

So you wanna learn about...

If you don't know jack about wine, you're really missing out — but you've come to the right place. This stuff has fueled gatherings for thousands of years and made France, a country the size of Vermont, one of the world's most visited hot spots. Remember, one day you won't have the option of ignorance on this topic; you'll be expected to bring a bottle to friends' houses, to order at a nice restaurant, and to serve a respectable glass at your own dinner parties. We'll give you an overview of the pricey liquid, from how it's made to the important differences between colors of wine, their regions and vintages, and, of course, how you can best enjoy them.

Learning the basics about wine and wine-making is useful because it allows you to (a) credibly evaluate the wines you taste and (b) impress your date.

So what exactly is this stuff and why is everyone all up in arms about it? Wine isn't just high-octane grape juice. Making good wine is a process; if you don't believe us, try drinking some really cheap wine and you'll quickly learn why Monty Python claimed that it "opens the sluices at both ends." Fine wine involves taking a great grape vine, growing it in the right soil, ushering the grapes through the fermentation process, aging the wine properly, and releasing it at exactly the right time. In short, there are plenty of things to screw up. The English have been botching it for years.

There are four major types of wine: red, white, rosé (or blush), and champagne. As far as dining is concerned, we're going to focus only on the first two types, since champagne is its own animal and most wine advisers recommend chilled rosé only for a picnic on a hot day. And anything that comes in a can, a

box, or a 40-ounce container isn't technically wine; it will be listed on the menu under the heading "Cheapskates."

What is wine?

Essentially, wine is fermented grape juice, but with some twists. God left us with a few remnants of Eden when he gave us the boot, and one of the best is the fact that any fruit containing sugar will turn to booze if you leave it to ferment. In the process of fermentation, yeast converts the sugar into alcohol. Yeast is found all over the place, and in the wild, it lands on the skins of grapes. And although grapes will ferment naturally, vintners nowadays don't take any chances. They labor over the precise strain of yeast to be used in their recipes, because different choices will lead to different results.

The ingredients

Most people believe that green grapes make white wine and red grapes make red wine. That is largely true, but you should know that white wine can also be made from red grapes. The inside of a red grape is essentially "white" — and most wines are made with just the inside of the grape. The red color in red wine is created by allowing the fleshy interior to mix with the pulpy skins during the crushing process, which infuses red wines with "tannin," an ingredient that gives red wine its distinctive flavor. So you can make white wine with red grapes — like White Zinfandel, a white wine made from a grape with a decidedly red exterior — but not red wine with green grapes. To top it off, most champagnes are made from red grapes. Weird, but true.

The process

The grapes are first crushed, with or without the skins, and then left to ferment. A disinfectant is used to neutralize any contaminants in the juice, such as mold and bacteria, that may have been on the grapes. The fluid, or "must," is then left to complete the fermentation process in either big steel vats or small wooden barrels. Fermentation in barrels requires a longer process and is harder to keep at the right temperature, but supposedly leads to a better finished product, for which you will, of course, end up paying more. Once the wine is properly fermented, the vintner plucks out all the little nibbles, and then matures the clarified vino. The better vineyards age the wine for years in oak barrels, which infuses the wine with positive woody hints. The lamer vineyards shove the stuff in a steel vat just long enough for it to be squirted into bottles with plastic spigots.