

NAVIGATING WINE BY STYLE



he huge number of wine options and impenetrable information on labels can be enough to make anyone's head spin. Our natural instinct is to study them one by one, but this is a losing strategy for beginners—there are simply too many wines out there. Rather than zooming in on what distinguishes one particular wine from the pack, it's far more useful to zoom out and learn about what all wines share in the big picture.

Grasping a handful of central wine truths can help even a wine novice visualize how wines relate to one another in sensory terms: in how they look, taste, smell, and feel in the mouth. For instance, grapes pass through predictable stages of development as they ripen, and not all wines are made from grapes of equal ripeness. Degrees of ripeness correlate with many sensory factors—from wine's alcohol content, or weight, to oakiness and acidity. This kind of expert-level insight is the key not only to making educated guesses about how different wines will taste but also to predicting how they will pair with various foods.

The Wine Style Spectrum

Professionals know that there are clear and consistent patterns that govern wine style, and they use this knowledge to make educated guesses about how wines will taste before they open the bottle. You don't need to memorize dozens of grapes or regions to be able to use the same generalizations when you shop for wine.

Mapping wines by style

Navigating the wine world requires a sense of its range and boundaries. Wines can be loosely classified by their two most important power scales: weight and flavor intensity. Charting them on a classic grid can provide any wine drinker with expert-level insights into the big picture—into how wine styles relate to one another on a sensory level.

But why weight and flavor? Both are key sensory characteristics that are highly relevant to personal tastes and easy for beginners to identify. These traits correlate strongly with one another, as well as with other relevant wine qualities, such as acidity, oak, and tannin. Most important, though, they also have reasonably direct relationships with wine features that we can observe before we open the bottle, like color and alcohol content.

Cracking wine's code

Charting wine styles by weight and flavor reveals some consistent patterns. Paler wines are often both lighter-bodied and milder in flavor than darker ones. White wine styles range more widely than reds. Pink rosé wines share territory with both whites and lighter red wines. Wines with bubbles are usually low in alcohol.

Such conclusions might seem banal, but just scratch the surface. Looking deeper into how wine styles relate to one another from a sensory perspective helps explain which factors have the greatest impact on relevant characteristics. These fundamentals help wine professionals navigate the wine world—and they can help you make more informed wine decisions, too.

CHARTING MAIN TRAITS

For the novice, it's very useful to picture where wines fall on a spectrum of style defined by wine's weight and flavor intensity. This provides a meaningful context for comparing wine options and for remembering how they taste.

WEIGHT

Heavier wines are:

Higher in alcohol • Richer in texture.

They are also often but not always:

Bolder in flavor • Given oak treatment • Aged before bottling • Lower in acidity • From warmer regions • May be fortified with distilled spirit

Lighter wines are:

Lower in alcohol • More sheer in texture.

They are also often but not always:

Milder in flavor • Unlikely to be given oak treatment • Bottled and sold young • High in acidity • From cooler regions • May be carbonated—sparkling or spritzzy

FLAVOR

Milder wines are:

More subtle in flavor and scent, often with herbal/earthy flavors • Rarely given oak treatment.

They are also often but not always:

Lower in alcohol • Paler in color • Bottled and sold young • High in acidity • From cooler regions

Bolder wines are:

More intense in flavor and scent, often with baked/spicy flavors • Often given oak treatment.

They are also often but not always:

Higher in alcohol • Deeper in color • Aged before bottling • Lower in acidity • From warmer regions

The Wine Style Spectrum

Recognizing patterns in how wines taste and relate to one another can help us make informed decisions without getting bogged down in excessive details.



White wine
like Chardonnay
and Pinot Grigio



Sparkling wine
like Champagne
and Prosecco



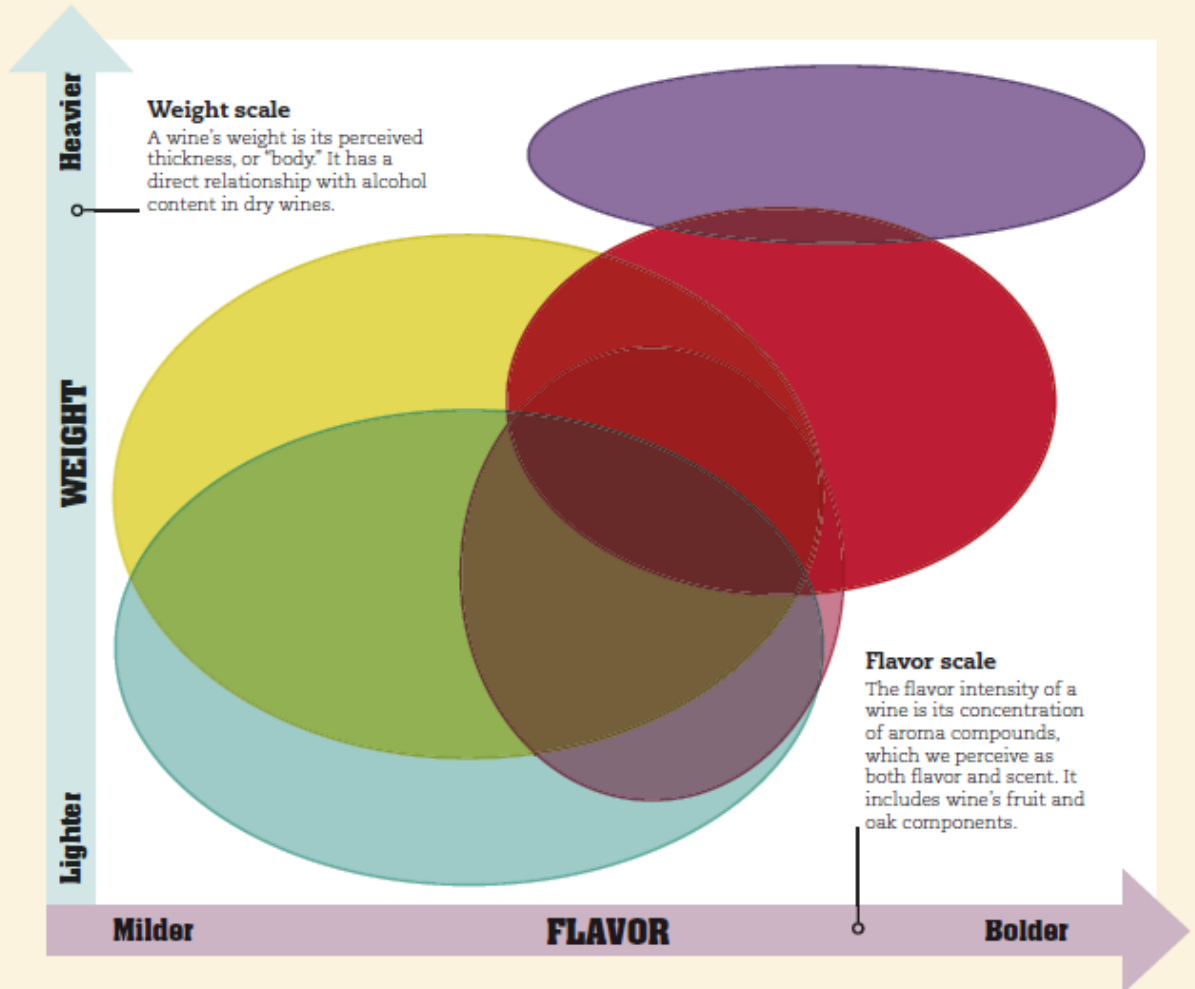
Rosé wine
like Anjou
and Tavel



Red wine
like Shiraz
and Chianti



Fortified wine
like Port
and Sherry



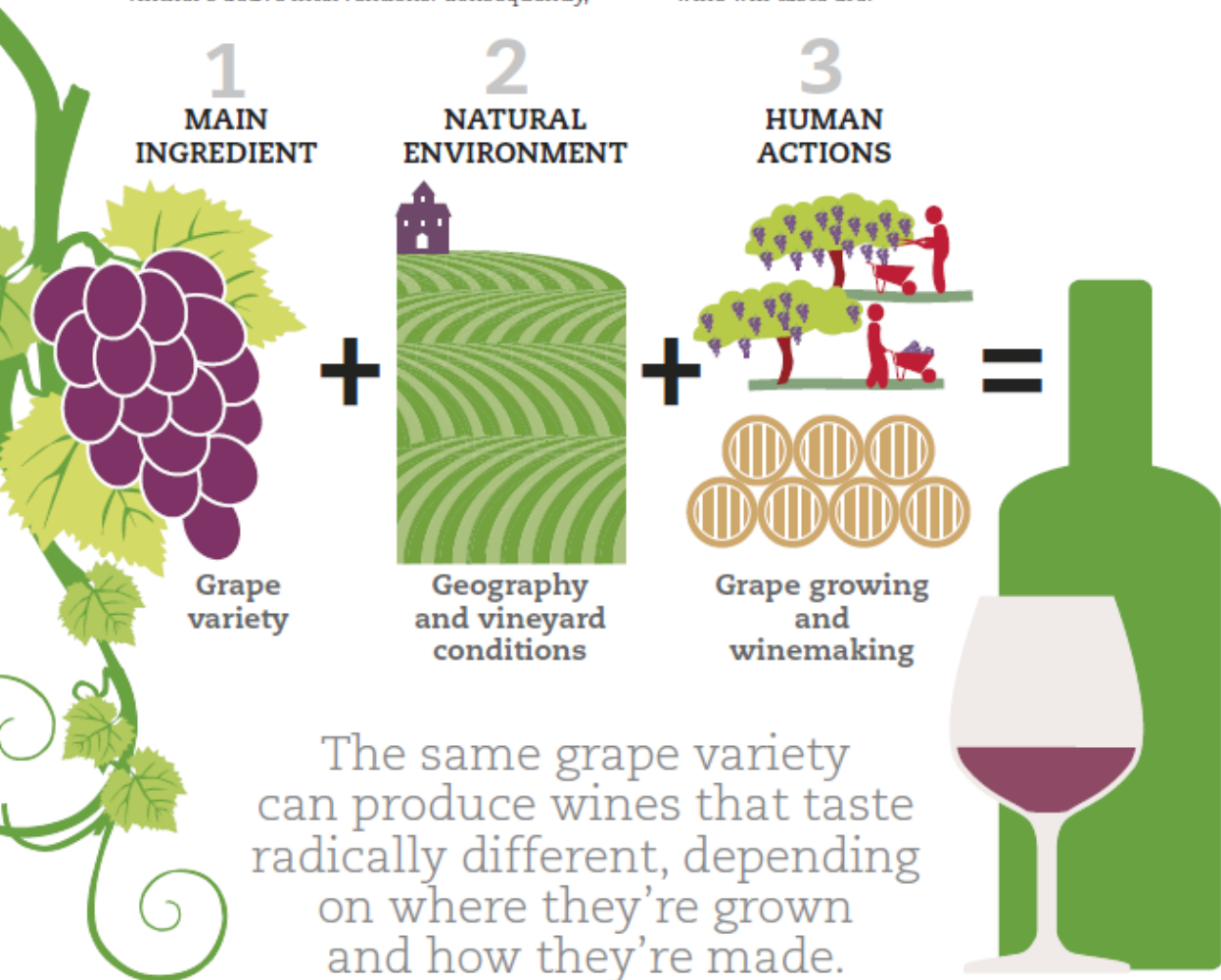
The Three Flavor Factors

Wines are often labeled by grape variety, but ingredients alone can't tell you how a wine will taste. There are two additional factors that can play just as strong a role in shaping wine's flavor and style.

Same grape; different taste

In any wine's taste, the type of grape is just a starting point that will be shaped and changed by two more powerful forces: the vineyard's ambient natural environment and human vintner's active interventions. Consequently,

wines made from the same grape variety can taste very different when grown in different regions and made using different methods. The three variables that control how any given wine will taste are:



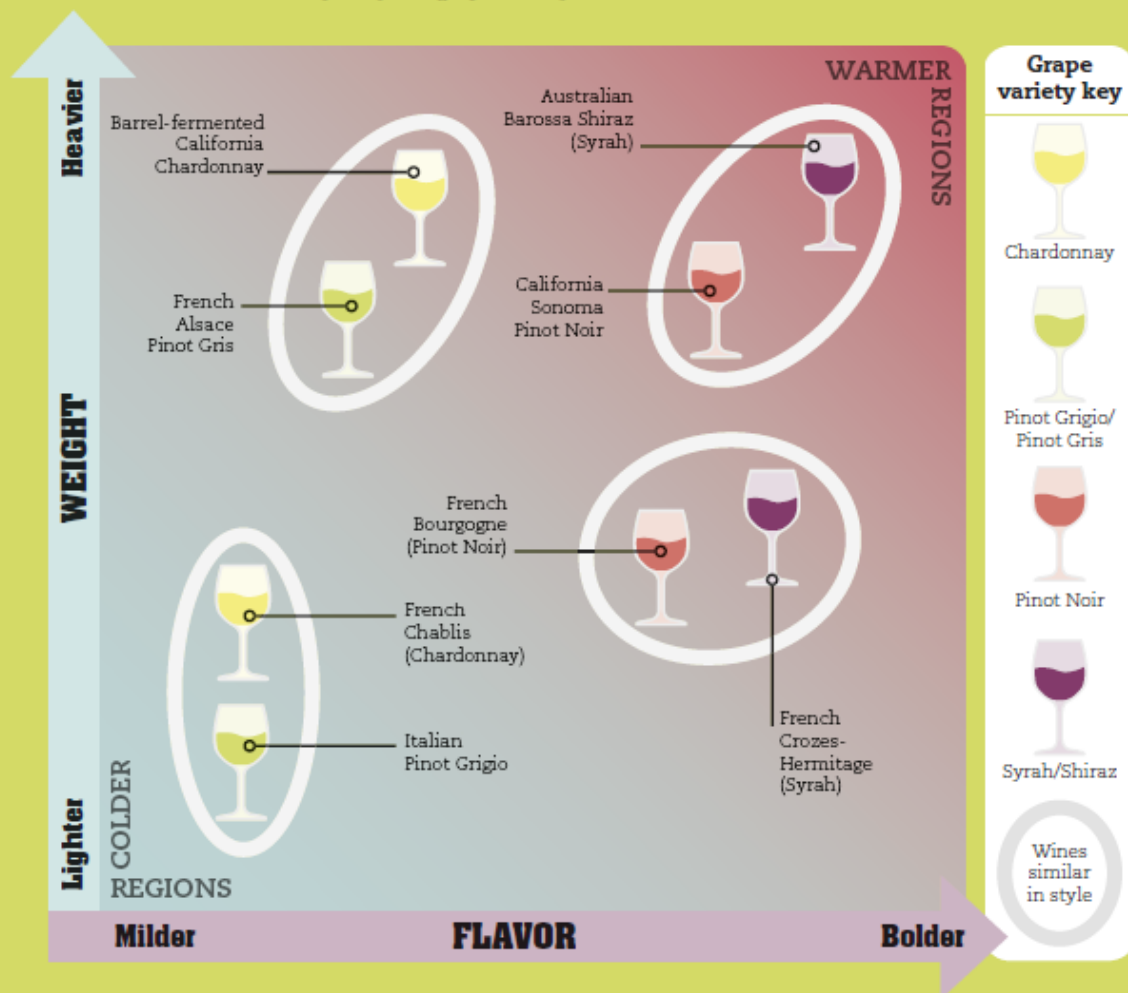
Unexpected similarities

We latch onto grape varieties when we shop for wine because they are prominent on wine labels, but also because they seem to offer a clear-cut way to decode wine. However, navigating solely by grape doesn't take into account the other two flavor factors. For instance, Pinot Noir and Syrah make vastly different wines. However, a French Pinot Noir from Burgundy and a French Syrah from the nearby Rhône will resemble each other more closely than they would New World versions from California and Australia respectively. Common ground between the French wines in culture and climate will outweigh the family resemblance that is conveyed by the grape variety.

For similar reasons, a rich Chardonnay from California will be closer in flavor profile to Alsace Pinot Gris than it would to a lighter Chardonnay such as French Chablis simply because both Alsace and California are sunny and warm. Chilly Chablis produces wines with more in common with other cool-climate whites, like Northern Italian Pinot Grigio.

All over the map

Wines from different grapes grown in nearby regions or similar climates often taste more alike than wines from the same grape grown in vastly different regions or climates.

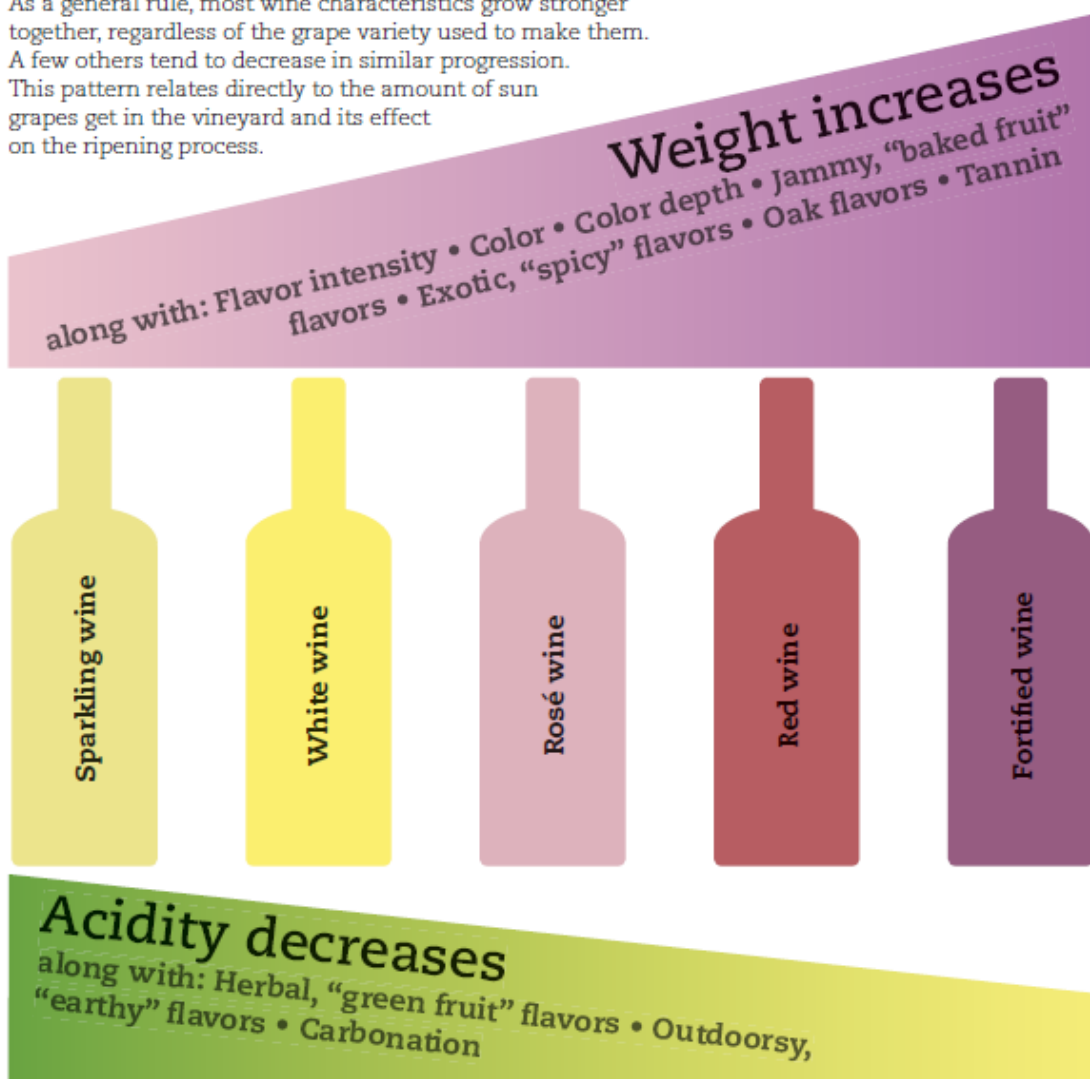


Why Regions Trump Grapes

Wine characteristics such as color, flavor, and alcohol content are almost direct reflections of the color, flavor, and sugar content of the grapes used. Geography and climate affect the development of these traits in the vineyard as the fruit grows and ripens on the vine.

The sliding scale of ripeness

As a general rule, most wine characteristics grow stronger together, regardless of the grape variety used to make them. A few others tend to decrease in similar progression. This pattern relates directly to the amount of sun grapes get in the vineyard and its effect on the ripening process.



Why Regions Trump Grapes

Compared to grape varieties and winemaking, the sun has a more dramatic impact on grape ripeness and, therefore, on a wine's final style.

For red wines and heavier wines, grapes must be very ripe

Because their grapes need lots of sunshine and warmth, red wines and full-bodied wines tend to come from places that are very sunny, warm, and dry.

To maximize ripeness and flavor potential, vintners usually let the fruit hang on the vine as long as possible.



For white wines and lighter wines, grapes should not be too ripe

Since their grapes can suffer from too much sunshine and warmth, white wines and light-bodied wines more often hail from places that are cooler, cloudier, and more humid.

To avoid excessive ripeness and retain freshness, vintners often harvest the fruit earlier.



Ripeness: A Key Concept

There is no single idea as powerful as ripeness for explaining how the wine world works and predicting how different wines will taste.

From tasting “green” to tasting great

Ripeness is the final stage of fruit development, when it becomes ready to pick, with the right balance of flavors to taste fresh and delicious. Ripening shifts fruit from a hard, sour immature stage toward a sweet, juicy state, accompanied by a color change from green to the fruit's proper color. We use the word “green” to describe the tastes associated with underripeness—sourness, bitterness, and the leafy flavor of vegetables—even though some fruits, like Granny Smith apples or white grapes, are still green in color when they are ripe and sweet. Plants get their energy from sunlight, through photosynthesis, so the degree of ripeness achieved by any fruit will depend on how much sun it gets in the final weeks before harvest.

**MORE HOURS
OF SUNLIGHT AND WARMTH**



MANY SHADES OF RIPENESS

For winemakers, picking grapes at exactly the right moment is critical, because it locks the flavor profile of their raw material in place. Sugar content is the main consideration in deciding when to harvest, since it determines wine's potential alcoholic strength. However, many other components are also evaluated, such as the fruit's levels of acidity, flavor compounds, and tannins.

Technically, there is no single universal definition of “perfect ripeness” among

Moving targets

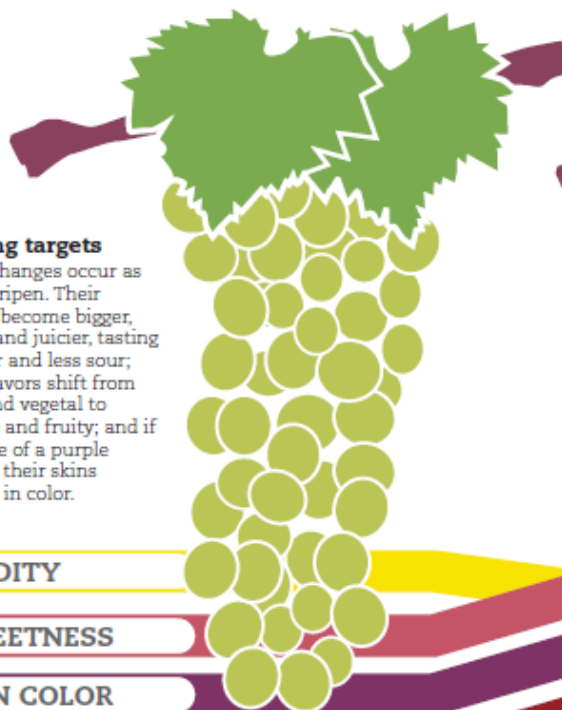
Many changes occur as grapes ripen. Their berries become bigger, softer, and juicier, tasting sweeter and less sour; their flavors shift from mild and vegetal to intense and fruity; and if they are of a purple variety, their skins deepen in color.

ACIDITY

SWEETNESS

SKIN COLOR

FRUIT FLAVOR

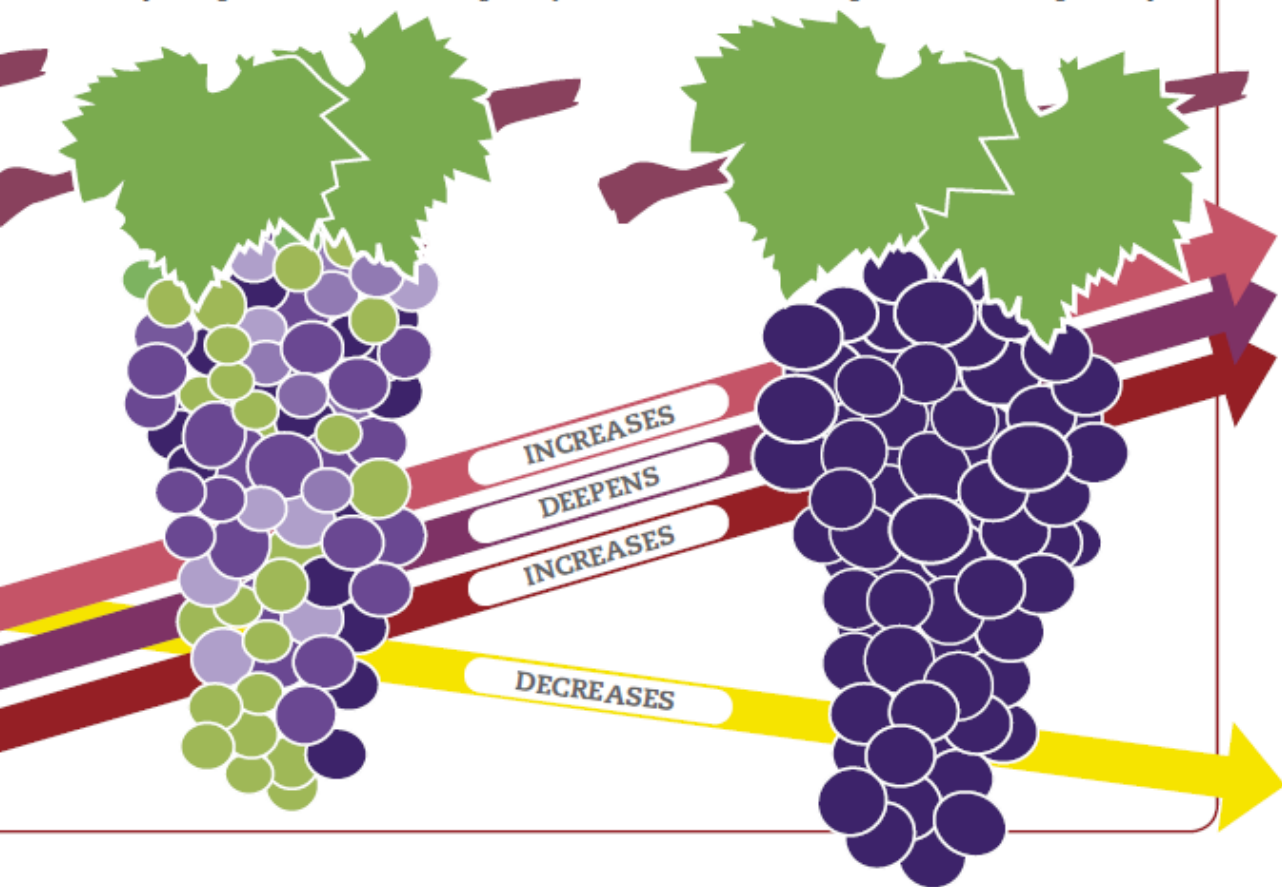


The final phase of any fruit's growth is to become ripe—sweet and ready to eat.

winemakers, since each grape component responds a little differently to changes in geography, weather, and farming techniques. Grapes with as little as 18 percent sugar would be considered fully ripe for Riesling grown in Germany's chilly Mosel, but not for California Cabernet Sauvignon, where anything under 24 percent sugar would be seen as underripe. Also, winemakers can and do harvest earlier or later depending on what styles they want to make, picking earlier for white or sparkling wine to retain refreshing acidity, or

waiting longer for color and flavor to develop in the skins when making red wines.

Luckily, wine drinkers do not need to adopt the winemaker's nuanced view of ripeness. For the purpose of navigating wine by style, you'll be better served making a useful generalization: Think of the grapes used for lighter, cooler-climate wine styles like Riesling or Prosecco as being less ripe, and those used for heavier, warmer-climate styles like Cabernet Sauvignon or Port as being more ripe.



Predicting Ripeness

It's often possible to deduce a wine's degree of ripeness from label clues like alcohol content, an essential step in cracking the code of the confusing wine world.

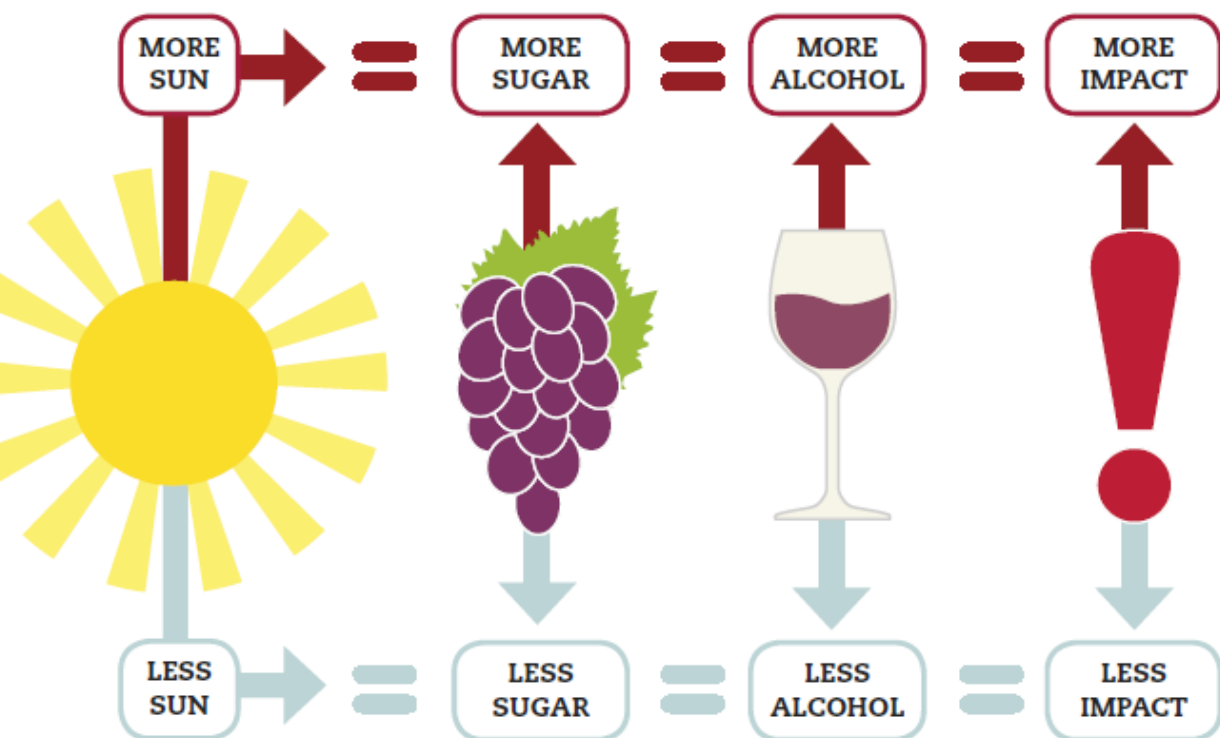
Give flavor a boost

Grapes that receive more sun become riper, which increases the overall sensory impact of their wine on multiple levels. Sweeter grapes produce wines with higher alcohol when they are fermented all the way to dryness. Such wines feel heavier in the mouth but also amplify flavor by definition. Riper grapes tend to taste stronger

because they have more flavor compounds such as aromatic esters but also because alcohol vaporizes easily. Even at low temperatures, a little extra alcohol acts as a scent and flavor booster in wine, just as in perfumes. Greater ripeness also deepens the color of red wines.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

Alcohol content does not correlate to ripeness-related traits when it has been manipulated in winemaking, as with fortified wines and sweet wines.



Secret decoder

One of the most useful pieces of information on any wine label is hidden in the small print. Alcohol content correlates well enough to many wine traits to serve as a rough style indicator.

BELOW 13%

WINES TYPICALLY FEATURE LOW-RIPENESS TRAITS:

Always lighter in texture
Usually higher in acidity
Often milder in flavor
Often paler in color
Rarely oaked
May be carbonated

EXAMPLES:

French Champagne
Spanish Albariño
Italian Chianti

BETWEEN 13% AND 14%

WINES TYPICALLY FEATURE MODERATE-RIPENESS TRAITS:

Mid-weight in texture
Moderate in acidity
Moderate in flavor
Moderate in color
May be oaked
Rarely carbonated

EXAMPLES:

Australian Chardonnay
French red Bordeaux
Oregon Pinot Noir

ABOVE 14%

WINES TYPICALLY FEATURE HIGH-RIPENESS TRAITS:

Always heavier in texture
Usually lower in acidity
Often bolder in flavor
Often deeper in color
Often oaked
Rarely carbonated

EXAMPLES:

California Zinfandel
Argentinian Malbec
French Châteauneuf-du-Pape

What alcohol can tell you

In dry wines, where no grape sweetness is preserved, there is a nearly direct relationship between ripeness and alcohol content, and alcohol content must be listed on virtually all wine labels. We can predict a fair amount about how a given wine will taste just by knowing that 13.5% is the norm. We know that wines with higher alcohol will, by definition, be heavier in mouthfeel than average, but we can guess that they will also taste less tart and smell more intense and fruity due to greater ripeness. Dry wines with lower alcohol will usually be the reverse: lighter, milder, and more herbal.

The predictive power of alcohol content doesn't stop there. Some wine factors that are

entirely under human control, such as degrees of oak and carbonation, are associated with higher or lower degrees of ripeness, and therefore alcohol content, for aesthetic reasons. The likelihood that a wine will be oaky increases greatly with higher-than-average alcohol, for example, while a lower-than-average alcohol level increases the chances of encountering carbonation. There are exceptions to these rules of thumb, of course, and wine qualities are least foreseeable in the crowded middle ground between 13% and 14%. But the patterns hold true enough to provide helpful guidance when wine shopping, and their predictive power becomes more ironclad the further alcohol levels deviate from the norm.

How Grape Varieties Fit In

The type of grape used to make wine is a major style factor. Each has its own unique characteristic and flavor profile. Some grape varieties are very distinctive, while others are less easily recognizable. Like different varieties of apples or mangoes, wine grapes will look different and taste different when fresh. But since all vines depend on sunshine and ripeness for their fruit's development, grapes are not always wine's sole flavor factor.

Organizing varieties

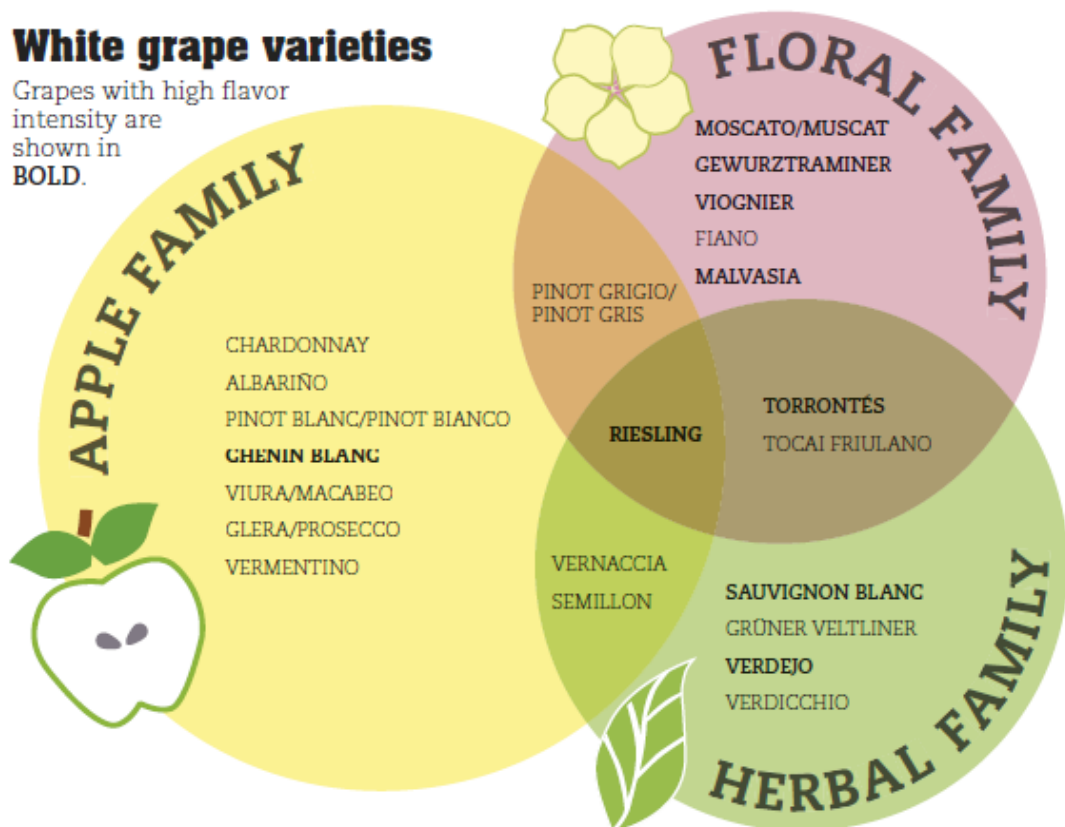
In the same way that children's personalities become more apparent as they grow older, grape varieties often resemble one another at very low ripeness, but grow more and more distinct as they get riper.

The traditional way to organize grape varieties is according to their native region—for example, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc

both come from Bordeaux in France and are genetically related, while Chardonnay and Pinot Noir come from Burgundy. This certainly helps us navigate wine lists and retail stores, but from the wine drinker's perspective, it can be more helpful to classify grapes according to sensory qualities, particularly similarities in their overall flavor and scent.

White grape varieties

Grapes with high flavor intensity are shown in **BOLD**.



Examining white relationships

In white wines, there is a broad apple/pear resemblance between wines made from the most popular grape varieties; this is most obvious in the likes of Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio. But a few stand out with aromatics that are unusually distinct, like the leafy green scent of Sauvignon Blanc or the florality of Moscato. Some grapes combine elements of more than

one family, such as Riesling, whose charming apple flavors seem to incorporate a touch of both flowers and herbs, like jasmine tea. In general, the stronger a white wine's aromatics, the less likely it is to be barrel-fermented and overtly oaked. For white wines, winemakers use new oak like a chef uses spices: to add personality to wines that have a subtle neutral scent.

Most white wine grapes feature an apple-like flavor, but some project more intense scents, like flowers or green herbs.

**Floral
fragrances**



**Apple
flavors**



**Leafy green
scents**



Examining red relationships

Despite higher flavor intensity, red grapes can be harder to categorize aromatically than white grapes. Where white wines have simpler scents, reds are more complex, and most feature a layer of oak to some degree. However, red wine grapes can be sorted into a few broad “families.”

Most red wines smell of fruits with deep colors, such as berries and cherries. Many of the most popular grapes smell and taste most like the darkest black fruits—say blackberry or blueberry—as with Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. A smaller number, like Pinot Noir and Sangiovese, taste more like brighter red berries, with scents reminiscent of strawberry or sour cherry. While most red wines tend to

fall somewhere on the red fruit/black fruit continuum, some feature an unusual concentration of additional

scents—appetizing aromas and flavors that don’t register as fruit, like black pepper

and star anise. Since these

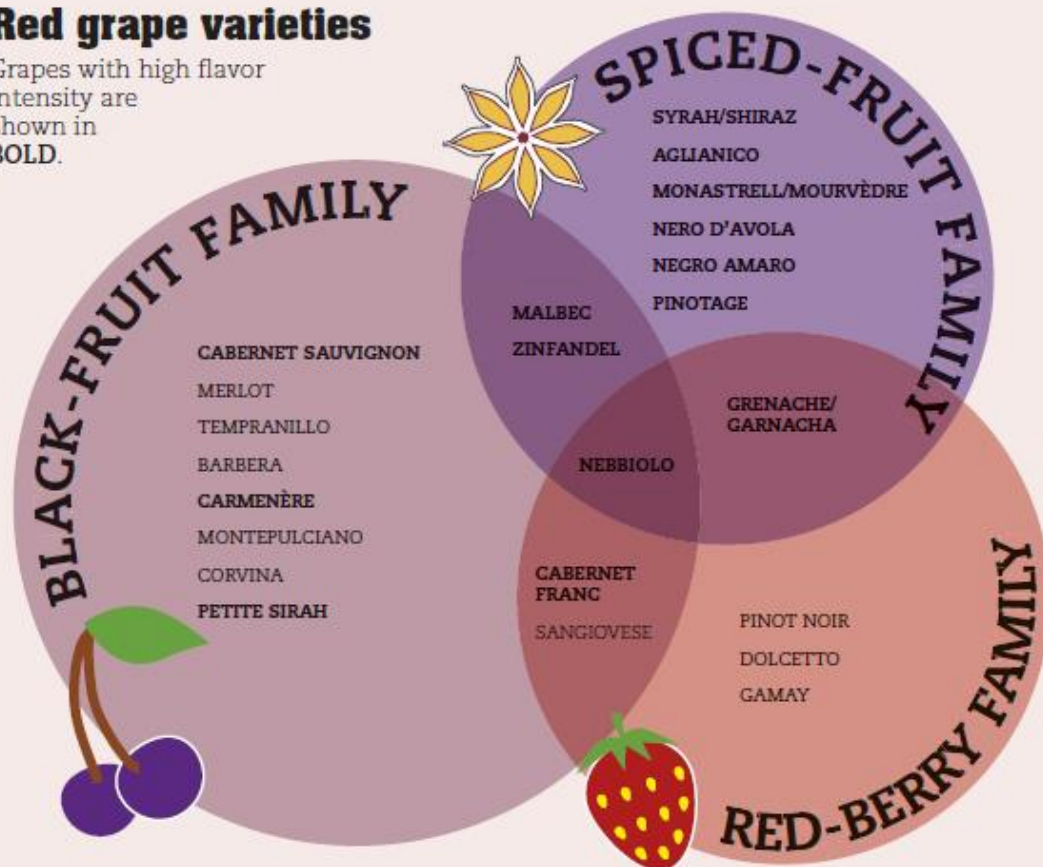
grapes make wines that smell like they’ve been seasoned from the spice rack, such as Syrah and Grenache, we’ll call this the spiced-fruit family.

LEFT TO STEW

Red wines get most of their flavor from steeping with dark grape skins during winemaking, a process that leads to stronger flavors and scents than those found in white wines.

Red grape varieties

Grapes with high flavor intensity are shown in **BOLD**.



Many popular red wine grapes project dense black-fruit flavors, but some feature brighter red-berry scents or a spiced-fruit aromatic profile more prominently.

Spiced-fruit
flavors

Black-fruit
flavors

Red-berry
flavors

How Grape Varieties Fit In

Chapter Checklist

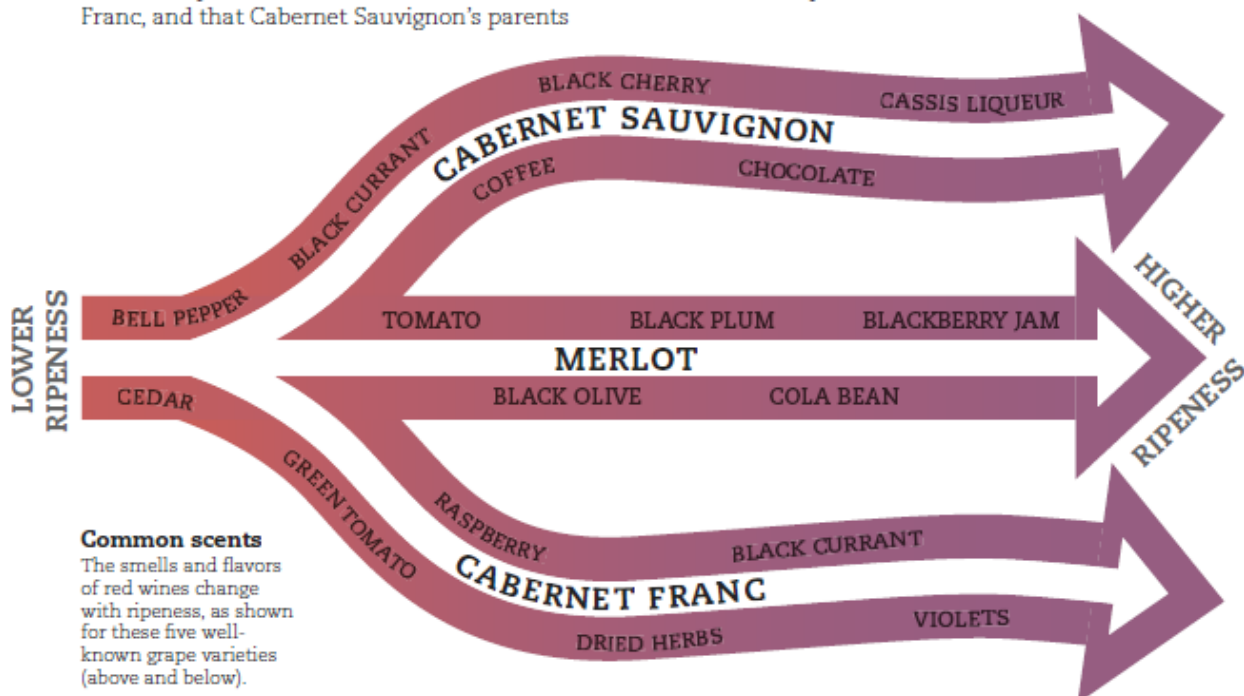
Here is a recap of some of the most important points you've learned in this chapter.

- ✓ Clear, consistent patterns govern **wine style**, and they can be used to make educated guesses about how a given wine will **taste**.
- ✓ A wine's taste is shaped by **three main factors**: the grape variety, the vineyard environment, and the impact of the winemaker.
- ✓ Wines from different grapes grown in **similar regions or climates** often taste more alike than wines from the same grape grown in very **different regions or climates**.
- ✓ Most wine characteristics grow **stronger** together, while a few others tend to **decrease** together. This relates to the amount of **sun** the grapes receive and its effect on the **ripening**.
- ✓ For red wines and **heavier wines**, grapes must be very ripe. For white wines and **lighter wines**, grapes should not be too ripe.
- ✓ **Ripeness** is the final stage of fruit development, when it becomes ready to pick and has the right balance of flavors to taste **fresh and delicious**.
- ✓ The ripening process shifts fruit from being hard and sour to a **sweet, juicy state**. There are also changes in color and flavor as grapes get more sun leading up to the harvest.
- ✓ Winemakers do not all share the same notion of "**perfect ripeness**." Each grape component responds differently to changes in geography, weather, and farming techniques.
- ✓ Riper grapes tend to taste stronger because they have more **flavor compounds** such as aromatic esters but also because **alcohol** vaporizes easily.
- ✓ By knowing that **13.5% alcohol is the norm**, you can predict a fair amount about how a wine will taste based on its alcohol level.

Keeping it in the family

The most obvious common ground in red wine flavors is found in closely related grapes, such as the three main Bordeaux varieties. Recent genetic studies show a parent/offspring relationship between Merlot and Cabernet Franc, and that Cabernet Sauvignon's parents

are Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc. Wines from these grapes share a leafy, vegetal flavor profile in cold regions and wet vintages but become easier to tell apart with more sunshine and ripeness.

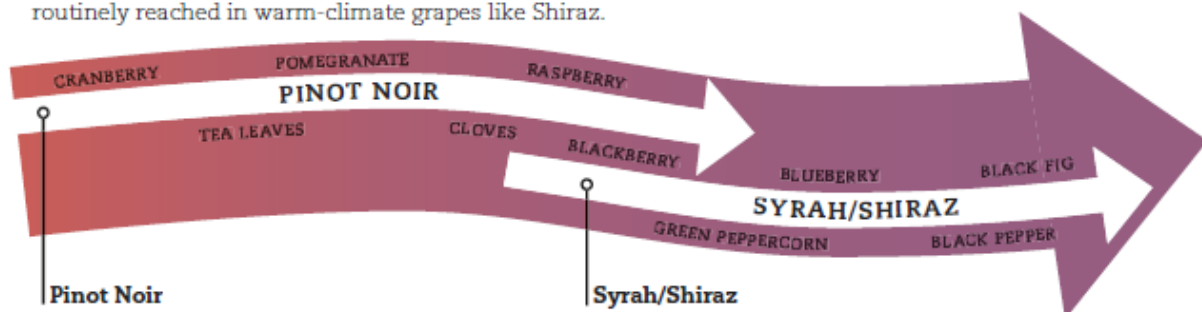


Common scents

The smells and flavors of red wines change with ripeness, as shown for these five well-known grape varieties (above and below).

Uneven ripening

Not all grapes ripen alike. Even at their ripest, cool-climate varieties like Pinot Noir rarely achieve the same levels of flavor development routinely reached in warm-climate grapes like Shiraz.



Pinot Noir

The red-fruit and herbal flavors associated with low ripeness are most often encountered in cool-climate, thin-skinned grapes like Pinot Noir.

Syrah/Shiraz

The black-fruit and baked-fruit flavors associated with high ripeness are most often encountered in warm-climate, thick-skinned grapes like Syrah/Shiraz.