



How to Read a Shelf Talker

And other strategies for picking new wines from Wine Folly BY VANESSA SALVIA

“I served in restaurants, and I was one of those people who asked, ‘Do you want red or white, lighter or bolder?’” says Madeline Puckette, wine blogger at Wine Folly, the site she started with her partner, Justin Hammack, six years ago in Seattle. “Figuring out what people’s sweet spot is can be useful and informative.” But, it’s also an easy path to what you typically drink rather than a map for discovering something new.

If you’ve seen an infographic about selecting wine, one that flows from you drinking it alone to buying it for people you don’t really like (in which case, says the flow chart, they don’t deserve wine), it’s probably from Wine Folly.

And if Puckette looks familiar, it’s probably because when she was a teenager growing up in Corvallis, she made a video for Lane Transit District about youth bus passes. She met Hammack while studying music in college in Los Angeles, pursuing a dream of being a rock star. “After seven years in L.A. I got burned out, and Justin and I went to Reno, Nevada, of all places,” Puckette says.

This was during the financial crisis, and she lost her job. “I walked into a wine bar to drink my sorrows away and got a job there,” she says.

Before that, Puckette tasted and collected as many different wines as she could. “I spent a lot of time trying to understand how wines tasted different from each other,” she says.

Getting to know the grape varieties is a great place to start. In 2015, Wine Folly introduced a book called *The Essential Guide to Wine*. The *New York Times* bestseller examines different grape varieties and what they tend to taste like. “The book has been a huge success because of the section on how different grape varieties taste, so you can sort of explore a grape variety that you might be curious about and then seek it out,” Puckette says. “The way that a grape turns into wine has a gestalt that carries through, that you can taste across all of the wines from that grape.”

One unusual wine she describes is *torrontés*, which grows only in Argentina. “Almost

always, no matter who makes it and no matter how dry they make it, it has an aroma of rose petals and geranium,” Puckette says. “When you learn that this wine has a rose flavor you start to think what kind of food would work with the flavor of roses and suddenly you’re getting into Middle Eastern dishes, which focus on rose water.”

When considering shelf talkers (those notes describing wines at the store) trust ones that include a flavor profile. “A shelf talker that just tells me it won a medal or where it was made doesn’t tell me anything about what it tastes like,” Puckette says.

Read enough tasting notes and you’ll learn to interpret what certain descriptors really mean. “For instance, ‘a bit grippy’ means that your lips are going to be stuck to your teeth because the tannins are so intense!” Puckette explains. “Or, ‘finishes with an herbal note.’ That is, for the most part, not a good thing for people who like ripe wines because it means it has an unripe note. They weren’t able to get full ripeness before they picked.”

Puckette encourages trying wines that are rated below 90. “People think 90 is a bare minimum but in the reviewer’s mind 90 is an excellent wine,” she says.

Wine shops and grocery stores are typically organized by growing region. “Try something from a different section each time,” Puckette advises. “And if you’re having Mexican food, or Spanish food or food from a hot climate, pick a wine from a hot climate.”

If you don’t have your menu planned, pick a region and base your menu around what else grows in that region, such as a California red with chicken and avocado. “You can concoct a dish around a glass of wine,” Puckette says. “The best time to think about wine, in my opinion, is in the context of food.”

Or, perhaps, the best time to think about drinking wine is anytime you might think about drinking something else. “For example, on a sunny day after mowing the lawn you want a cold refreshing beer,” she says. “But you could have wine instead. Maybe a cool refreshing dry rosé.” ❖