

Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation

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Have you ever experienced a sudden shudder when presented with a series of wines for evaluation? Too often? Do you feel an uneasiness even if you are provided with a form, such as the AWS Evaluation Form, to catalog your impressions? Do you feel you are lost as to how to separate what you are sensing during the wine experience?

Do you scan the room to notice how some people get right to the task, dig in so to speak, and begin writing on the evaluation sheet after seeing, swirling, sniffing, sipping, savoring and spitting? Those people seem to have, in their heads and at their fingertips, an outline of what to look for in a wine. Fret no longer! This article and the accompanying charts will give you the essentials and the factors considered in wine evaluation to make judging a less burdensome task, to make it more enjoyable when you next evaluate wine.

You may have read in many articles and books, dedicated to the study of wine appreciation and evaluation, the items a person takes into consideration when judging wine. You have discovered that some references emphasize basic criteria: Appearance, Aroma, Bouquet, Taste, Aftertaste, Overall Impressions and possibly a Scoring System. While the basics are important to provide the skeleton (framework), an expansion of these criteria is necessary to broaden your communication and retention skills; adding muscle, so to speak, to the bones.

The American Wine Society Evaluation Form incorporates the above mentioned factors and assigns a number of points for each given area of evaluation. It is important to note that the score must be consistent with the descriptors. If you observe positive and/or negative features about a wine, document the observation in the appropriate column and make sure the number of your assigned points corresponds with the *objective* critique. Remember the word *objective*. It is important to set aside your personal likes and dislikes when evaluating wine. You must concentrate on the observations your senses are sending to your brain. All wine drinkers have preferences when choosing a wine for enjoyment, whether it be (1) a robust, dry red wine, or (2) a light, crisp white or (3) a fruity, sweet wine. These are choices we make for our own enjoyment; they are subjective. In objectively evaluating and judging a wine the *only* place for a personal comment of like or dislike is in the Overall section. But you should note there are other factors listed in that column to be considered as well.

At this point, you may be questioning why you would want to go through the exercise of objectively evaluating a wine when you can tell with a subjective snap judgment of like/dislike. If your like/dislike decision is based on a limited criteria you could be under-estimating or over-estimating a wine. You could be limiting your sights and enjoyment because you have limited your focus. You may be ignoring some of the signals your senses are sending to your brain as you are tasting a wine because your emotional preferences are dominating the experience.

Your senses are, most likely, giving your brain signals as you look at, sniff and sip wine. Why not make the most of those signals and the sipping event? Take the time to pour a glass of wine. Place the glass of wine on a white sheet of paper. Using the *Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation* as an outline, write your perceptions and impressions on an AWS Evaluation Chart.

The outline is to be used as a guideline for the taster to observe each of the factors to be considered.

Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation

| WINE | APPEARANCE 3 max | AROMA/BOUQUET 6 max | TASTE/TEXTURE 6 max | AFTERTASTE 3 max | OVERALL 2 max | TOTAL SCORE |
|------|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| | Separate Appraisal of Color from Appearance Specify Color : hue, saturation, purity Reflectance Clarity : brilliant, bright, clear, hazy/dull, cloudy, precipitated, gassy Note Body (tears, legs, arches) Bubbles : Size, Persistence, quantity, rate, duration, Mousse, Cordon In a still wine (-) | <u>Use Aroma Wheel®-Descriptors</u> Aroma : Grape Varietal, distinct, vinous, Fruity, Floral, Spicy, Earthy, Vegetative Bouquet : fermentation, oak aging, bottle bouquet clean, fresh, dirty, yeasty, sulfur (w/ or w/o irritation) Alcohol (if irritating, a -) Harmony / Balance of Aroma & Bouquet (ex. - if too much wood, alc.) Note any off odors (-) | Taste & Tactile Sensations Varietal Flavors : distinct, vinous. In a blend, note the harmony of flavors <u>Use Descriptors</u> : fruit, wood, any off flavors (-) Acidity : flat, tart & pleasant, green Sweetness : dry, low, medium, sweetish, high, cloying Bitterness : not noted unless present as an off flavor Astringency : smooth, slightly rough, rough, very rough Body / Viscosity (mouth filling properties): thin, watery, light, medium, full Balance : Sugar, Acid, Alcohol, Fruit, Wood Tactile : CO2 bubbles, Alcohol: warm, hot | <u>Use Taste Descriptors</u> Length of finish : short, medium, long, memorable Astringency Balance Body | Assess Typicality & Quality How well parts relate to each other Typicality of: type, region, producer, vintage Quality : minor flaws, ordinary, great wine Complexity & Harmony : Balance of sensory elements --no inconsistencies in color, odor, flavor, or aftertaste Balance of sugar/acid/alcohol Power to stimulate senses | Consistency in written descriptors and points assessed. Total score MUST reflect the AWS guidelines: 18-20 pts. = Extraordinary 15-17 pts. = Excellent 12-14 pts. = Good 9-11 pts. = Commercially Acceptable 6-8 pts. = Deficient 0-5 pts. = Poor, Objectionable |

Points Assessed During an AWS Wine Evaluation

APPEARANCE

- 3 - Excellent - Brilliant with outstanding characteristic color.
- 2 - Good - Clear with characteristic color.
- 1 - Poor - Slight haze and/or slight off color.
- 0 - Objectionable - Cloudy and/or off color.

AROMA AND BOUQUET

- 6 - Extraordinary - Unmistakable characteristic aroma of grape-variety or wine-type. Outstanding and complex bouquet. Exceptional balance of aroma and bouquet.
- 5 - Excellent - Characteristic aroma. Complex bouquet. Well balanced.
- 4 - Good - Characteristic aroma. Distinguishable bouquet.
- 3 - Acceptable - Slight aroma and bouquet. Pleasant.
- 2 - Deficient - No perceptible aroma or bouquet or with slight off odors.
- 1 - Poor - Off odors.
- 0 - Objectionable - Objectionable or offensive odors.

TASTE AND TEXTURE

- 6 - Extraordinary - Unmistakable characteristic flavor of grape-variety or wine-type. Extraordinary balance. Smooth, full-bodied and overwhelming.
- 5 - Excellent - All of the above but a little less. Excellent but not overwhelming.
- 4 - Good - Characteristic grape-variety or wine-type flavor. Good balance. Smooth. May have minor imperfections.
- 3 - Acceptable - Undistinguished wine but pleasant. May have minor off flavors. May be slightly out of balance, and/or somewhat thin or rough.
- 2 - Deficient - Undistinguished wine with more pronounced faults than above.
- 1 - Poor - Disagreeable flavors, poorly balanced, and/or unpleasant texture.
- 0 - Objectionable - Objectionable or offensive flavors and/or texture.

AFTERTASTE

- 3 - Excellent - Lingering outstanding aftertaste.
- 2 - Good - Pleasant aftertaste.
- 1 - Poor - Little or no distinguishable aftertaste.
- 0 - Objectionable - Unpleasant aftertaste.

OVERALL IMPRESSION

- 2 - Excellent
- 1 - Good
- 0 - Poor

TOTAL SCORES

- 18 - 20 Extraordinary
- 15 - 17 Excellent
- 12 - 14 Good
- 9 - 11 Commercially Acceptable
- 6 - 8 Deficient
- 0 - 5 Poor and Objectionable

Using your senses record your observations and include scores in each of the next six columns on the Evaluation Chart. The scoring criteria explanations for the Points Assessed During AWS Wine Evaluation chart address issues of clarity, varietal aroma, bouquet and taste as well as length of aftertaste. While the Points Assessed currently does not take into consideration all of

the items listed on the Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation, the scoring system of points corresponding descriptors of Extraordinary, Excellent, Good, Acceptable, Deficient and Poor are applicable as a summation of quality for Appearance, Aroma/Bouquet, Taste/Texture, Aftertaste and Overall.

Before beginning the process of evaluating wine a few tips used by judges should be mentioned.

TIPS FOR JUDGING

- Good lighting is essential for good evaluation.
- Avoid mouthwash prior to an evaluation.
- Do not wear cologne or perfume which can interfere the sense of smell.
- No smoking.
- Wine glasses for each wine should be the same size and shape.
- Pour the same amount of wine in each glass.
- Condition your mouth with wine before tasting the first wine.
- Discourage talking during evaluations. Concentrate on the wine.
- Do not discuss the wines during evaluation—evaluate in silence. No comments, no grunts, no sighs, no facial expressions. Do not influence other tasters. Rely on your own senses.
- Discussion of wines occurs after every person has completed the evaluation form.
- Remember the 6 S's of Judging
 1. See,
 2. Swirl,
 3. Sniff,
 4. Sip,
 5. Savor and
 6. Spit.

Applying the Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation to the AWS Score Sheet

The first column on the Evaluation Chart is for information about the **WINE**. This can include:

- ◇ Name of the wine (Example: Turtle Rock Red) and/or
- ◇ Grape(s) (Example: Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay),
- ◇ Producer (winery, cooperative),
- ◇ Geographical location (appellation and country; Example: Lake Erie, PA, USA or Aloxe-Corton in Cote d'Or (Burgundy region), France,
- ◇ Vintage (year),
- ◇ Wine designation (Example: table wine, reserve, Grand Cru), and
- ◇ Distributor (if noted on the label) of the wine.

In a blind tasting, you may not know any of this information. Judge the wine on standards of quality without knowing the identity of the wine. Standards of quality include the absence of off-odors and off-flavors, and in general, the positive aspects of aroma/bouquet, taste/texture, acidity, bitterness, sweetness, astringency, body, and balance.

In a blind tasting you can write a wine grape or fruit varietal “guess” in the Wine section of the evaluation form based on your descriptors written in each of the other boxes. Your “guess” is your conclusion from all of the clues you have sensed and recorded on paper plus your experience as a taster. Consider yourself a Wine Detective—sniffing for clues.

The next column in the AWS Evaluation Chart is for the **PRICE** of the wine. After silent evaluations, a discussion may follow in which the purchase price of the wine may be mentioned and written in this box. This column has been eliminated in the *Factors Considered* graphic due to space limitations.

Sight and hearing are the first senses used during a wine evaluation. These observations are recorded in the **APPEARANCE** column. Notes written in this column should include the color of the wine, reflectance, clarity, body, and, if a sparkling wine, the size and quantity of the bubbles and mousse.

To describe the color of a wine, start with the Hue (also known as shade). Wine hues include shades of the primary colors (red, yellow, blue) as well as secondary colors (green, purple and orange). White wines color descriptors include (but are not limited to): Colorless, Light Yellow Green, Light Straw Yellow, Light Yellow, Medium Yellow, Light Gold, Medium Gold, Tawny, Chestnut. Red wine color descriptors include (but are not limited to): Pink, Light Red, Medium Red, Ruby, Crimson, Purple, Dark Purple, Dark Red, Brick Red, Tawny, Brown.

Tip: White wines gain color as they age. Red wines lose color as they age.

Saturation is the depth of the color of a wine. It is also known as the intensity or chroma. It is the lightness or darkness of the hue. An example of saturation: Scarlet is a saturated color; pink is de-saturated. Often a wine is described as deep, or inky. These terms describe a heavily saturated wine. Wines are viewed in front of a light source or over a sheet of white paper to determine the saturation level as well as wine clarity. **Hint:** For red wines, tilt the glass and view the shallow edge of the liquid.

The **Purity** of a wine is described as the correct or appropriate color for its age; no watery edge; no oxidation. The term “right color for its age” is best illustrated with a current vintage of white wine. A newly bottled white wine should not be a tawny color. Browning color in a wine is an indication of oxidation and age. Describe the color. Then allow your other senses to objectively evaluate the wine.

Reflectance describes the mirror-like surface of the wine, which is a positive. If the wine surface is dull or has a flat appearance, it can suggest a lack of fining or filtering, or decrepitude (spoilage).

Clarity, or limpidity, in a wine is a visual sign of healthiness. Descriptors range from: Brilliant (perfect crystal clarity), Bright (slightly less than brilliant), Clear (acceptable clarity). Turbidity is the opposite of clarity and it is material in the wine which causes a haze. Terms used to describe turbidity are: Dull (minor fault), Hazy (serious problem) or Cloudy (unacceptable). If the wine has a precipitant (except for tartrates or tannins) or is gassy, it is a negative.

Visual imperfections which are not considered flaws are: tartrate crystals, pieces of cork, granular sediment. The granular sediment is a normal occurrence of the aging process in wine. Tannins and pigment precipitate. This is why older wines are allowed to stand upright for several days prior to decanting and serving to guests.

It is important to note that chilled wines can cause condensation on the glass and produce a faint cloudiness. Wipe away the mist (and, if necessary, warm the bottom of the glass bowl with your hands if the wine is too cold) before proceeding with the visual evaluation.

Next examine the **legs** of the wine. This will give you a clue about how much alcohol is in the wine. The thinner the legs, the higher the alcohol content. Tears and arches are other terms used for legs. The term Body in the **APPEARANCE** column refers to the legs of a wine while Body under the Taste/Texture column refers to the mouth-filling properties.

Lastly, you will observe the presence/absence of **bubbles**. Still wines do not have effervescence. Sparkling wines should have effervescence. If a still wine has effervescence (and it is not a Vino Verde wine from Portugal), it is a negative and should be noted in the **APPEARANCE** column.

Exception: A little “spritz” or gassiness can be observed in newly bottled wines. A small amount of carbon dioxide is sometimes trapped in the bottle during the bottling/corking stage. It is absorbed in the wine and released again when the bottle is opened and poured. This *slight* effervescence should dissipate in a short period of time. *If it does not*, it is a negative.

You may be slightly puzzled about using your sense of hearing for wine evaluation. The auditory sense is used when opening the bottle and hearing the pressure release of the cork. If you hear a “hiss” as the cork is extracted from the bottle of still wine, you are getting a clue about that wine. Either it is a newly bottled wine which has some trapped carbon dioxide, which should dissipate quickly, or the wine is undergoing additional activity/fermenting in the bottle.

If you do not hear any release of gas in an opened bottle of sparkling wine, record this information on the evaluation form. The pressure behind the cork would be inadequate. Your other senses will confirm your observation and supposition during the aroma/bouquet, taste, aftertaste and overall impression evaluation. Observations used with your sense of hearing are *not* recorded *if* they are appropriate for the wine under consideration.

Note: Open a bottle of sparkling slowly to make as little “popping” sound as possible when extracting a sparkling cork to help keep the carbon dioxide in the wine.

The **APPEARANCE** evaluation of a sparkling wine should contain descriptors such as:

- ◇ Mousse (foam or bubbles that form on the top of the sparkling wine when poured)
- ◇ Cordon (bubbles that remain around the edges of the poured wine)
- ◇ Size of the bubbles (tiny, small, medium or large)
- ◇ Persistence describes the
 - Quantity
 - Rate (how fast or slow bubbles are produced) and
 - Duration (how long the bubbles continue).

Sparkling wines will have more pressure in the bottle than a cr  mant (cray-mahn). If a wine has no bubbles, examine the cork, if possible. If the cork is hard or crumbling, perhaps the wine was stored improperly or the cork was defective.

A squeaky clean glass can also be a problem. Avoid washing champagne glasses with dishwasher detergents with a rinsing agent. Rinsing agents prevent the bubbles from adhering to the glass, thereby preventing a continuous bubble display. Fortunately, the bubbles are still in the wine and will be able to be felt (sensed) in the mouth.

The next four sections of the Wine Chart rely heavily on your sense of smell.

AROMA/BOUQUET odors are recorded as you sniff the wine. As you taste, you also smell the air in your mouth which flows into the nasal air passages. These odors, combined with the mouth sensations of sweet, salt, acid and bitter, are called flavor. Flavor descriptors are recorded in the **TASTE**, **AFTERTASTE** and **OVERALL** sections of the chart.

AROMA/BOUQUET odor descriptors can easily be referred to using the U. C. Davis Aroma Wheel^{  } on the reverse side of the revised AWS Evaluation Chart. Aroma is defined as the odors of wine that originate in the grape while bouquet odors originate in fermentation, processing, or aging (particularly after bottling).¹ Additional aromas may be detected in a wine which are not listed on the Davis Aroma Wheel^{  2}. As you identify these odors in wine, record them on the evaluation chart.

Some varietals are easily recognized while others are not as distinctive to be identified. Varieties which can be easily recognized by odor are: Cabernet Sauvignon, Catawba, Concord, Delaware, Gew  rztraminer, Ives, M  ller-Thurgau, Muscat (of Alexandria, Blanc, and Hamburg), Niagara, and Orange Muscat, Ruby Cabernet, Sauvignon Blanc, S  millon, and Zinfandel. The level of ripeness can influence aroma. Underripe grapes will not develop maximum flavor while overripe grapes will have characteristic flavor but may have excessive alcohol content. Exceptions noted include dessert wines with a premature stop in fermentation.

Bouquet odors are a result of yeast selection; the type of fermentation (e.g., cool fermentation, carbonic maceration, extended maceration, malo-lactic fermentation); wood exposure; and the aging process in the bottle. The type of wood, toasting level (light, medium, heavy or extra heavy), size of the barrel (or quantity of oak chips used), and time exposed to wood contribute to the bouquet of a wine. Processing odors include bottle aging and special techniques such as: extended film yeast contact (e.g.: Flor sherry yeast imparts a distinctive aldehyde bouquet); reduced must additions (e.g.: Marsala); baked wines, such as Madeira; and grape or fruit concentrate additions to wine, which impart a caramel-like bouquet. Wine storage conditions can affect the life of a wine. Wines stored at 80   Fahrenheit will have a noticeably short life as compared to wines stored at 50   Fahrenheit.

Alcohol can be sensed. If it is so strong it overwhelms the other components, it is a negative. Note the **Harmony** of the odors. A harmonious wine has aroma and bouquet and alcohol odors in proper proportion.

Of course, any off-odors detected are considered a negative and reduce the number of points given in this section. For example, the smell of a burning match can sometimes be sensed. It is caused by excessive use of sulfur dioxide. However, newly bottled wines can sometimes have a

slight sulfur smell. If the odor does not “blow off” in a short period of time, it is considered negative. Other undesirable off-odors include but are not limited to: Acetic (vinegar), corn, hydrogen sulfide (rotten egg), mercaptan (skunky, garlic), moldy, mousy, oxidized, rubbery, and sauerkraut.

TASTE/TEXTURE sensations are recorded during and after a small portion of wine is sipped, “breathed over” and spit. (The term “breathed over” refers to the technique of drawing air through slightly opened lips as a small amount of wine rests on the tongue.) The use of descriptors is important to detail the features of the wine. The taste of wine also includes sweet, sour, bitter and salt, although saltiness is rarely noted (Exception: Saltiness can sometimes be detected in dry sherries, wines treated with high levels of calcium sulfate, and possibly, grapes grown near the sea).

The ability to detect levels of sweetness, sourness (acid taste of wine in the mouth), bitterness and saltiness in wine varies from person to person. The detection process becomes easier with practice and concentration.

Acidity, **Sweetness** (residual sugar), **Bitterness** (if any), **Astringency** (a puckery tactile sensation), **Body**, **Balance** and any **Tactile** experience are also described using the appropriate vocabulary provided in the **TASTE/TEXTURE** column of *Factors Considered in Wine Evaluation*.

Taste perceptions are influenced by:

♦ **Alcohol:**

- Alcohol enhances the perception of sweetness. (Example: Port, a fortified wine, tastes sweeter due to the high alcohol content.)
- High alcohol content can mask odors.
- Alcohol reinforces acidity.
- **Terms used:** warm, hot, irritating
- The burning sensation of high alcohol is considered a negative.

♦ **Astringency:**

- Tannins often leave a gritty feeling on the teeth and lips. As wine ages, tannins should decrease, leaving a smooth wine.
- High astringency masks bitterness.
- **Terms used:** Not astringent, smooth, soft, velvety, slightly rough or slightly astringent, moderately astringent, rough, harsh, very rough or coarse, and highly astringent.
- Astringency of red wines decreases during aging.

♦ **Bitterness:**

- Bitterness is often confused with astringency. Bitterness is a taste.
- **Terms used:** Not bitter, slightly bitter, moderately bitter, highly bitter.
- Some bitterness in red wine is desirable. Red wines are less bitter and

astrigent as the tannin content decreases with age.

- Wines with an excessive sulfite level with also have an objectionable bitter taste.
- White wines fermented on the skins can also have a bitter taste.

♦ **Body**

- Mouth feel. Body is influenced by the viscosity of a wine.
- **Terms used:** Thin body, watery, light body, medium body, full body.
- Viscosity is due primarily to alcohol, sugar level and extract concentration.
- Low alcohol wines are usually thin in body.
- High alcohol wines are usually full body.
- Residual sugar increases the perception of body.
- Body is increased with the addition of glycerol.

♦ **Sourness**

- Sourness is the tart taste of wine.
- **Terms used:** Flat (insufficient acid), Pleasant (balanced), Tart, Green (unripe, high acid)

♦ **Sweetness**

- Sweetness reduces the perception of sourness due to acidity.
- Sweetness masks acidity and saltiness.
- Sweetness rounds/blends flavor components.
- It reduces bitter, sour, astrigent and vinegary responses.
- **Terms used:** dry, medium-dry, medium, sweet, very sweet, high, and cloying sweetness.
- Sweet, balanced wines can impart an unctuous texture.

♦ **Tactile**

- Include astringency, pain, and temperature.
- Excessive astringency, excessive acidity, excessive sulfur dioxide, excessive alcohol in the absence of sugar can cause pain and are considered negatives.
- Cold temperatures reduce the volatility of some substances. (Example: Sulfur dioxide in a cold wine is difficult to detect.)

♦ **Tannin**

- The presence of tannin reduces the perception of sweetness.

Questions to ask after evaluating this section:

- ♦ Do the same flavors follow the aroma/bouquet odors?
- ♦ Are there additional flavors? If so, what are they?
- ♦ Is the wine balanced? Are the tastes present in proper proportion? This can be a tough question to answer since it is dependent upon your experience as a wine taster.

Hint: Try to evaluate and discuss wines in the company of experienced tasters, certified judges, and/or wine professionals to learn how they are getting the most of tasting wine.

AFTERTASTE (and aftersmell) flavors are recorded next. Note how long you can taste the wine. Does the flavor drop off within 10-15 seconds? Are the flavors still detectable after 30 seconds? It has a long finish if it remains up to 1 minute. A wine with little aftertaste has a short finish (a negative). A wine is memorable if the flavors linger for a longer time (a positive). **Astringency**, **Balance** and **Body** are also taken into consideration in this section in reference to the length of finish.

OVERALL is a summation of how typical the wine is in relation to other wines of its type and its quality. Experience is a valuable tool in this part of the evaluation. Don't fret; just practice, practice, practice. If you are unaware of the standards of **Typicality** (common descriptors for the varietal and style of wine), evaluate the wine on the basis of **Quality** (soundness). This is also the box you can tactfully express your "like it/don't like it" *subjective* point of view. Your subjective, hedonistic response can describe your level of pleasure.

Overall Quality questions:

- **How well do the parts** (aroma/bouquet, taste/texture, aftertaste and overall) **relate to each other?**
- Is there **Balance** (proper proportion)/**Harmony**?
- Did this wine have **Power to Stimulate the Senses**?

After you have written detailed descriptions, taste the wine again (and yes, spit again). Review your notes. Is the wine still evolving? Take more notes, if needed. Some wines will not have as many descriptors as others. Make note of the wine style—light, medium, big. Re-taste the wine again, if needed. Reassess your score. Is it consistent with your positive/negative comments? Refer to the Points Assessed During AWS Wine Evaluation. If the wine is not extraordinary and memorable, then do not award it 18-20 points. The detailed descriptions should support the score. Double-check your addition. Be especially sure your **TOTAL SCORE** equals the sum of the points in each box of the chart.

As you practice and develop more detailed descriptions in your tasting vocabulary, your skills will improve and you will gain confidence in your assessments so that you will become more self-assured when you next evaluate wine.

¹ Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation, Maynard A. Amerine, Edward B. Roessler, W. H. Freeman & Co., 1976, pp. 195, 196.

² Colored, laminated plastic copies of the Wine Aroma Wheel are available from A. C. Noble, Department of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616. Contact Dr. Noble for price.