



WINE SPEAK – Wine Tasting Terms

ACIDIC: Used to describe wines whose total acid is so high that they taste tart or sour and have a sharp edge on the palate.

AERATION: The process of letting a wine "breathe" in the open air, or swirling wine in a glass. It's debatable whether aerating bottled wines (mostly reds) improves their quality. Aeration can soften young, tannic wines; it can also fatigue older ones.

AFTERTASTE: The taste or flavors that linger in the mouth after the wine is tasted, spit or swallowed. The aftertaste or "finish" is the most important factor in judging a wine's character and quality. Great wines have rich, long, complex aftertastes.

AROMA: Traditionally defined as the smell that wine acquires from the grapes and from fermentation. Now it more commonly means the wine's total smell, including changes that resulted from oak aging or that occurred in the bottle- good or bad. "Bouquet" has a similar meaning.

ASTRINGENT: Describes a rough, harsh, puckery feel in the mouth, usually from tannin or high acidity, that red wines (and a few whites) have. When the harshness stands out, the wine is astringent.

BALANCE: A wine has balance when its elements are harmonious and no single element dominates.

BITTER: Describes one of the four basic tastes (along with sour, salty and sweet). Some grapes--notably Gewurztraminer and Muscat--often have a noticeable bitter edge to their flavors. Another source of bitterness is tannin or stems. If the bitter quality dominates the wine's flavor or aftertaste, it is considered a fault. In sweet wines a trace of bitterness may complement the flavors. In young red wines it can be a warning signal, as bitterness doesn't always dissipate with age. Normally, a fine, mature wine should not be bitter on the palate.

BODY: The impression of weight or fullness on the palate; usually the result of a combination of glycerin, alcohol and sugar. Commonly expressed as full-bodied, medium-bodied or medium-weight, or light-bodied.

BOUQUET: The smell that a wine develops after it has been bottled and aged. Most appropriate for mature wines that have developed complex flavors beyond basic young fruit and oak aromas.

BUTTERY: Indicates the smell of melted butter or toasty oak. Also a reference to texture, as in "a rich, buttery Chardonnay."

CEDARY: Denotes the smell of cedar wood associated with mature Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet blends aged in French or American oak.

CHEWY: Describes rich, heavy, tannic wines that are full-bodied.

CIGAR BOX: Another descriptor for a cedary aroma.

CLOSED: Describes wines that are concentrated and have character, yet are shy in aroma or flavor.

CLOUDINESS: Lack of clarity to the eye. Fine for old wines with sediment, but it can be a warning signal of protein instability, yeast spoilage or re-fermentation in the bottle in younger wines.

COMPLEXITY: An element in all great wines and many very good ones; a combination of richness, depth, flavor intensity, focus, balance, harmony and finesse.

CORKED: Describes a wine having the off-putting, musty, moldy-newspaper flavor and aroma and dry aftertaste caused by a tainted cork.

DECANTING: Process for separating the sediment from a wine before drinking. Accomplished by slowly and carefully pouring the wine from its bottle into another container.

DELICATE: Used to describe light- to medium-weight wines with good flavors. A desirable quality in wines such as Pinot Noir or Riesling.

DRY: Having no perceptible taste of sugar. Most wine tasters begin to perceive sugar at levels of 0.5 percent to 0.7 percent.

EARTHY: Used to describe both positive and negative attributes in wine. At its best, a pleasant, clean quality that adds complexity to aroma and flavors. The flip side is a funky, barn yard character that borders on or crosses into dirtiness.

ELEGANT: Used to describe wines of grace, balance and beauty.

FINISH: The key to judging a wine's quality is finish, also called aftertaste--a measure of the taste or flavors that linger in the mouth after the wine is tasted. Great wines have rich, long, complex finishes.

FLORAL (also FLOWERY): Literally, having the characteristic aromas of flowers. Mostly associated with white wines.

FRESH: Having a lively, clean and fruity character. An essential for young wines.

FRUITY: Having the aroma and taste of fruit or fruits.

GRAPEY: Characterized by simple flavors and aromas associated with fresh table grapes; distinct from the more complex fruit flavors (currant, black cherry, fig or apricot) found in fine wines.

GRASSY: A signature descriptor for Sauvignon Blanc and a pleasant one unless overbearing and pungent.

GREEN: Tasting of unripe fruit. Wines made from unripe grapes will often possess this quality. Pleasant in Riesling and Gewurztraminer.

HARSH: Used to describe astringent wines that are tannic or high in alcohol.

HERBACEOUS: Denotes the taste and smell of herbs in a wine. A plus in many wines such as Sauvignon Blanc, and to a lesser extent Merlot and Cabernet. Herbal is a synonym.

LEAN: A not necessarily critical term used to describe wines made in an austere style. When used as a term of criticism, it indicates a wine is lacking in fruit.

LEGS: The viscous droplets that form and ease down the sides of the glass when the wine is swirled.

LINGERING: Used to describe the flavor and persistence of flavor in a wine after tasting. When the aftertaste remains on the palate for several seconds, it is said to be lingering.

NOSE: The character of a wine as determined by the olfactory sense. Also called aroma; includes bouquet.

NUTTY: Used to describe oxidized wines. Often a flaw, but when it's close to an oaky flavor it can be a plus.

OAKY: Describes the aroma or taste quality imparted to a wine by the oak barrels or casks in which it was aged. Can be either positive or negative. The terms toasty, vanilla, dill, cedary and smoky indicate the desirable qualities of oak; charred, burnt, green cedar, lumber and plywood describe its unpleasant side.

MEATY: Describes red wines that show plenty of concentration and a chewy quality. They may even have an aroma of cooked meat.

MUSTY: Having an off-putting moldy or mildewy smell. The result of a wine being made from moldy grapes, stored in improperly cleaned tanks and barrels, or contaminated by a poor cork.

PEAK: The time when a wine tastes its best--very subjective.

RAISINY: Having the taste of raisins from ultra-ripe or overripe grapes. Can be pleasant in small doses in some wines.

RICH: Wines with generous, full, pleasant flavors, usually sweet and round in nature, are described as rich. In dry wines, richness may be supplied by high alcohol and glycerin, by complex flavors and by an oaky vanilla character. Decidedly sweet wines are also described as rich when the sweetness is backed up by fruity, ripe flavors.

ROBUST: Means full-bodied, intense and vigorous, perhaps a bit overblown.

SOFT: Describes wines low in acid or tannin (sometimes both), making for easy drinking.

SPICY: A descriptor for many wines, indicating the presence of spice flavors such as anise, cinnamon, cloves, mint and pepper which are often present in complex wines.

STRUCTURE: The interaction of elements such as acid, tannin, glycerin, alcohol and body as it relates to a wine's texture and mouth feel. Usually preceded by a modifier, as in "firm structure" or "lacking in structure."

SUBTLE: Describes delicate wines with finesse, or flavors that are understated rather than full-blown and overt. A positive characteristic.

SUPPLE: Describes texture, mostly with reds, as it relates to tannin, body and oak. A positive characteristic.

TANNIN: The mouth-puckering substance--found mostly in red wines--that is derived primarily from grape skins, seeds and stems, but also from oak barrels. Tannin acts as a natural preservative that helps wine age and develop.

TART: Sharp-tasting because of acidity. Occasionally used as a synonym for acidic.

TIGHT: Describes a wine's structure, concentration and body, as in a "tightly wound" wine. Closed or compact are similar terms.

TIRED: Limp, feeble, lackluster.

TOASTY: Describes a flavor derived from the oak barrels in which wines are aged. Also, a character that sometimes develops in sparkling wines.

VEGETAL: Some wines contain elements in their smell and taste which are reminiscent of plants and vegetables. In Cabernet Sauvignon a small amount of this vegetal quality is said to be part of varietal character. But when the vegetal element takes over, or when it shows up in wines in which it does not belong, those wines are considered flawed. Wine scientists have been able to identify the chemical constituent that makes wines smell like asparagus and bell peppers.

VELVETY: Having rich flavor and a silky, sumptuous texture.