

Wednesday, April 09, 2008

Make A Plan for Tasting

By **Jim Hammond/**

For the Journal

Now that spring is firmly entrenched — except for the occasional late snowfall — it's time to plan for this year's wine events. A new event has been added to the Memorial Day and Labor Day festivals: The Corrales Quilt and Wine Fair, which will be held in the village of Corrales on May 10-11.

Last year I wrote about wine festival etiquette. This time I'd like to focus on wine-tasting tips. Entirely too many of you are just tossing the stuff down so you can go to the next booth before the lines lengthen. Trust me, the wine vendors have provided enough wine to go around. Pacing and technique will enrich your experience and enjoyment.

The steps in wine tasting are: Strategize, see, sniff, swirl and spit — or SSSSS for short. The spit part I know can be challenging, but bear with me on this. Once you have your wine glass in hand, strategize which wines you plan to taste. We all have limits to how many wines we can taste before our palates give out and they all begin to taste the same.

If you're a white fan, that should be your focus. If you prefer drier wines, don't confuse your taste buds with sweet and dessert wines until the end. If you want to taste whites and reds, begin with whites, move to lighter reds, and then heavier-bodied reds, and finally dessert wines. You'll probably vary your plan as you go — that's called reality — but at least it will give you some focus.

Use your eyes

A visual check of the wine will set expectations. Heavily bodied reds will emit little or no light. Many Syrahs are almost ink-black in color. Tilting the glass from side to side will spread tendrils of liquid. As the wine coats the sides of the glass, "legs" will form. That's what they're called; just be careful who you're facing when you comment, "Nice legs!"

(It's a popular wine myth that the "legs" indicate a wine's viscosity, but that's not true. They only indicate the level of alcohol.)

The next step will test your dexterity with a glass. Swirling the wine introduces oxygen, and opens it up so the aroma, or nose, can be sampled. If you haven't done this before, I'd suggest you don't try it in a crowd. Spraying the wine is not one of the intended steps. To be safe, after the pour, rotate the glass on the counter until you get the hang of the most effective wrist action. This technique is considered bad form in some circles, but so is spraying wine on the other participants.

If there is any wine left in the glass after your swirl, check the bouquet. Swirl again if you aren't noticing anything. An alternate way to swirl is to place

your palm over the glass rim when you agitate the wine. This will concentrate the bouquet and make it easier to identify the flavors exhibited by the wine. And those around you will breathe easier.

Take a whiff

What you pick up in the nose does not always translate to what is tasted. Some wine has a subtle or almost nonexistent nose. Other wines, particularly reds, may show different elements during the taste step. A poor nose knocks points off a wine's rating so most vintners strive for an attractive nose that compels you to drink the wine.

A just-opened bottle of red wine usually has a different nose than after it has had enough time to breathe. For example, I was pouring a Chilean Merlot Reserva at a tasting I'd organized recently, and I was getting heavy barnyard aromas. I mean I could almost hear the cows mooing. I knew my guests would not get past the sniff test, so I did a flash decant to aerate the wine. After an additional half hour it went from barnyard to earthy and ended up being the most popular wine I served.

I make this point because not every winery will have every red open the appropriate length of time, which can be up to two hours for young, very dense wines. That is also why the swirl is so important. The next step entails another swirl, but this one is in your mouth.

When you sip, allow the liquid to coat your tongue. This will identify mouth-feel, and the level of sweetness and acidity. It also reveals how well the alcohol is integrated into the wine. A lot of heat on the tongue and back of the mouth usually indicates the wine has not come together, or that the alcohol level is too high. These are negatives when assessing a wine's food-friendly palate.

When the wine has coated your tongue, purse your lips and draw in more air to fully aerate the wine and allow the olfactory epithelium to do its job. In case you wondered, this is the apparatus that gives us our sense of smell. This second route through the mouth is what really makes the wine come alive. It's quite a rush.

Looks like I've run out of spit, so we'll have to cover that another time. However, if you come to the Corrales wine event, I'll be giving wine talks both days on basic and advanced wine topics. A new wine pamphlet on New Mexico wines will also be available for purchase. See you there. Salut!

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