

Willamette Valley or sangiovese from the Rogue Valley. James let me try a few, and I learned a few key tips in the process.

At a wine tasting, it is okay to spit the wine out into a designated container, because sometimes tasters just want to experience the wine without feeling the effect of the alcohol. James spat his wine out gracefully, if spitting has ever been graceful. Though it seemed like the appropriate thing to do, I just couldn't bring myself to spit.

I learned to swirl the wine a bit in my glass to aerate it, which can mellow a strong wine and improve its taste. James instructed me to always check out the "nose" of the wine first because taste isn't the only sense people use to evaluate a wine. Someone who knows wine, James said, can usually tell a good bottle of wine by its smell alone.

Finally, James showed me how to coat my mouth with the wine, which allows all parts of your tongue access to the flavor. Lo and behold, when I was concentrating on the taste of the wine, I could tell the differences among each kind! They were different — not always drastically, but distinctively.

Perhaps most valuably, I learned that wine can be "corked," which means the wine is bad and has a strong overriding taste of wet cardboard. This only affects individual bottles of wine, thankfully, so other bottles from the same batch of grapes are fine. Corked wine tastes much worse than most cheap wine you could buy, so to avoid embarrassment from now on, I'll check to see if wines I serve are corked before I let my guests drink them, or buy good wines with screw-tops (obviously, those can't get "corked").

Lest I get too cocky with my new knowledge, James reminded me that wine isn't something you learn in a morning, an idea that Phillip Patti, the manager and sommelier at Uva, also drilled into my mind.

Patti's wine bar, which is in Oakway Center and opened last fall like B2, felt trendy and comfortable. There are free wine tastings every Wednesday from 5 to 7 pm. The focus on wines being sold was flights, as Patti wants visitors to be able to sample a few wines, and not have to stick to one. Most of the flights offered when I was there included at least one wine from the Northwest, but Patti is really interested in introducing people to wines from all over the world, so rare Austrian Zweigelt is also on the menu. "To be as exciting as possible, you really have to open up to everything," he says.

Patti says the best thing about Oregon wineries — and something that would impress my dad — is that the majority are still small enough that it's easy to meet the winemakers and learn their methods.

When I asked how you tell the difference between a cabernet merlot and a sauvignon, he told me that he is still working on that distinction after six years of training. So James was right: Wine is far from something you learn in a morning or in a week. I still would be hard-pressed to explain why tannins are important or what wine would go with a fruit salad or a big dish of pasta, but in my week of wine explorations, it became clear that wine is not such a hard thing to understand as I might have thought. Learning about wine is like learning about music — there is probably a style or two you prefer, and to learn all about every kind would take a lifetime's dedication — but that doesn't mean you give up listening to music.

When my dad comes to my graduation in June, I think my new wine knowledge will shock and amaze him. Even if I'm never as interested in wine as he is, I'll be able to hold my own in the most basic of conversations — and in a week, that's really the best I could hope for. ■



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