



NEWSLETTER

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Finding fault with wine is easier done than said

A dreadful pong greeted the nose like a visiting relative when a particular pinot noir (not WGW, naturally) was presented recently. By the time we decided that it was not fit for human consumption and determined to throw it away, someone took another sip and suggested it was not that bad after all. "Eh?" We looked at it. We smelt it. We imbibed. "He's right you know." Slurp.

Wine has baffling habits and this was one of them: in minutes a barnyard gasper turned into a passable pinot. Even allowing for the fact that Beefsteak and Burgundy Club members always find more faults in the first glass than the fourth, the transformation was remarkable (it takes a truly serious fault for this mob to throw wine away. You hear strange conversations at table, such as: "That tasted like cat's urine. I need to check that. Pour me some more, please" - seriously strange.)

Pinot ingested, someone asked what were the faults of wine? Now that is worthy of research.

First serve

Aside from the two culprits that most of us know - cork taint and oxidation - there is surprisingly little agreement on faults in the available literature. First the consensus.

South Australia's Roseworthy College lists six faults in its wine appreciation curriculum: volatile acidity, sulfides, oxidation, mousiness, brettanomyces spoilage and cork taints. The most common, Roseworthy avers, are cork taints and oxidation.

The author of Tim Knappstein Wines' web site agrees, describing corked wine as smelling "dank" and tasting "musty or mouldy" to which I would add "mousey". It may range from faint to overpowering.

Only two faults are attributable to corks - cork taint described above where fungal infection of the cork transfers to the wine; and a faulty or over-compressed cork which allows the passage of air resulting in oxidised wine.

Sherry, madam?

Oxidation is visible as a yellow/brown tint in white wine and dull brown in red wine. It can have a rancid character like sherry. It smells and tastes stale and flat.

Paula Gardner, in madaboutwine.com, lists more faults. The first she terms re-fermentation but more commonly it is called malolactic fermentation. It involves the conversion of stronger malic acid into weaker lactic acid and carbon dioxide. It adds flavour and complexity to both red and white wines. In chardonnay, malolactic fermentation produces the butteriness (diacetyl) valued by aficionados. Winemakers avoid malolactic fermentation in acidic white wines such as chenin blanc and riesling where they want a crisp, clean finish.

Le malo

When *le malo*, as the French call it, occurs in the bottle then it is either a sparkling wine or a fault. As Gardner points out, "if the yeast is not completely removed it can react with any sugar that's left and the fermentation process can start again, making the wine cloudy and fizzy." Sulphur can be and generally is successfully used to suppress remaining lactic bacteria at bottling. But if it fizzes when it is not meant to then it is a fault.

Gardner also tackles acetic acid, noting that "This time it's bacteria rather than yeast which is the culprit, making the wine taste like vinegar." Winemakers usually call this fault "volatile acidity" because while acetic acid is the main culprit, other acids can produce the same effect. As the Oxford Companion of Wine points out, the major source of the fault are acetobacter bacteria that require oxygen and cause a reaction with the wine's alcohol to form acetic acid.

Good wine should be chilled out

Madaboutwine.com picks up on tartrate crystals. Usually winemakers chill wine for a few days prior to bottling to force any tartaric acid present to precipitate as crystals. The "cold stabilised" wine is then siphoned off (racked) and the crystals are left behind. However, occasionally crystals turn up in bottled wine - usually white wine that has been refrigerated. They are harmless but can be disconcerting if mistaken for shards of glass. Decanting solves the problem.

Overuse of sulphur as a preservative to kill or repress bacteria is a common wine fault but not usually fatal. Sulphur compounds are volatile and if you get a whiff of sulphur (like a burnt match) when you open a bottle the best policy is to wait a while before giving up on it. If necessary, decant the wine to help it breathe and allow the sulphur to burn off.

.../over





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If the problem is a breakdown of sulphides that has occurred earlier in the winemaking process, then nothing will help. The smell is like rotten eggs.

You are entering the twilight zone

Another recognised agent is *brettanomyces*, which sounds like a fungus but several technical references call it a bacterial infection. In fact it is a yeast strain (a single-celled plant called a thalophyte) the action of which produces volatile phenols (spare me! Phenols include tannins, colour pigments and flavour compounds).

But are the phenols that *brettanomyces* produces good or bad? Tom Ostler of the Wine Judges' Commission of Ontario sums up the confusion: "descriptors range from barnyard and leather, to clove and strong spice, to smoky - B.B.Q., to phenolic, medicinal, band aid and even animal." Did someone mention Hunter Valley?

Parker's view from the Big Apple

Robert Parker, who dictates much of North America's wine taste, likes brett, as it is colloquially known. Many judges do not.

It is not the only two-faced wine fault. Canadian writer Natalie MacLean adds stemmy (over-pressed producing bitterness), green (tartness from unripe grapes), woody (over or poorly oaked). Also mouldy (usually caused by mildewed grapes), madeirised (cooked flavour caused by over-heating), yeasty (unfermented yeast) and the smell of geraniums (caused by bacterial degradation of sorbic acid).

Wonderfully decrepit, that wine

Many of these descriptors invite debate about degree and personal taste. The Oxford Companion to Wine notes "Taste varies not only according to individuals but also according to nationality. Italians are generally more tolerant of bitterness, Americans of sweetness, Germans of sulphur dioxide, the French of tannins and the British of decrepitude" (well, they would be, wouldn't they? Look at their cricket team). It adds that Australians are sensitive to mercaptans – a skunk-like smell (burning tyres?) that is easily avoided in newly-made wine by racking it off its lees to aerate it.

Visible wine faults include haziness and cloudiness caused by microbial action, and the wrong colour for the variety and age of the wine. To smellable faults add stagnant wine tainted by waterlogged barrels. Metallic taints acquired from winemaking equipment are often best picked up by taste.

If it sounds like overkill, consider that people now buy kits that describe various odours associated with wine faults. One kit advertised contains twelve aroma bottles including vegetal, rotten apple, vinegar, glue, soap, sulphur, rotten egg, onion, cauliflower, horse, mouldy-earthly, and cork. Can the experience of a bottle of wine be more thoroughly crushed?

So, what about the pinot's chameleon transformation?

The conclusion I draw is that the sulphurous and rotting meat/swampy odours in its pouring were caused by a mild case of brett plus over-sulphuring of the wine to protect against oxidation. But were they faults or features and could it be that faults, in small quantities, enhance a wine by adding complexity?

Pinot serves double fault for trophy

At the 2001 Sydney International Wine Competition, British judge Grant Ramage, examining the 2000 *Te Kairanga Reserve Pinot Noir* declared: "This is what you need with game. A properly stinky bottle of Pinot with quite developed gamy flavours in harmony with the meat. Not the best on its own but it looks very good with food."

The succinct judgement of Queensland's Peter Scudamore-Smith was: "Bretanomyosis (sic). Bacterially spoilt." Scud's comment did not prevent the wine winning gold and a trophy.

The moral would seem to be that it is okay for a pinot to be stinky as long as this is a passing quality. As my winemaker, Rod Macpherson, says, "you can get away with murder with pinot." The way it smelt initially, we thought someone had!

John Arlidge

