



Wine experts are always talking about hints of this and nuances of that, while the rest of us are drawing blanks. Do these tasters have more acute senses? No, they have just learned how to pay close attention to their senses while tasting. And they have developed a method to evaluate wine, a vocabulary to describe it and a framework with which to categorize it.

You, too, can become a better taster and get more out of each glass—both pleasure and knowledge. The path of the connoisseur doesn't lead to snobbery or pretension. It embodies true appreciation. You train your palate and your brain as you enjoy each sip.

—Gloria Maroti Frazee, director of Wine Spectator School

TASTING WINE

Wine tasting involves four activities:

OBSERVING:

Using your senses to perceive, identify and measure stimuli

DESCRIBING:

Using your vocabulary to reveal the wine's features

COMPARING:

Recalling similar wine types to use as benchmarks

EVALUATING:

Synthesizing all the information to judge wine quality

TASTING METHODS

Much like a worker on an assembly line, an expert goes through a series of simple and repetitive motions while tasting through a flight of wines. Lift glass, tilt and look. Swirl and sniff. Sip and swish. Pause. Spit. Sniff, sip and spit again. Scribble a tasting note. Repeat with the next wine.

Why this repetition? When you examine two wines, you need to compare like features: Color should be compared with color, body with body, finish with finish, and so on. The repetitive steps help you collect the same type of information for each wine.

Expert tasting methodology—**see > sniff > sip > summarize**—reminds you to use each of your senses, as well as your brain.



SEE: Fill your glass one-third to one-half full. Hold it against a white background and tilt it to see the variation in color from the deepest part of the liquid to its edges. Looking at the color, intensity and clarity can give you hints about the grape variety a wine is made from (Cabernet Sauvignon is typically darker than Pinot Noir, for example), the growing conditions that year (warm weather can lead to riper grapes with deeper colors), or winemaking techniques (a wine that

is brilliantly clear may have been filtered to remove suspended particles that another winemaker may think add to the wine's character). Color can also indicate a wine's age: A young red wine full of color compounds will be very dark, but as it ages and the compounds drop out of suspension, the wine lightens to "brick" or "amber."

SWIRL AND SNIFF:

Before a wine is swirled, its aromas are trapped in the liquid. By swirling, you increase the surface area, which increases alcohol evaporation, carrying aromas into the air. Stick your nose right into the bowl of the glass and inhale. Since scents account for about 75 percent of a wine's character and quality, focusing on your sense of smell is essential.

SIP AND SWISH:

Take some wine into your mouth, not a big gulp, but not too little either. Swish, or roll, the wine around in your mouth to bring the liquid into contact with all your taste buds, which are dispersed throughout your tongue, soft palate and throat. Like swirling wine in your glass, the evaporating alcohol carries scents into your retronasal passages.

SPIT:

What's the quickest way to tell an expert taster from a beginner? The expert spits. This keeps the brain fog-free, so that each wine can be properly appreciated. Before attending that walk-around tasting, practice spitting into the kitchen sink. After you spit (or swallow, if you're just drinking a glass), exhale gently and slowly through your nose and mouth to concentrate on how the wine finishes.

PAUSE:

After the first sip, pausing for a few breaths gives you time to form an overall image of the wine. Think of this step as the Zen of tasting. Don't write or talk right away. As soon as you start verbalizing your impressions, your brain switches into intellectual mode, making it difficult to detect additional stimuli. Suggestions often influence perception. When a fellow taster describes a wine as tannic before you've formed your opinion, you are more likely to experience the wine as tannic.

• Watch our How to Taste video to learn more, at www.winespectator.com/howtotastevideo.

• For more evaluation questions to ask at each step, see the "Expert Tasting Methodology" section of this PDF.