Wine-Tasting Checklist

Think of each new wine you taste as an entry in a mental database. Deciding how it compares to others you've tried determines where it gets classified. The final step of tasting is to savor, assessing the main qualities that are reasonably objective as we commit the wine to memory. We'll use a checklist of sensory characteristics so we don't miss anything important.

Put it in the vault
Describing a wine in words, even just to yourself, is the key to remembering its characteristics so you can compare them to those of wines you'll taste in the future.

Use your senses—well, most of them!

Four of our senses help us evaluate different wine attributes; the one sense that doesn't have any part to play in wine tasting is hearing. In the chart below, track any attribute across to the low, medium, or high column to find useful terms for describing how it manifests itself in a wine's style.

SENSE	ATTRIBUTE	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
See	COLOR	White	Pink	Red
	COLOR DEPTH	Pale	Moderate	Dark
Taste	SWEETNESS	Dry	Lightly sweet	Fully sweet
	ACIDITY	Mildly acidic	Tangy	Tart
Smell	FRUIT INTENSITY	Mild	Flavorful	Bold
	OAK PRESENCE	No oak	Mild oak	Strong oak
Feel (mouthfeel)	BODY	Light	Mid-weight	Heavy
	TANNIN (red only)	Silky	Velvety	Rough
	CARBONATION	Still	Spritzy	Sparkling

Taste Wines Like a Pro

Our perception of wine is easily influenced by the environment in which we taste, so professionals try to be as objective as possible. A consistent tasting routine helps establish a baseline for comparison. The goal is to isolate and amplify the impact of wine's sensory characteristics—colors, scents, flavors—to distinguish one wine from another. This is best done by pouring yourself a glass of wine and following the steps below.

Look at the wine

Is the wine white, rosé (pink), or red? If the tasting environment is well lit, tilt the glass over a white surface, such as a sheet of paper, and look through the wine for useful style clues. How deep is the color? Is it showing signs of browning with age?

See pp.22–5 for more on what to look for.

Swirl the wine in the glass

You swirl wine to smell it better—almost like turning up the volume on the stereo system. A wine's smells grow more intense when its aroma compounds are concentrated in the bowl of a wine glass. Swirling increases the wine's surface area, which in turn boosts its rate of evaporation and aromatic intensity.

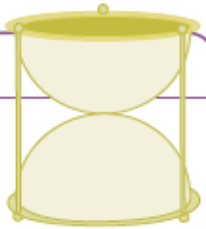
Sniff the wine deeply

Smell is the main sense used in wine tasting, so sniffing wine before tasting is an essential step. Dip your nose into the wine glass, and take two or three deep sniffs. Think about what you are smelling. How intense is the aroma? Does it remind you of anything? Fruits or vegetables? Herbs or spices? Do you smell toasty oak barrels?

See pp.26–7 for more on what to look for.

TO SPIT, OR NOT TO SPIT? THAT IS THE QUESTION

Wine professionals often spit wine at large tastings, something that seems unnatural to most people, since spitting is rude in any other context. However, for those who must taste wine critically as part of their work, spitting is essential, since it minimizes alcohol absorption and prevents intoxication. At large wine-tasting events, in winery tasting rooms, and in wine classes, spittoons are always readily available.



Modern wine-tasting spittoon

Sip the wine

Take a slightly larger sip than usual. Instead of swallowing immediately, hold the wine in your mouth for 3–5 seconds, letting it coat every surface: tongue, cheeks, palate.

Swish it around

By swishing wine around as if it were mouthwash, you dramatically intensify the sensory perceptions of taste, smell, and "mouthfeel." Increasing surface contact makes tastes and tactile sensations more vivid. It also warms the wine; body heat increases wine's evaporation rate, concentrating its aromas for the olfactory nerves.

Savor the wine

Wine's flavor does not disappear when you swallow. Its aftertaste lingers for a minute or more, allowing you to assess its sensory qualities and make more personal judgments. Tick through the wine-tasting checklist to identify its style parameters. Decide whether you like the wine. Would you prefer it alone or with food? Would you buy it again?

See p.22 for the wine-tasting checklist.

How Wine Looks

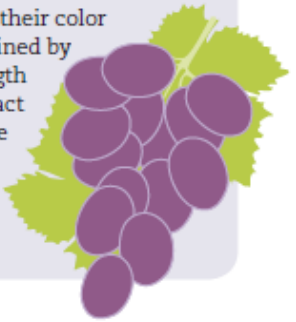
The most obvious differences between wines are the ones we can see. People are so naturally focused on visual perception that wines on wine lists and in retail stores are usually classified by color.

Figure out the colors

Wine colors range from nearly clear to inky purple-black, but the first step is to decide into which broad category they fit: white, pink, or red. A few rare wines are made in a specialized way that obscures their original color; these are mostly russet-colored sweet wines that are made from dried grapes. However, 99.9 percent of the time, it will be quite obvious which wines are white, which are red, and which fall somewhere in between.

Did you know...?

White wines can be made from pale or dark grapes. This is because the grape skins are discarded early in the production process. Red wines and rosés are made from dark grapes, their color determined by the length of contact with the grape skins.



Rare rosés

Only a tiny percentage of wines fall into the pink middle ground of color. These are called rosé wines, using the French word for "pinked."

Whites: What affects their color?

The main color source in white wines is oxidation: Exposure to air deepens whites from faintest yellow to gold. The most common source of oxidation is barrel aging, so oaky Chardonnay tends to be darker and more golden than crisp, stainless-steel–fermented Sauvignon Blanc. Uncommonly intensely flavored white wines will also display more color saturation, as is the case with sweet dessert wines.

Darkened by barrels, age, or density

Reds: What affects their color?

Just like whites, red wines look darker when they are more concentrated. However, while white wines darken with age, reds do the reverse, growing paler as their color compounds succumb to gravity, settling as sediment. Color behaves quite differently in red wine because of its source: dark grape skins.

The type of grape, degree of ripeness, and techniques used to extract color from the skins all affect a red wine's color depth. Thin-skinned grapes like Pinot Noir make paler wines than those from thicker-skinned varieties like Syrah; and fruit from sunny regions provides deeper color than cooler-climate fruit.

Vintners extract more color from the grape skins for premium age-worthy reds, while the hue of rosés is determined by limiting contact with the grape skins.

Darkened by grape-skin compounds

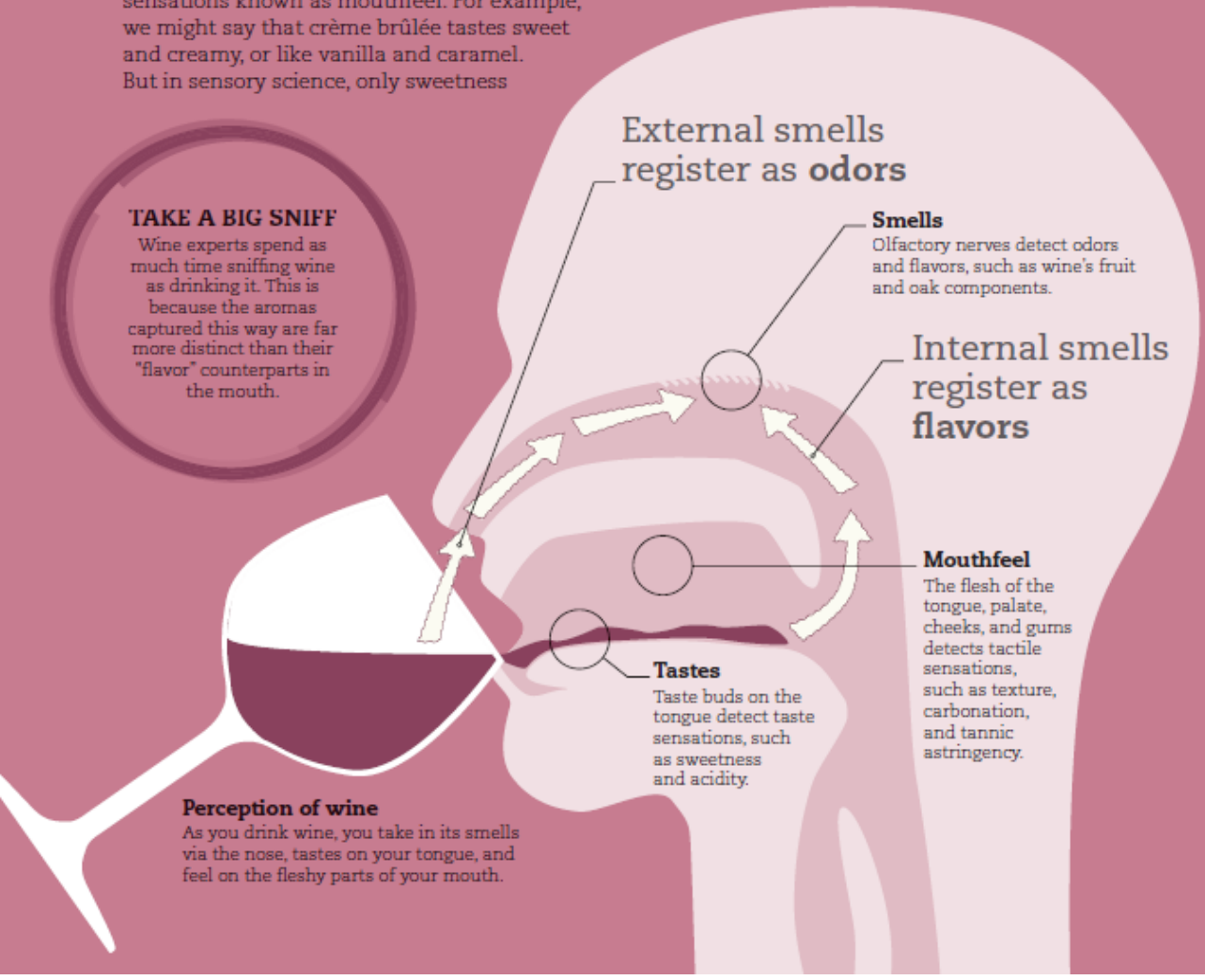
Lightened and browned by age

Are We Tasting or Smelling?

In everyday speech, we use the word "taste" for all sensations happening in the mouth. In the wine world, too, "taste" is mostly used in this generalized context. However, when we analyze wine, we make distinctions between wine characteristics based on which sense perceives them.

Know what taste is

By separating the three sensory threads—smell, taste, mouthfeel—that occur almost simultaneously when we take a sip, we can distinguish true tastes from the smells that constitute "flavor" and from the tactile sensations known as mouthfeel. For example, we might say that crème brûlée tastes sweet and creamy, or like vanilla and caramel. But in sensory science, only sweetness would be considered a true taste because it alone is detected by the tongue's taste buds. Vanilla and caramel "flavors" are really olfactory sensations, or smells, while creaminess is a tactile sensation, part of the dessert's mouthfeel.



TAKE A BIG SNIFF

Wine experts spend as much time sniffing wine as drinking it. This is because the aromas captured this way are far more distinct than their "flavor" counterparts in the mouth.

Understand aromas

Of all our senses, smell is the most important when it comes to wine tasting. Even if we don't sniff our wine, we still get an intense blast of aromas when we take a sip. We're used to thinking of this as flavor, as part of how wine tastes, but most of what we perceive as flavor is really olfactory stimulus—or smells.

Technically, there is no real difference between odors and flavors, except the direction from which they arrive. Olfactory nerves in the upper nasal cavity recognize smells as odors when sniffed through the nose from an external source. However, when those same smells reach the nose from the internal passage that connects the nose and mouth, they register as flavors, as part of how food or drink tastes.

Wine descriptors start to make a lot more sense once we grasp the fundamental difference between the taste sensations that are conveyed by the taste buds and the smell sensations delivered by the olfactory nerves. We taste a few rudimentary wine qualities—such as sweetness and acidity—on contact with our tongue. But we perceive a great many more complex wine characteristics as both scents and flavors when the volatile aroma compounds in wine reach our olfactory nerves.

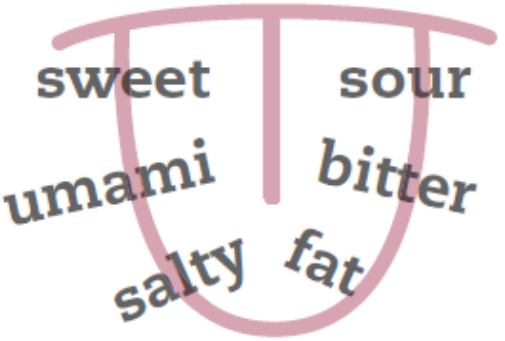
The nose test

For a vivid illustration of the difference between taste and smell, try this little experiment.

- Plug your nose tightly, and take a sip of orange juice. Keep your nose blocked all the while, and don't let go for at least 5 seconds after you swallow.
- Notice how, when the nasal passage is blocked, you can discern only what your tongue can taste on its own—in this case, sweetness and acidity.
- Now unplug your nose. As soon as air can flow freely from your palate to your olfactory nerves, you will get a rush of citrusy orange "flavor."

There are at least 10,000 things we can smell …

… but there are only six things we can truly taste.



How Wine Tastes

Now that we know there are only six detectable taste sensations, we need to establish what impact that has on wine tasting. The most surprising thing is probably that only two "true" tastes are found in wine.

Know the sensations

Four of the six known taste sensations have been recognized for centuries: sweetness, sourness (or acidity), saltiness, and bitterness. The other two are far less apparent and were only discovered with more recent laboratory testing. The overall "yummy," or savory, quality called umami, triggered by glutamates and amino acids, was first identified by Japanese researchers curious as to why seaweed and miso tasted so satisfying. More recently, another barely detectable taste has been found to be associated with fat in foods.

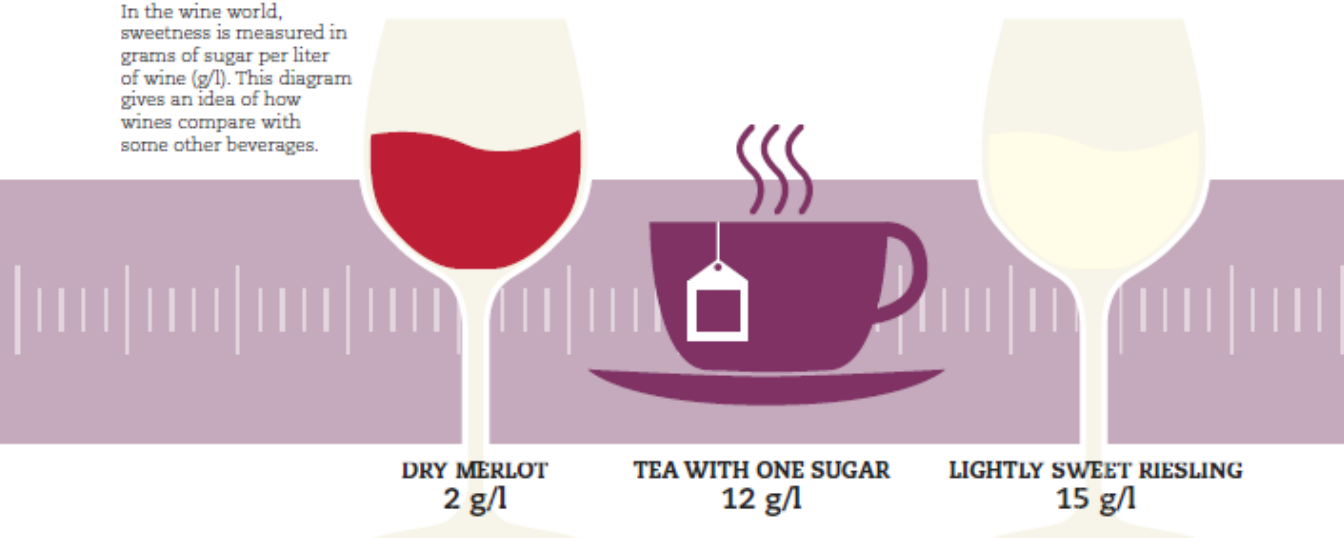
Only two taste sensations are important in wine tasting: sweetness and acidity.

What to look for

Sweetness and acidity are the two tastes we look for and assess whenever we taste wine, and both are important in categorizing wine by style. We do not look for other tastes because wine has no salt, fat, or bitterness; and while many wines feature umami, it's not readily apparent.

Gauging sweetness

In the wine world, sweetness is measured in grams of sugar per liter of wine (g/l). This diagram gives an idea of how wines compare with some other beverages.



Sweet or dry?

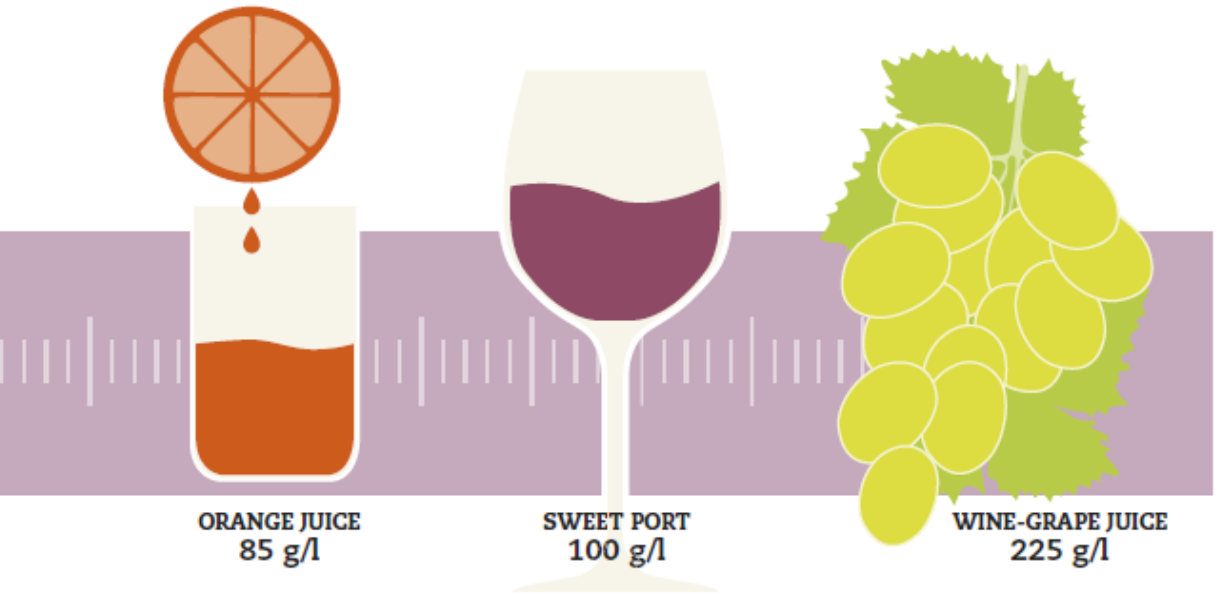
Sweetness is perceived as a sugary sensation on contact with the tongue, most vividly at the very tip, where taste receptors are more densely concentrated. Most wines have no perceptible sweetness and are described as "dry." This tends to be a confusing descriptor for beginners, because dry has a different meaning in wine than it does in everyday use. For centuries, winemakers around the world have called wines dry when their natural grape sugar has been fully converted to alcohol. *Sec* in French, *trocken* in German, and *secco* in Italian all mean "not wet" in normal speech but "not sweet" when applied to wine.

A pleasing hint of sweetness can be found in varying degrees in wine, most often in mass-market bargain wines. Lightly sweet "off-dry" styles are particularly popular with wine novices, who appreciate their juicelike flavor. Fully sweet wines, or dessert wines, are seductive, but rare because they are challenging and expensive to produce. The vast majority of the world's wines are dry because they are simpler to make, have a longer shelf life, and work well with food.

HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for low-, medium-, and high-sugar wines, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

SUGAR	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	Dry	No noticeable presence of sugar	Australian Chardonnay; French Côtes du Rhône
Medium	Lightly sweet; Off-dry	Slightly noticeable presence of sugar	German Riesling; California Old-Vine Zinfandel
High	Sweet; Dessert	Obvious, strong presence of sugar	Portuguese Port; Italian Moscato



ORANGE JUICE
85 g/l

SWEET PORT
100 g/l

WINE-GRAPE JUICE
225 g/l

Sour fresh-fruit acidity

Acidity is perceived as a sour sensation on contact, causing the mouth to salivate almost immediately, as with lemon juice or vinegar. Wine is more tart than most beverages, due to the high acidity of fresh grapes.

Newcomers often find wines too sour for their liking, in part because acidity always seems strongest on the first sip. But wine's acidic edge melts away as you continue to drink, especially if you're also eating. Since high levels of acidity can be a turnoff for the inexperienced, the wine profession treads carefully in describing it. Words such as "sour" and "acidic" carry negative connotations, so terms that sound more appetizing are more commonly used: tart or tangy, crisp or quenching, racy or refreshing.

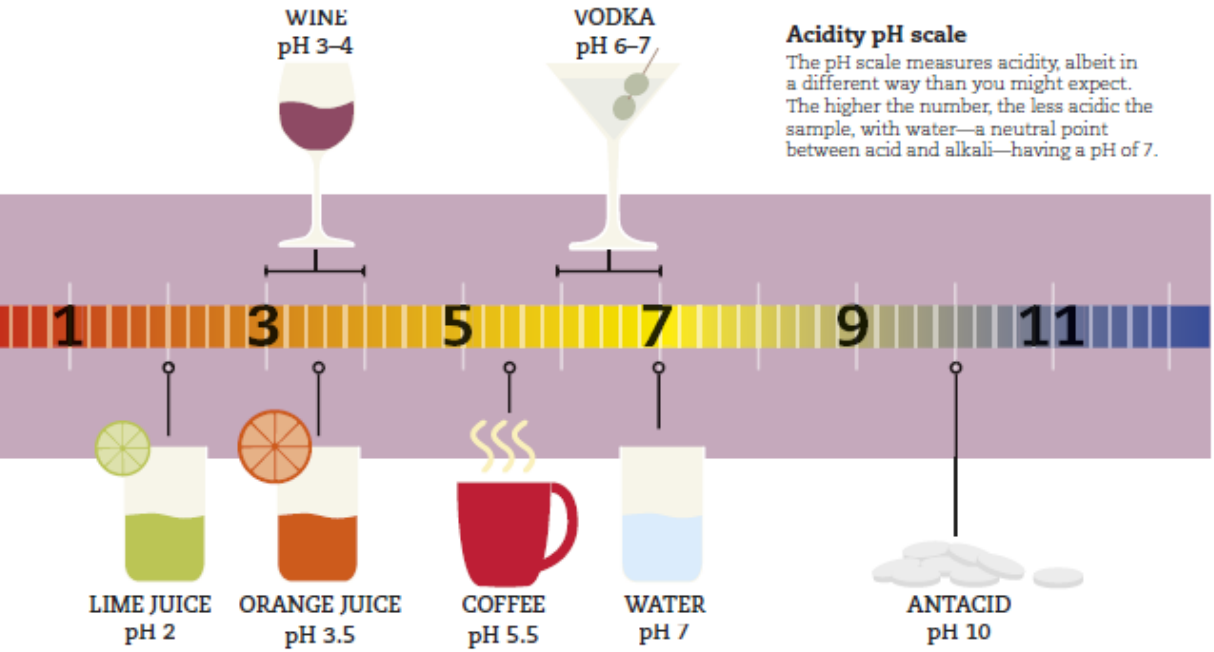
A CHEF'S SECRET

Acidity makes everything it touches taste better. Chefs know this, and that's why so many restaurant dishes are made with a splash of wine, a squeeze of lemon, or a drizzle of vinegar.

HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for low-, medium-, and high-acidity wines, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

ACIDITY	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	Mildly acidic; Flabby	Noticeable but modest acidity, as in baked apples	Oaky Chardonnay; Cream Sherry
Medium	Tangy; Crisp	Standard refreshing acidity, as in fresh apples	Italian Pinot Grigio; Chilean Merlot
High	Tart; Sharp	Prominent, aggressive acidity, as in underripe apples	French Sancerre; Italian Chianti



Acidity pH scale

The pH scale measures acidity, albeit in a different way than you might expect. The higher the number, the less acidic the sample, with water—a neutral point between acid and alkali—having a pH of 7.

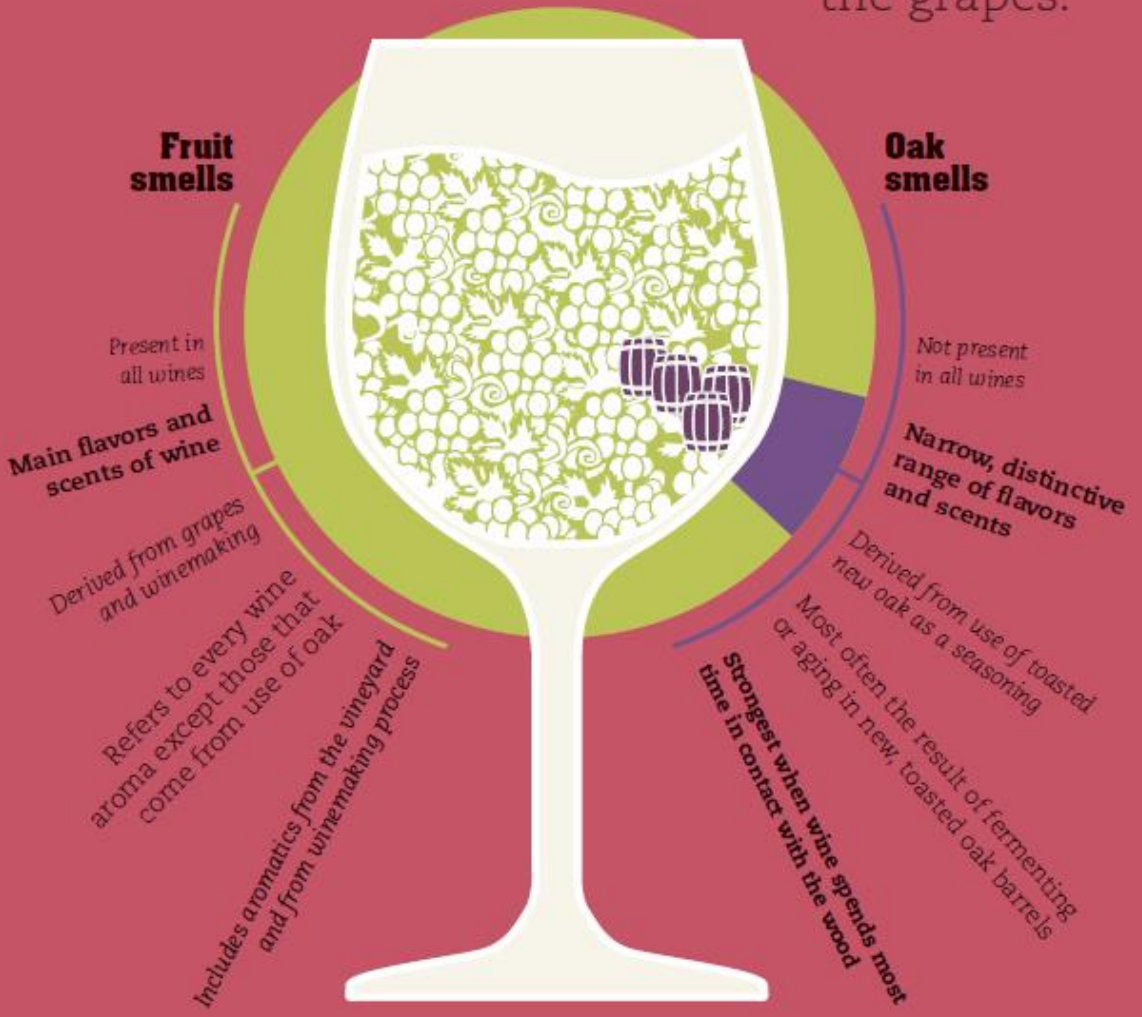
How Wine Smells

In wine tasting, "fruit" is the collective term for olfactory scents and flavors that come from the grapes used to make wine. Since all wines are made with 100 percent fruit, almost all wine flavor fits this description.

Know your fruit from your oak

It is helpful to categorize wine's scents and flavors and assess their overall intensity. In wine tasting, the two main categories of wine's olfactory sensations are "fruit" smells and "oak" smells, each named for their part in the winemaking process.

Of all wine's smells, most come from the grapes.



HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for wines with low-, medium-, and high-intensity fruit, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

SCENT	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low intensity	Mild; Subtle	Understated flavor, as with chamomile tea	Italian Prosecco; French Chablis —rare outside of white wines
Medium intensity	Moderate; Flavorful	Standard flavor power, as with black coffee or tea	New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc; Spanish Garnacha
High intensity	Bold; Concentrated	Intense, powerful flavor, as with espresso	Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, German Eiswein—rare outside of red wines and dessert wines

Understanding "fruit"

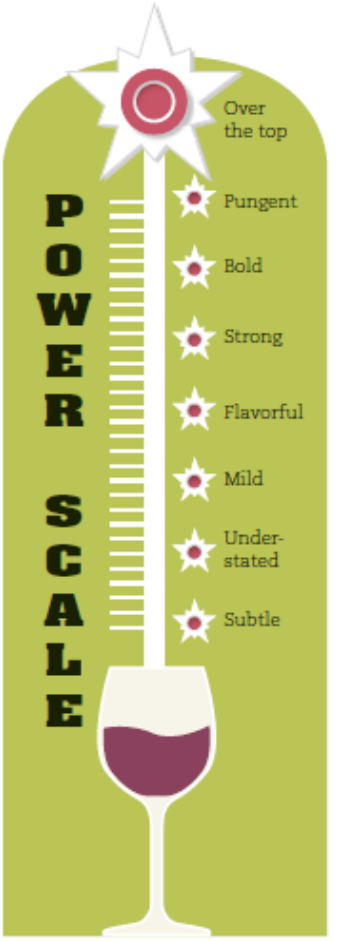
Many wine tasters try to identify specific aspects of a wine's fruit aromatics, with comparative terms like blackberry or lemon. For beginners, though, it is more useful to start by assessing the overall intensity of a wine's fruit on a simple power scale. Think of the fruit component as wine's flavor intensity: Is it subtle and understated, or bold and over the top?

Professionals in the wine trade stretch the word "fruit" beyond its normal meaning. Fruit can encompass plenty of overtly fruitlike smells, such as the pineapple scent of Chardonnay or the black currant aroma of Bordeaux. But in wine lingo, fruit is also a catchall category that encompasses non-fruit flavors, too. Whether it's the peppery scent of Syrah, the herbal flavor of Sauvignon Blanc, or a floral aroma in Gewurztraminer, these would all be described as part of the wine's fruit component. However, when a wine is described as "fruity," it typically means that its scent is strong and dominated by ripe dessert-like smells of actual fruits.

In addition to the natural smells present in the raw grapes, the fruit component incorporates smells that are generated during winemaking. Complex chemical reactions create volatile aromatic compounds that can smell like all sorts of things—from bread dough, to leather; from cedar, to asphalt.

EARTH BECOMES "FRUIT"

Vineyard environments can contribute earthy aromatics, often called *terroir*, that are considered dimensions of a wine's fruit component.



Fruit-intensity power scale
Use this power scale to help you identify the fruit intensity of a wine. Try to pick which term best suits any bottle you taste.

Understanding "oak"

The term "oak" describes a narrow range of wine scents and flavors, derived from contact with wood, usually toasted oak barrels. For centuries, oak barrels and vats were used to ferment and store wine for practical reasons, but they continue to be used today for the desirable flavors they impart. Oakiness is most commonly found in red wines and full-bodied whites, and it is particularly associated with premium aged styles.

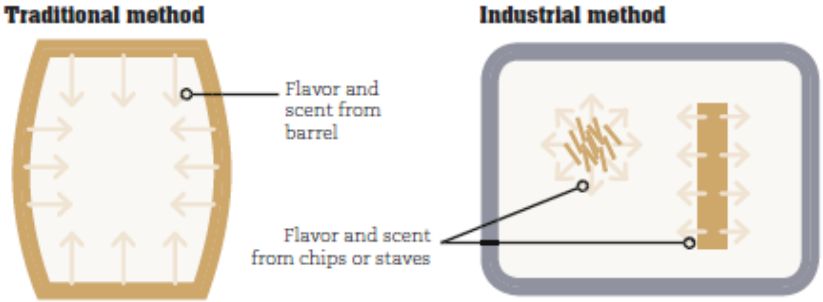
Oak has the strongest impact when barrels are new, so wines made with older barrels may not have any oak traces. New toasted oak gives wine a range of flavors like those found in oak-aged spirits like cognac and bourbon.

OAKY SMELLS

In addition to a wood-like scent, wine aged in oak can pick up smells like vanilla, dessert spices, caramel, and nuts. Many wines are made without oak treatment, so these scents and flavors are not always present.

WINE IN OAK OR OAK IN WINE?

Oak flavor is imparted to wine by new toasted oak. In premium wines, the oak flavor comes from being aged or fermented in new wooden barrels. In bargain wines that are aged or fermented in stainless-steel tanks, it may come from flavoring agents such as oak chips or staves.



HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for wines with low, medium, and high levels of oak, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

OAKINESS	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	Unoaked; Naked	Absence of oak scents and flavors, as with vodka	German Riesling; Italian Valpolicella
Medium	Mild Oak	Mild oak scents and flavors, as with young Canadian whiskey	French Bordeaux; Oregon Pinot Noir
High	Oaky; Toasty	Intense oak scents and flavors, as with premium aged cognac	Prestige Chardonnay; Spanish Rioja

How Wine Feels

Some sensory aspects of how wine "tastes" are neither tastes nor smells but "mouthfeel"—tactile sensations we discern with tongue, palate, lips, and gums. Mouthfeel incorporates some of our favorite food pleasures—from the crispy crunch of potato chips, to the creaminess of chocolate mousse.

In wine, we look for three types of physical sensations:

1. **Carbonation, or bubbles**
2. **Weight, or body**
3. **Tannin, or astringency**

Fizz and froth

The most obvious and instantaneous tactile sensation in wine is carbonation, since bubbles are immediately apparent on contact. Carbon dioxide is a natural by-product of fermentation, so all wines are bubbly at some point during winemaking. This natural fizz is usually allowed to escape, leaving the vast majority of wines "still," or noncarbonated. Sometimes, though, the bubbles are intentionally trapped and preserved to make a wine that is fully carbonated, or "sparkling."

Sparkling wines foam in the mouth like a soda and deliver a similar tingly shiver of refreshment on the palate. They need special bottles and corks to contain their carbonated contents under pressure. Occasionally, a milder prickle of carbonation, known as a spritz, may be present in wines that are not fully sparkling; these wines tend to be very young whites or rosés. Their bubbles typically dissipate quickly in the glass.

HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for wines with low, medium, and high levels of carbonation, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

CARBONATION	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	Still; Standard	Total absence of bubbles or fizz	Pinot Gris; Sauvignon Blanc
Medium	Spritzy	Faint presence of bubbles or fizz	Vinho Verde; Basque Txakolina
High	Sparkling; Bubbly	Overt presence of bubbles or fizz	Champagne; Prosecco

Assessing weight

Weight in wine terms refers to texture or thickness—a physical sensation of viscosity on the palate that is also known as "body." In the same way that cream feels thicker than milk because it contains more fat, full-bodied wines feel heavier than light-bodied wines because they contain more alcohol. Most mid-weight wines have roughly 13.5% alcohol. The lower a wine's strength, the lighter it feels on the palate.

Dessert wines are an exception to this rule, since dissolved sugar adds viscosity of its own. Wines that are both sweet and strong, like Port, are very heavy, feeling nearly as thick as syrup. Other factors, such as oak aging or yeast contact, can boost perceived weight but usually to a lesser extent than alcohol and sugar.

CHECK OUT THOSE LEGS

A wine's weight becomes visible when wine slides down the sides of a glass after swirling. Known as "legs" or "tears," these drips fall slowest in the heaviest wines.

HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for low-, medium-, and high-texture wines, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

TEXTURE	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	Light; Light-bodied	Sheer, delicate texture, as with skim milk	German Riesling, Italian Moscato—rare outside of sparkling, white, and rosé wines
Medium	Mid-weight; Medium-bodied	Standard medium texture, as with chocolate milk	French Bordeaux Blanc, Chilean Merlot
High	Heavy; Full-bodied	Rich, viscous texture, as with chocolate milkshake	California Old-Vine Zinfandel, Portuguese Port—rare outside red, dessert, and fortified wines

Discovering tannin

Red wines often dry out the mouth in the minute after tasting, blocking salivation and leaving a rough, leathery feeling on the palate. This is due to the presence of tannin, an astringent phenolic compound found in the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes.

- We find significant tannin only in red wines, because reds are fermented in contact with these solids, whereas white wines are not.
- Tannins add to a red wine's depth of color and also tend to coincide with flavor intensity.
- Tannin is a strong antioxidant and natural preservative that helps wines age but breaks down over time.
- The youngest, darkest, most intense red wines designed for aging are typically the most tannic.
- Sometimes called a wine's "grip," tannin's mouth-drying effect is not always immediately apparent but gets stronger in the 30–60 seconds after tasting.
- Wines with mild tannin can feel plush, like velvet, while strong tannin can leave a harsher feeling, like suede.

Red wines get their tannin mainly from grape skins. These antioxidant compounds give red wine color and flavor, as well as astringency.

MOUTH-DRYING, NOT DRY

Tannin is often confused with dryness because it makes the tongue feel dry. However, in wine lingo, "dry" refers to wines that are not sweet, while wines that dry out the mouth are described as tannic.

HIGHS AND LOWS

This chart shows common terms for low-, medium-, and high-tannin wines, along with details of how each is perceived on tasting and examples of corresponding wines.

TANNIN	TERM	DESCRIPTION	WINE EXAMPLE
Low	None	No detectable mouth-drying astringency	French Beaujolais; Dry rosé
Medium	Velvety; Soft tannin	Detectable, gentle mouth-drying astringency	California Merlot; French red Burgundy
High	Rough; Hard tannin	Obvious aggressive mouth-drying astringency	Italian Barolo; Australian Cabernet Sauvignon