

Where color comes from

Color is one of the major distinguishing features of wine. The main difference between red and white wine is that the grape juice used to make red wine contains skins, seeds, and stems. This is significant because leaving juice to mix together with the woody bits (known as maceration) causes the finished product to contain something we briefly mentioned earlier — tannins. If the term “tannin” bugs you because you don’t really understand it, just think about a strong cup of tea. That woody taste is tannin. In wine, it can lend a wonderful complexity to red varieties.

The Rule

The reason you need to be aware of the differences between red and white wine is because of one of the oldest rules in fine dining: harmonize your food and drink. If you’re going to be eating something delicate with subtle tastes, the Rule states that you should avoid drinking something with a strong flavor that will overshadow the food. Conversely, a hearty meal will often be best complimented by a strong wine with flavor of its own. But every single current guide to wine makes a point of saying that the Rule is out of date and the only hard-and-fast dictate of wine drinking is to choose something you enjoy.

The rationale behind the Rule

Nevertheless, there’s a reason that the Rule evolved in the first place: it makes sense. If, for example, you’re trying to pick up on the vague hints of Caribbean brine that delicately caress the primo slice of sushi you just ordered, slurping a bowl of tequila isn’t going to help. Balancing food with drink may not be required anymore, but it’s a good tip to keep in mind. A specific corollary of the Rule is that white wines tend to go best with fish and white meats, like chicken and pork; red wines go best with red meat and red sauces. Another adjunct to the Rule is that you should begin with lighter wines and progress to heavier ones throughout the course of the meal. This policy again reflects the idea that you should not overburden your palate: if you start with a strong drink, your taste buds will be shot and you won’t be able to enjoy anything that comes after it. That is why aperitifs are typically light drinks and dessert liquids, like port, are rich and heavy.

One of the main distinctions — after red and white — that’s bandied about by wine drinkers is whether a particular quaff is “sweet” or “dry.” Though imagining how a fluid can be dry is something of a logical stretch, just bear in mind

that dry is nothing more than the opposite of sweet, and we all know what sweet tastes like. A related factor is the weight of a particular type of wine, which refers to the amount of alcohol present in a given sample (**see bottle below**).

Ordering at a Restaurant

Keeping this simple matrix in mind, you will be well equipped to tackle any menu you face. If you want to buy time to consider what precisely you should choose from the wine list, tell the waiter you will decide on a wine once you have chosen your food. Then wait to see what your date orders. Next, simply ask your date whether he or she prefers red or white. If there’s no preference, start with the Rule and suggest a wine that matches the overall color of his or her meal. Then simply toss out the ringer: “I think a Riesling might go well with your fish, though a Fume Blanc would also be a good choice if you’d like something a little drier.”

After your date closes his or her mouth and expresses a preference, you’re golden. When the waiter returns, simply announce your collective choice: “We would like a Fume Blanc tonight, can you recommend one?” The waiter will direct your attention to a selection of your chosen wine on the list — and then all you have to worry about is the price.


So we’ve gotten you past the threshold and into the land of respectable restaurant ordering. But as you will no doubt quickly learn, the universe of wine variables is vast. Once you have begun to get a grip on the color scheme, geography will be the next lesson. Anyone can make wine almost anywhere, but a few places have developed the process better than others. When we think of wine, we think first of France, Italy, and California. So when you are

starting out, just stick to those regions. Sure, there is a wonderful universe of wines from Spain, Chile, Australia, Germany, and beyond, but we’re looking to avoid embarrassment here, not to have you winning sommelier (wine steward) competitions. Now that you know how to finesse the red - versus - white debate at the table, here’s another way to flex. Most fine restaurants, and many feeble ones, are either French or Italian. If they’re neither, then they’ll probably be American eclectic. So you’ll obviously be on the right track if you order a native wine when eating the food. A quick guide to geographic specialties is in the bottle at

left. Keep in mind that we’re barely scratching the surface here and that each of those regions produces myriad other kinds of wine.

Ultimately, you’re going to have to be the one to sit down and start tasting. Begin with these basics to establish your landmarks in the vineyard universe, and then feel free to branch out to more esoteric wines.

Everything you’ve just learned is going to enable you to make an intelligent wine choice the next time you’re at a restaurant. Of course, if all goes well on that date, you may be looking to share another bottle of vino at your place. To do that, you’re going to need to know how to open a bottle at home without stabbing your date with the corkscrew or drowning anyone in the process.

Go to our web site, www.colleges.com, to learn how to properly open a bottle of wine. 

Guides to Sweetness and Weight

As a general rule of thumb, red wines are heavier and more complex than white wines.

White wines are initially more palatable to novices since they often tend to be sweeter. Here is a quick guide to the sweetness of wines (and please note that, for both guides, the listed reds are not necessarily of the same sweetness/weight as the whites listed below them — these are relative guides of sweetness/weight, within red or white):

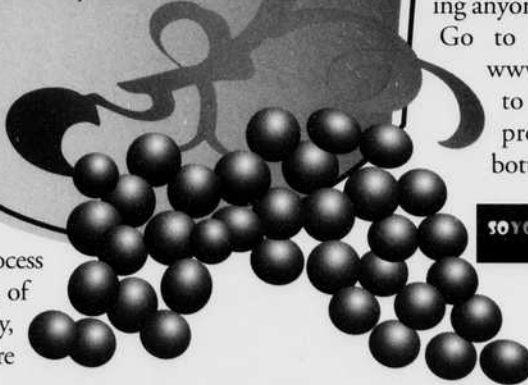
	Red	White
sweetest	Zinfandel Merlot Pinot Noir Cabernet	Riesling Chenin Blanc Sauvignon Blanc Chardonnay
driest		
lightest	Chianti Pinot Noir Merlot Zinfandel Cabernet	Pinot Grigio Riesling Fume Blanc Chardonnay
heaviest		

Regional Specialties

American	French	Italian
Chardonnay Zinfandel	Bordeaux Burgundy Sauvignon Blanc	Barbaresco Chianti Classico San Giovese

Age and Quality

The word “vintage” is simply a fancy way of saying “year.” The reason different vintages produce different quality wines — despite the fact that the same vintner is using the same winemaking process on the same kind of grapes — is that small variations across any number of factors (most notably weather) can affect the entire yield of wine in a given season. So although “old wine” is a crude shorthand for “good wine,” you should always remember that keeping a cruddy vintage around for a decade won’t make it any better than a two-year-old hotshot.



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