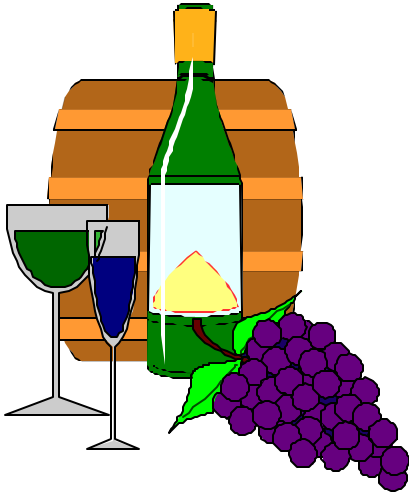


The Taste of Wine - The Way it Was

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The years between the two World Wars were the golden years of fine wines. The famous long-established wine makers of Europe produced superb vintages to be shipped to dedicated consumers all over the world. But the traditional methods of production were labour intensive and slow and the world was becoming more mechanized every day.

The change started in California about the year 1990 when some wine makers joined together to reorganize production methods so as to reduce costs and increase profits. At first it seemed to be a local phenomenon, but then it was discovered that their new wines were selling well even though they had actually been stripped of most, if not all, of their identifiable distinctive characteristics during production. Their success seemed to come from two innovations. First each wine was now given the name of a famous wine grape such as Pinot Noir or Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc and was at the same time advertised as “new and exciting”. Second, each wine was made to be clear, slightly sweet, and uniform. Every bottle of every batch would look and taste exactly the same.

What followed was a minor Industrial Revolution. After a short period of introduction, the sales of all these new products took off, and because of their success the new production methods spread from California to the rest of the wine world. Soon the fine wines of Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Rhone Valley, and Champagne were moved off suppliers’ shelves in favour of the new Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and other wines with like names. But even though, as a result, it is now difficult for us to acquire good fine wines, we can still dream and remember, the many joys of those tastings that took place in the past.

In them there were some four stages to be observed. First, preparation, the wine was cooled if it had been on the shelf and warmed if it had been in the refrigerator. The ideal temperatures were:

Bordeaux - 16 to 18°C

Burgundy - 14 to 16°C

Cotes du Rhone - 13 to 16°C

Beaujolais - 12°C

Other Reds - 12 to 14°C

Champagne - 6 to 8°C

The wine glass had to be clear and large enough so that it was able to develop and capture an aroma without being filled to the brim, and it had to have a top that funnelled inward rather than outward.

The second stage was to observe the appearance of the wine in the glass - its colour, limpidity, viscosity, brilliance, and physical presence. Age as indicated by colour was important if not critical and good red wines should be at least five years old, while white wines usually matured in about two years. As to appearance, red wines, unlike white wines, lightened rather than darkened with age and after a number of

years turned from a dark purply colour to a lighter brick red, while white wines such as Sauternes would change from a pale gold to a darker gold and then to a glorious amber. Texture or viscosity was revealing because good wines with a concentrated flavour were, like blood, thicker than water, and showed their character as they wet the sides of the glass by clinging and falling back in trailing drops that in Germany were called “Church Windows” and in Britain “legs”.

Stage three was to observe the aroma, by swirling the wine around in the glass before sniffing and sipping it, we deliberately aerated the wine to enhance its aroma. We knew that some wines were naturally highly aromatic and other less so and that the aromas of young wines were essentially the smell of the grapes transmitted and intensified by fermentation. We also knew that the grapes that made the best wines tended to have the most distinctive and memorable smells (aromas) from the moment they became wines, and that if new wine was kept in oak barrels for a time, the scent of oak overlaid and partially concealed the grape smell for a while, but after being bottled the components became less distinct and new complex aromatic substances would form in it.

Now for the moment of truth - we knew that taste and smell were not separate organs of sensation but worked together. A blocked nose impeded the mouth from tasting - what the nose detected by sniffing, the mouth confirmed by sipping. In final preparation for the test we tipped up the glass to sniff and sip at the same time - which we then did - and then held the wine momentarily in the mouth before swallowing it. Now all the elements in the wine slowly revealed themselves since only the tongue, the palate and the throat could together get the full feel of the wine in order to judge its body and at the same time appreciate the sum of all its flavours plus the warmth and potency of its alcohol. Finally we noted what flavour was left - either a nasty taste or none at all, but that fine wines always lingered in departing sweetness and that great wines often perfumed the breath for a full five minutes, or more, after each sip.

This is indeed the stuff that dreams are made of.□