



In Vino Veritas, So Why So Sniffy?

Wise words for the would-be wine fan BY ANDY VALENTINE

Everyone's been there: It's a special occasion, so you're sitting in a fancier-than-normal restaurant, enjoying some freshly cooked *cioppino* (or any other expensive sounding seafood), when some loud-mouthed wine "connoisseur" is ushered to the table right next to yours.

Next thing you know, wine guy is perusing the wine list and discussing the fact that he enjoys "dry, full-bodied wines from the south of France," or something he hopes sounds equally impressive to his date as well as every patron within earshot. This is the same guy who eventually will call the waiter back to the table and claim that his wine is "corked," and that he would like a replacement bottle. Most likely, he is also the guy who has seen one too many wine-tasting shows on the Food Network and now believes he knows exactly what he's talking about.

This guy is ill informed. Do not listen to this guy.

Words like "dry" and "full-bodied" are thrown around all the time in the wine community, and to those who are actually able to define them, they are just simple vocabulary. The truth is, though, a lot of people are

only making educated stabs at what these words actually mean. And it's these same phrases that strike fear into the hearts of newcomers who possess a genuine interest in wine, as the risk of sounding uninformed seems too high a price to pay for getting involved.

I'm here to tell you: Have no fear.

I, for one, had always thought that "dry" was indicative of that cheek-clenching dry mouth sensation that occurs quite often when drinking red wine — turns out it just means "the opposite of sweet." In fact, that puckering sensation is caused by tannin — a low-weight, astringent plant compound known for its bitterness.

I was lucky enough to speak face-to-face with Boris Wiedenfeld of Sundance Wine Cellars (2441 Hilyard St.), and he informed me with great ease that, despite all the scientific crap, the world of wine is not nearly as complicated as it seems.

Breaking down the most enjoyable way to taste wine is simple; it all has to do with employing four of your five senses. First of all, the way a wine looks in a glass can give the drinker hints toward a number of things, including the quality, intensity and age of a wine. For example, if a red wine is bluish — that

is, closer to purple — then it is younger. If the wine looks to be "cloudy," then most likely it's not of good quality. A good wine should be translucent.

Now that you're done looking at your wine, you can smell it. There are a number of misconceptions surrounding the smelling of wine — most of them based on the idea that it is designed for something far more complicated than its actual purpose. In truth, people smell wine because it smells good.

"I'll have people come in here for wine tastings on Fridays, and they'll stand there for the entire night just smelling the same glass," Wiedenfeld told me, further indicating that sensual enjoyment should be the wine taster's primary concern. Smelling wine also can give the taster some indication as to the complexity of the wine — though that kind of thing can be reserved for the boring, critical tasters and thrown to the side whenever pleasure takes precedence.

Once you're all done hawking whiffs of wine up your nostrils, the moment everyone's been waiting for has arrived: It's time to taste that shit.

Here's the part of wine tasting where that guy from the restaurant thinks it's his time to shine; here's where words like "dry," "full-bodied," "finish," "corked" and "fruity" start flying around like linguistic shrapnel in a wine-infested war zone. Don't worry, the fun of wine is not knowing every single one of these words and using them as much as possible — it's entirely sensual, and no wannabe wine snob should be able to take that from you.

The most enjoyable way to taste wine is to first take a sip and swish it like mouthwash. This helps to build up the level of acidity in your mouth so the wine will not be so out of balance when it's finally sipped. After waiting a little while, a normal sip can be taken and enjoyed. Here, pay attention to the way the wine coats your mouth, and also to the subtle flavors. No matter how each wine tastes, much of the fun to be had is in spotting differences among the various wines — relish this.

In case you're wondering (and, like I was, you probably are), a wine that's "full-bodied" will simply coat your mouth and throat more intensely. This has to do with viscosity, and a wine's "finish" is simply determined by how long the flavor stays in your mouth after tasting.

"No one's going to put 'has a short finish' on their label," Wiedenfeld told me before grabbing a bottle of corked wine and showing me exactly how it smells.

If you think your wine is corked, chances are it isn't. If that asshole in the restaurant thinks his wine is corked, chances are it isn't. Corked wine smells like wet cardboard wrapped around a log of Steven Seagal's shit — and I'm gonna go ahead and guess that it doesn't taste much better. Most people returning a bottle of wine because it's "corked" just don't like the wine. "It wasn't what they were expecting," said Wiedenfeld.

Wine tasting should be done entirely for personal enjoyment. Now is the time to block out those knowledgeable (or pretentious) winos and start fresh. Now is the time to get involved, no matter how scary the vocabulary is. Now is the time to become a wine fan. ❖

BORIS WIEDENFELD PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

