The intensity will generally give you an idea whether they are full-bodied (deeper colour)

stone, tropical, dried, red or black fruit), oak, vegetal, kernel, dairy, minerals, floral, herbs and spices. Some are bizarre, such as animal aromas, which include leather, meaty and wet wool. A good-quality wine should have complexity on the nose, with many aromas vying for your attention. The oak should not dominate but be integrated with the other aromas. Wines change as they spend time in the glass, and these should be pleasant changes.

When you smell a wine you are also on the lookout for faulty wines. Oxidised white wines will be darker in colour, dull, and may have a bruised apple, rotting fruit aroma - or a cooked, 'maderised' aroma if it is a red wine. A wine infected by *brettanomyces*, or simply 'brett', can be identified by a Band-aid, medicine cabinet aroma, or occasionally mouse cage or horse hair! It is caused by an asporogenic wild yeast that is found in wineries and infects oak barrels. Occasionally present in Australian wines, it is more commonly encountered in some traditional imported wines. Cork taint

shiraz have higher tannin levels than, say, pinot noir. That dry, astringent feeling from tannins comes about when the natural grape tannins attach themselves to your saliva and are swallowed, leaving your mouth without any saliva protection. The more tannins in the wine the more your mouth will be locked up. However, this is counter-balanced by the acidity, which will create saliva.

Detecting acidity in red wines is harder due to the action of tannins and more concentrated fruit, but if you find there is a juicy taste then the acids are working overtime as it is the increased saliva that has caused that sensation.

Full-bodied wines are no better than light-bodied wines, and neither is high alcohol an indication of quality. It is the balance of its constituents and length of palate that is critical in determining quality, as well as flavour intensity. 'Length' is a combination of the perception of how a wine travels along the palate and how long it lingers in the mouth after it has been consumed.

Flavours on the palate can run along the same lines as the aromas or can be quite different. This is often due to the effects of the other constituents on the palate. A wine might smell of flowers or stone-fruits but due to its high acidity its flavours are more citrus-driven on the palate.

UK-based Master of Wine Michael Palij from Winetraders specialises in Italian wines, measuring quality according to four parameters: "Balance, length, intensity and complexity, known affectionately as BLIC! Italian wines tend to score very highly on intensity and balance and this is what makes them compatible with food. All that tannin, acidity and alcohol makes them structured and big in the mouth - just what you need when partnering fatty salami or a rare bistecca fiorentina."

The joy in tasting and assessing wines is to discover a bargain that delivers quality beyond its price point, and there are plenty of wines out there in this category - if you know what to look for.

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or light-bodied, which means you will be able to see the writing on a page through the wine. You can note other aspects, such as legs or tears that run down the side of the glass which indicates its viscosity, either through high alcohol or sugar content.

I'm a firm believer in 'calibrating' your palate. It's advantageous to taste a number of like wines together. In this way you can return to that first wine and try it again, once your nose and palate are attuned to tasting wines. Often you will appreciate that first wine more once you have tasted other wines.

Now swirl the wine around the glass and take a deep smell of the aromas. Wine falls under numerous aroma categories which can be as diverse as fruit (citrus, green,

- with aromas of wet newspaper, cardboard or, my favourite, hessian bag - is again more common with imported wines due to our mass uptake of screw caps as a closure. Other faults and some key aroma indicators include, sulphur (strong burnt match), volatile acidity (nail polish) and acetification (vinegar).

When drinking the wine you need to assess the levels of sweetness, acidity, tannins, weight or body, as well as the effects of the alcohol and flavours you perceive. These again should be in balance or be at the right level for the style of a wine. You would normally expect crisp acidity in a riesling and less in a chardonnay. Italian red wines, like barbera, have higher than normal acidity, while cabernet sauvignon and