

Serve it, Drink it, Share it  
Viticulture in Corona for One and All  
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With the growing popularity of wine, most restaurant owners in the Corona area are beginning to stack the last pages of their menus with ever daunting lists of wines, usually broken down by color and varietals, but almost always resembling the racing form from Del Mar. "The 2001 Merlot has three-to-one odds over the 1998 Syrah in the third race. My money's on the Chardonnay." Scanning the collection of odd phrases and hard-to-pronounce words might be similar to reading a foreign language for the first time: "The tannin provides for an intense palate with good structure and balance, but look for a deep, beautiful, and young red-violet color with aromas of raspberry, cherry and fine leather..." Leather? You flip to the front of the menu and glare at your date. What kind of place is this?

More so than ever, the chore of picking a good wine for dinner or for a casual sip by the fire has become exactly that, a chore. We fret, wring our hands and reach for a quarter to flip. Why? A venerable inbreeding of wine snobs have made enjoying a glass of what amounts to nothing more than grape juice so complicated you're afraid to drink it, and learning about is nearly impossible thanks to all the pseudoscientific jargon only the "true" connoisseurs are blessed to know. Just because you weren't born with a silver sommelier's cup in your mouth, it doesn't mean you are destined to gaze blindly at the wine list (or stare at the endless array of bottles at the grocery store) like it's the schematics to H.A.L 9000. Wine was made to be enjoyed. Don't worry about what you don't know about wine (which is mostly impractical information best left to trivia contests), just concern yourself with what you should know, and you'll soon be sipping a glass of the Vina Domaine Oriental 1993's Cabernet Sauvignon described above, saying to yourself, "My, that *is* good leather."

One of the oldest beverages on the planet (save for beer), wine is produced by adding yeast to crushed grapes. Take a large quantity of grapes, pulverize them into a juicy mess ala "I Love Lucy!" and wait. Natural yeasts on the grapevines eat the sugar in the juice and convert it to alcohol. Presto! You've got fermented grape juice, otherwise known as wine. Be careful though, next stop is vinegar. Chardonnay (the main ingredient in champagne), Cabernet Sauvignon (a very age-worthy red), Riesling (an unjustly unpopular grape) and Zinfandel (the oldest planted grape in California) are a few of the roughly 10,000 examples of grapes in the world, called varieties (however, you'll probably never hear of more than 25 in your wine-drinking lifetime). Mix these varieties together in various percentages and the possibilities are endless. A varietal is a wine named after the sole grape used. For a bottle of Chardonnay to be called a bottle of Chardonnay, for example, it must be made from at least 75 percent Chardonnay grapes (and 25 percent of something else). Sure, the list of little known-to-no-one facts can go on and on and on, but that doesn't put wine in your mouth and a pleasing smile on your face. Let's pop a cork and take a taste, shall we?

#### Tasting Wine:

Compare wine tasting to browsing in an art gallery. You can stop in front of each piece of art and tell within an instant whether you like it or not. The same is true about wine. If you like what you taste, you'll want to know more about it and try more wines like it. Hence your experiences is broadened. Try this: On a clean white tablecloth, gather together a few large wine glasses, a loaf of crusty bread, a note pad, some curious friends, and a variety of wines, both red and white. Also, make

sure you don't have any heavy equipment to operate for the rest of the evening. Prepare to see, swirl, smell, sip and savor.

**See:** Pour out a third of a glass of wine for each person and hold it up against the white background of the tablecloth, as a lot can be gained by the color. White wines, as they get older, get darker, while red wines, as they age, get lighter. The white wines have more color because they are usually older and it was aged in wood containers instead of metal. You'll notice that a Chardonnay has a deeper hue than does a Riesling because different grape varieties give off different colors. What is pale yellow to some is golden to others so talk about what you see with your friends.

**Swirl:** Why do you always see wine drinkers nervously swirling their wine? Are they trying to keep the dust off of it or are they seeing how close they can get to the rim without spilling? The purpose of the constant swirling allows much needed oxygen to get into the wine, and at the same time, releases esters, ethers and aldehydes that combine with the oxygen to give you that wonderful bouquet of smells. Now that you're aware of it, you're going to start swirling everything, your coffee, your milk, soft drinks. Yes, it is a force of habit that develops into a serious problem and, if you're not careful, you'll find yourself swirling a mocha cappuccino right into your lap one day.

**Smell:** Simply put, you shouldn't drink wine when you're congested because smell is almost as important as taste (almost more so). Your tongue can only perceive four tastes—sweet, sour, bitter and salt (and there's no salt in wine so you're down to three)—but your nose can smell over 1000 different scents. After swirling, drive your nose right into the glass, almost until you can start blowing bubbles. Do this at least three times, and each time take in a nose full of air. The wine's aromatics, or bouquet, is the olfactory data, and all those flavors you can smell is sometimes called the nose. Pinpointing the various flavors of the wine always start with smell, and it can tell you if the wine has gone bad or not, as well. So, what do you smell? The list can be endless, but try not to use flowery words to describe your wine. Meatloaf smells like meatloaf because it is meatloaf, but wines can smell like anything from grapefruits and peppers to mold (from a defective cork) and vinegar (too much acetic acid).

**Sip:** Finally, you thought we'd never get here, but here we are. You get to have a drink. Take a sip, just enough to spill over your tongue, and a great way to add flavor to the taste is to slurp it. That's right, slurp it like soup, but try not to sound like a cow drinking water; you'll get strange looks. While you're quietly slurping, breath in deeply without actually inhaling the wine. Feel the wine vapors filling your lungs and nose? Okay, you've got the wine in your mouth, now splash it around your tongue and think about what you're tasting. Sweetness is found at the front of the tongue, as in a Muscat grape. Fruits and the main characteristics of the wine are found in the middle of the tongue, and this is where you'll taste the butter of a Chardonnay or the cassis of a Cabernet Sauvignon. Acidity (from such grapes as Pinot Blanc and Trebbiano) is found at the sides of the tongue, the cheeks and the back of the throat. Tannins is that woody oak flavor you'll find frequently in barrel-aged reds and whites. If it gives you that cotton-mouth dryness, the wine is too young, as the tannin flavor should not overpower your entire mouth.

**Savor:** The finish, or length, is the aftertaste, a harmonic balance of the above flavors in your mouth. A good quality wine will have a long, pleasing aftertaste that can last up to three minutes. Sit back for a moment and think about what you've

just imbibed. What impressed you most? Texture is how it feels in your mouth: dry, thin or sharp can be textures of a white wine, while soft and silky can be the feel of a red wine. Was it light like skim milk or full-bodied and rich like whole milk (we hope it didn't taste like milk, however)? For white wines, was the acidity just right or too much, and for red wines, was the tannin too strong or even too weak. Did it feel as if it was missing something? What flavors did you taste? Blackberries, cherries, vanilla, spices?

It is at this point you decide whether you liked it or not. If you like the wine, pour another glass and begin again at step one. If not, open another bottle and try something else.

To be labeled a "wine connoisseur" suggests an understanding and appreciation of wine, not an encyclopedic knowledge of facts and figures. For now, enjoy wine for what it is. You can look the facts up later; that's what books are for. Grab your sommelier's cup and drink up. There is no such thing as a bad tasting good wine, but if it tastes flat, weak, cooked, or like moldy fruit or vinegar, it's a bad wine, period. If it smells like rotten eggs or nail polish remover, dump it. So what is a good Wine? Ask yourself this: Do you like it? If you do, it's a good wine, no matter how much or how little it cost.

Although few people actually label themselves connoisseurs, everyone loves the idea of being one. You're no different, so why shy away from a word that conveys glamour, wisdom, sophisticated elegance and wealthy prestige? You've earned it.