

## **The Wine Dichotomy**

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Wine-tasting is a difficult business--despite the glamor that is often attributed to it. Oh sure, standing with the Baron in the hushed cellar of a Bordeaux chateau, tasting his new 2007 out of the barrel, trading *bons mots* before lunch, giving him your approval.....this all sounds like a scene from a fantasy life. But make sure to include in your fantasy the fact that you've already tasted 30 other wines that day, will taste 12 more at lunch, 40 more in the afternoon, and maybe "just" 8 with dinner.

And that somebody's gonna want to know what you thought about all of them.

Perhaps the most frequent question I'm asked about my wine life is....how the heck can you taste 100 wines a day? Don't they all start to seem alike? Say....after about the 4th one?

Indeed, studies have shown that the critical distinctions human beings can make among wines that they're tasting starts declining with the fifth or sixth wine. It becomes rapidly more difficult after that and, though I can only back this up empirically, I know that most wine amateurs are completely shot by wine # 12.

And yet....wine professionals seemingly know no bounds. We are always told that **Robert Parker** tastes 100 wines on a tasting day.....and I suspect that's a light day for him!

How does he do it? How do most wine professionals do it? How do I do it?

The amateur's mistake, it seems to me, is to approach each wine with a "do I like it?" kind of attitude. Their process goes directly from taste to judgment. "Ooh, that's good," they may say. Or, "I don't like THAT," they may blurt out. But my key is withholding judgment for a while. First, I have to objectively, systematically *test* the wine on my palate, before the judgment starts falling together. I simply establish for myself key objective criteria--things that I have trained myself to look for in a glass of wine. Some of these are quite simple and technical; as I go through my little check list, I'm asking "how's the acidity? how's the residual sugar? how's the tannin? how's the alcohol? are these components balanced?" Some judgments are a little more subjective, but I still approach them in checklist fashion: "what does the wine smell like? how does the wine feel on the palate? what does the wine taste like?"

Then, there are some "bigger" issues...such as the one that's the real subject of my piece today. For tasting many, many thousands of wines over the years has convinced me that a central dichotomy exists in wine that I find endlessly interesting.....and endlessly helpful in establishing a critical response to any given wine.

And that dichotomy is: fruity wine vs. earthy wine.

Now, please don't believe that I'm giving you anything gospel-like here; put together 100 wine-tasters, and they'll probably all disagree with at least part of what I have to say. But for myself, over the years, I have determined that "earthy" is one of the greatest things a wine can be.....and that I'm not nearly as interested in "fruity." I always say.....simplifying the matter to nearly the point of absurdity....."if I want fruit, I'll drink grape juice. But when I drink wine, I want transformed grape juice...a drink that reaches way beyond 'fruity.'" "Knowing that, sticking my nose in glass #97 of a long day.....I at least have a place to start.

Of course, this simple dichotomy is fraught with subtleties, nuances, paradoxes, contradictions.

For starters, you can't just say "earthy" and leave it at that. Recently, one of my favorite wine bloggers, **Brooke Cheshier**, has been exploring the nuances of "wine language" on her blog. (Log on to

<http://aficionada.squarespace.com/journal> to see for yourself.) She spent some time in a classroom at the CIA in Napa Valley with **Karen MacNeil**, the famous author, and head of wine studies at Greystone, seeking further enlightenment. The Macneil observations about "earthy" that Brooke recently posted on her blog are extremely interesting! I find them useful now, anytime I stick my nose in a glass and start thinking "earthy" thoughts.

MacNeil reportedly said, in her Mastering Wine class, that there are only five permutations of "earthy" in wine. Brooke continues:

### **THE 5 PERMUTATIONS OF EARTHY**

(as taught by Karen MacNeil):

1. **Garrigue:** A French term that, much like the word terroir, takes a page and a half to describe. I'll do my best to be brief. Basically, MacNeil says, it's the smell of wild, resinous herbs against hot baked earth. Think lavender and rosemary and thyme scorching themselves under the hot Provencal sun. Garrigue is one - very fragrant - step before desert (Sahara. Not pot de creme).
2. **Duff:** Another word that sounds better in French. Sous bois. Under the forest, or as we like to say, forest floor. Think wet leaves, pine needles, damp earth.. anything slightly rotting but in an organic sort of way. MacNeil said it most poetically by describing it as New England forests in the fall.
3. **Animali:** No, not animal-like. We'll get to that in a minute. Animali, MacNeill says, is a sweaty, male smell. "At mile one, not mile five." Salt and testosterone? I'll drink to that.
4. **Barnyard:** Here are those fecal, animal scents. Many experts consider barnyard qualities a flaw, as it's most often caused by a wild yeast called brettanomyces. But there are a passel of us brett lovers out there. Still, a little brett goes a long way, and everyone's sensory threshold (the point where it just tastes like poo, literally) is different.
5. **Mushrooms:** Self-explanatory. Truffles fall under this one, too.

Well, thank you Brooke and Karen. It's good to have a matrix....particularly when you're tasting 100 wines a day. Keeping this quintet of funk in my head has been helping a good deal in separating out, even discovering, the flavors in wine that I like so much.

Now, if someone came along and told me there's a "sixth" earthy permutation in wine, it would not rock my world. I could handle seven or eight as well. Doesn't really matter, because my relationship with earthy is set for life: it's what I love in wine! No ambiguity there.

Things get a lot trickier when you turn to fruity. And it's not just because any MacNeil-esque catalogue of fruity categories would stretch into the dozens, if not the scores.

The problem with fruity, from my perspective as a would-be efficient wine-judger.....is that sometimes I like it and sometimes I don't!

Let's look at white wine first.....and let me begin by saying that the kind of "fruity" so prevalent in white wines today.....is a turn-off to me. Select almost any Chardonnay from your wine shop shelf, or Italian Pinot Grigio, or almost any other of the big mass-market sellers--and, after you pour it into a glass, your nose will be assaulted by what fruit-worshippers call "oodles and oodles of fruit." To me, most of this fruit smells more like bubble gum than fruit. What fruit there is, to my olfactory mechanism, smells like generalized apples and pears. Riper versions move down the fruit continuum to pineapples and mangoes. Whoop-de-do. I'd rather have apple juice, pear juice, pineapple juice or mango juice. I'd rather have bubble gum.

HOWEVER.....the first infuriating proviso.....is that I actually like the young-fruit aroma of some grape varieties. Let me count the wines:

RIESLING. Good examples from Germany, Austria, Alsace have a bewitching yellow-fruit character in youth: peaches, nectarines, apricots....that registers on my nose as something special, distinctive, of a much higher order than the bubble gum mass. What I love in Riesling most of all are the funky, mineral-ly, petrol-ly flavors that develop with age.....but I can drink this stuff young, too.

GEWURZTRAMINER. I'm not always wanting to drink this odd ringer for litchi fruit....but I always respect those fruity aromas as something more sophisticated.

MUSCAT (particularly Muscat á Petits Grains). Arrive at a party to a glass of Muscat d'Alsace, or Austrian Geller Muskateller, and your nostrils will be bewitched by the young Muscat-y aromas--which is to say a set of wild-grape essences almost on the border of the native American grape varieties we call "foxy." But these fruity aromas are complex, perfumed, layered, seductive.

There are lots of other white wines too that present "fruit" in an interesting way. So, when it comes to white wine, I'm a selective fruithead.

To make matters much more complicated, however.....along comes red wine! And red wine, for me, sets up the Ultimate Paradox: though I disdain the simple, mass-market fruit of most white wines in circulation, I adore the simple young fruit of reds like Beaujolais, Dolcetto, Saumur-Champigny (simple Cab Franc from the Loire), etc.! In fact, almost any red that can get to me within a year of being made will usually have some concatenation of cherries, strawberries, currants, etc. that I find bewitching. This line of fruit is simply.....more interesting!....than the standard white line of fruit. And....to me...it goes much better with food! But the really crazy thing is this: most American consumers dislike wine like Beaujolais! "Too fruity," they cry, running back to their absurdly fruity Chardonnays. In the rest of the wine world, things are reversed (as they are in my head): "simple young red fruit good, simple young white fruit eh." In America, white fruit rules.

Now, all wines, red and white, with some age, begin, essentially, to decompose. To me, that's when the fun really starts....because, all other things being equal, I will always opt for funk over fruit. But the vast majority of wines available at retail in the U.S. have not yet begun the march to "earthy"--so it's important to go into those gazillion-wine-tastings with some forethought on the subject of fruit.

Then the key question becomes.....which young, fruity wines show the structure, the extract, the sophistication, the balance, to age into funky old classics? Aah.....that's a question for another day.

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