



WINE TASTING FOR BEGINNERS

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a large, elegant glass filled with red wine. The glass is tilted slightly, and the wine is a deep red color. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a restaurant or bar setting with warm lighting.

Contents

PART I - getting ready	3
Level up	4
Tasting epiphany	5
Level 3 Professional wine tasting	5
Learning how to taste wine	6
Step 1: Understand the influences on tasting	7
Step 2: Get the right equipment	9
Step 3: Prepare the tasting	11
 PART 2 - sight and smell	 13
Step 4: Use your eyes in wine tasting	14
Step 5: Use your nose	18
Consider development during wine tasting	24
 PART 3 - taste, tannin and body	 25
Step 6: Taste the wine	26
 PART 4 - assessing quality	 31
Step 7: Assessing quality	32
Step 8: Ratings	34
Step 9: Identity	36
Step 10: Readiness for drinking	38
Final Step: Price	39

PART I

getting ready



Wine tasting is fun, enjoyable and interesting. But at first it isn't always easy. There's a lot of folderol and BS. In this series, we're trying to demystify wine tasting and help people get started.

After passing the **WSET Level 1** exam (seriously, everybody can pass that test after a day or two of study), I decided to continue with **WSET Level 2**. That was a little harder, as we went through the main grape varieties and key wine producing regions for the first time. But no problems with the theoretical knowledge – it's easy to master for anyone that is willing to dedicate some time and diligence to the studying process.

LEVEL UP

Level 2 introduced the concept of writing short professional tasting notes, using a simplified version of the **WSET systematic approach** to tasting. This was easy for people working in the wine industry and most of them jumping straight to **Level 3**. But me? Well, I struggled and struggled. I diligently bought the 20+ bottles WSET wanted us to taste. I read the label and Googled the wine to see what I should expect to identify. Lucky me, tasting was not examinable at Level 2, as I was not able to identify any secondary or tertiary aromas.



TASTING EPIPHANY

After the wine exam, Matthew and I went to the **Kensington Wine Rooms** in Notting Hill and took 4-5 samples of various wines (new world, old world, younger, older). The American Zinfandel did it for me and caused a revolution in my primate tasting brain: for the first time in my life I was able to clearly identify the aromas clusters: fruit and oak ageing.

TASTING TIP: I bought all the wines required on the Level 2 list from the supermarket. They were mostly acceptable or good with only a couple very good wines. That's fine for easy drinking but for tasting you need the aromas and flavours to be as precise and characteristic as possible. As a beginner, I believe you need to start with very good and outstanding wines. Plonk will teach you little!

LEVEL 3 PROFESSIONAL WINE TASTING

So, full of hope, I registered for WSET Level 3. I chose the online class because I have a full time job. (I need it to support my wine habit!) With this course tasting starts to be important. The recommended tasting wine list was longer and surprise, surprise: there was a blind tasting in the exam. Ouch!

Wine and Spirit Education Trust WSET organised a one-day tasting technique class at the beginning of the course, but I did not find it mind-blowingly useful. You have no theoretical knowledge from the course at that point and it's a struggle not only with calibration – is my 'full bodied' the same as yours or WSET's, for example. Worse you have almost no frame of reference or understanding of the concepts described. This is an important class so if you are taking it, I would recommend preparing for it very carefully.

(As an online student, I thought WSET should have included an additional full day of tasting class at the end of the course, so that you fine tune your technique. Or at least offer it as an option at additional cost.)



LEARNING HOW TO TASTE WINE

Learning wine tasting from scratch is not easy. After my one-day tasting class I realised how weak I was when it comes to my tasting technique. I bought a number of books to help, listened to podcasts, especially the [Guild of Sommeliers](#)' excellent series. And I even searched the internet looking for a manual on how to become a tasting guru in ten easy steps. You might say that one can't learn to dance by reading a book and it may be the same with wine tasting. But it's disappointing that there isn't a simple and practical book to get you started.

I've also learned that developing your own tasting techniques needs time, practice and cross checking with other people. I guess you need to be patient with yourself and try to attend as many tasting sessions as possible.

But in the meantime, if you don't have time nor patience, or too much money to spend on tasting classes, what do you do? Hands on, full of enthusiasm (and maybe a small fear of failure) I started my journey to become a blind tasting guru. During this process I felt like a spy, trying to gather as much intel to build my own map of professional tasting.

I might be wrong, I might be right, but here is my personal guide to becoming a tasting guru in 10 simple steps, based on what I learned over the last year and a half.

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCES ON TASTING

Your own body and the environment affect tasting. There are a few things you need to know before you even open the bottle:

- **How you feel:** be aware that if you have a cold, if you are tired, if you are having a bad day, if there is too much noise around you or somebody looks straight at you waiting for your feedback on the wine, your tasting performance may suffer. Unfortunately, we cannot press a button on our brain and switch on the “super taster” mode. If there is something you can fix, like going to a quieter place or asking for some space and privacy, or having a nap before tasting, don’t be shy.
- **Environment:** try to do the tasting in well-lit room, preferably with natural light, free of smells. Try not to wear perfume, aftershave, deodorant, hand cream.
- **Palate:** before you do the tasting, try not to have coffee, eat spicy food or food with garlic or onion. I always eat a small piece of bread before I do the tasting. You can also have bread in between the wines and rinse your mouth with water, to get rid of leftover flavours.
- **Time of the day:** the best timing to do tasting is lunchtime, before having your food. This is the moment when all our senses are very alert. Be aware that in the morning everything seems better than it is. As we had our tasting exam at 9:30 in the morning, we were advised to have a sip of wine before coming to the exam. They never suggested that at university!
- **Tasting order:** white wines should be tasted before red wines, lighter wines before heavier wines, save sweet wines for the end.
- **Get into the role:** One wine expert said that tasting requires two distinct personalities. First you need to be a detective to get as much data out of the wine as possible. Then you need to switch into the role of advocate, building a case out the information you collected to describe and identify the wine.

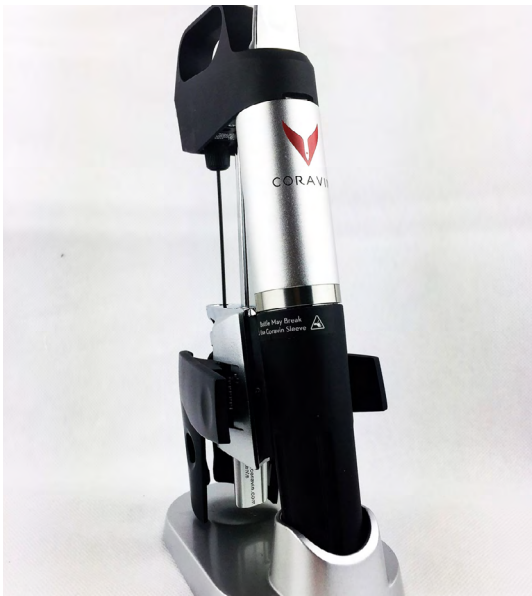
- **Nobody is wrong:** everybody smells and tastes things differently and uniquely, depending on our genetics and the environment we have been exposed to throughout our lives. **The Wine Show episode 7** makes this point very clearly. Joe Fattorini goes to China and finds that the people there have a very different tasting palette and vocabulary. However, WSET expects students to use a very specific vocabulary to describe wine to ensure clear communication and consistency, so learning what they mean when they say 'unripe green apples' or whatever is an important part of the tasting journey.
- **Reaching a conclusion about the quality of the wine:** in the WSET systematic approach, there are four main elements you need to pay specific attention in reaching the quality level and level of readiness to drink conclusion: Balance, Intensity, Finish and Complexity (I use BIFC as my mnemonic).
- **Bias:** we are all subject to bias when it comes to making a quality judgement about the wine we taste if we know where it is coming from and how much we paid for it. With blind tasting, you don't let the wine's label, price or provenance influence your judgement.



STEP 2: GET THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT



Tasting glassware. buy tulip-shaped ISO tasting glasses. You're likely to see them on tasting courses and in exams so it makes sense to standardise, although more and more professionals prefer **different** styles of glass.



Invest into a **Coravin**. It is pricey, but helps you save on buying your tasting bottles. When you taste 6 wines in a goal, **Coravin** solves the issue of opening too many bottles and having to drink them in a short period of time. With the Coravin, you can also come back a month later to the same wines you tasted before, compare notes or taste them against other type of wines.



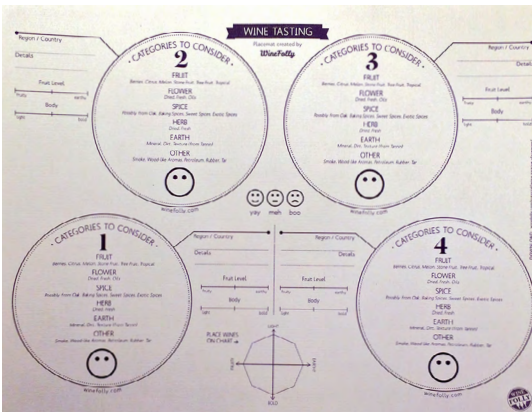
Aroma board. Build your aroma board with different aromas, or easier, invest into an aroma toolkit, like **Le Nez du Vin**. It is brilliant to build up memories of aromas. You can also involve the entire family or friend, buy having a contest who guesses most of the aromas.



Get a spittoon. This will help you get into the professional mindset when you taste the wine. Any recipient will do, but we liked this one, which is more easy to use. Perhaps with more practice, we'll learn to spit with the accuracy of a Marine Corps sniper but this design certainly spares a beginner's blushes.



Buy bottle sleeves. Hiding the label is easy this way and saves you having to decant the wine into a blank bottle (as they will do during tasting exams).



Get a white mat. This will help you assess the colour. A piece of paper will do, of course, but a mat is a more stable platform for glasses. You can use a mat with tasting reminders, like **Wine Folly's**.

Get a wine tasting booklet. I use an A5 size booklet, which helps me have one page for each wine I taste.

Build a tasting mnemonic. I made my own following the WSET systematic approach. This made me make sure I don't forget something when I write my

tasting note (exam or practice). If you must know it's: CICO CIAD SATABFFOF BIFC.

STEP 3: PREPARE THE TASTING

TASTING GLASSES

- Make sure your tasting glasses are clean, free of dishwasher soap or other cleaning products residue. Wipe them gently with a cotton cloth or a kitchen paper towel.
- Do not rinse the glasses with water prior to tasting, as water leftovers interact with the wine and dilute the aromas. To convince yourselves, do this experiment at home: pour the same wine in two glasses, one non-rinsed, one rinsed with water and smell the difference.
- It is ok to use the same glass if you are tasting the same grape variety.
- If you only have one glass for tasting and you change the grape variety, rinse the glass with the new wine, throw it away and then pour your tasting sample.

TASTING TEMPERATURE

I would recommend taking out the wines for tasting from their storage place and keeping them for two or three hours at room temperature.

Opinions vary about the tasting temperature, but for me it works best at room temperature, as between 18-20°C a wine will have the most volatile aromas for you to identify (yes, whites too). Too cold and you will struggle to smell. That's probably why cheap wine is best served cold – you won't miss the complexity if you can't smell it. Too warm and the aromas will become stewed and you will struggle to identify the complex ones.

In the end, remember: find your own preferred tasting temperature, but keep in mind if you are having a tasting exam that in the exam situation, the wines will always be at room temperature.

TASTING SAMPLE

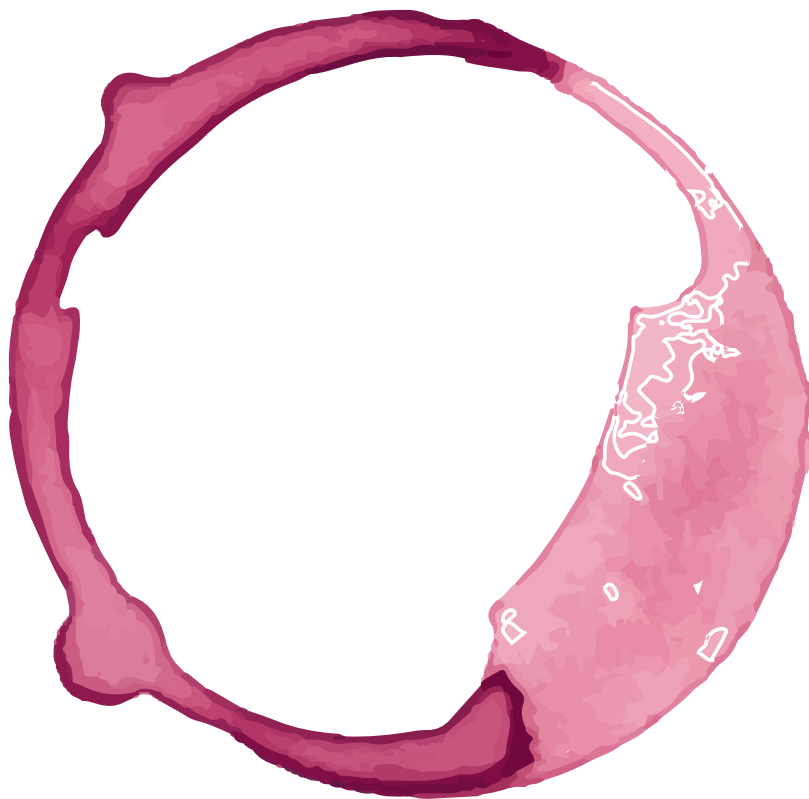
- A tasting sample should be around 50ml of wine. This means the equivalent of two fingers horizontally if you are using the ISO tasting glass.

- Pour your tasting sample at least 30-60 minutes before you start your tasting if you are using the Coravin or opening a new bottle of wine. For all professional tastings, wine are usually decanted or double decanted a couple of hours before. A complex wine changes with the air contact, so give it a little bit of time to breathe and show off its treasures.



PART 2

sight and smell



In part two of our guide to wine tasting, we explore sight and smell. The nose and appearance of wine can give clues for the patient wine detective and enhance the experience of wine tasting.

STEP 4: USE YOUR EYES IN WINE TASTING

Clarity: look if the wine is clear or hazy. Hazy is not a good sign, unless you are having one of those natural wines, unfiltered. The Wine Folly blog has a nice illustration that pictures [different wine colours](#) but we're using the [WSET Systematic Approach to Tasting](#) and it's vocabulary here.

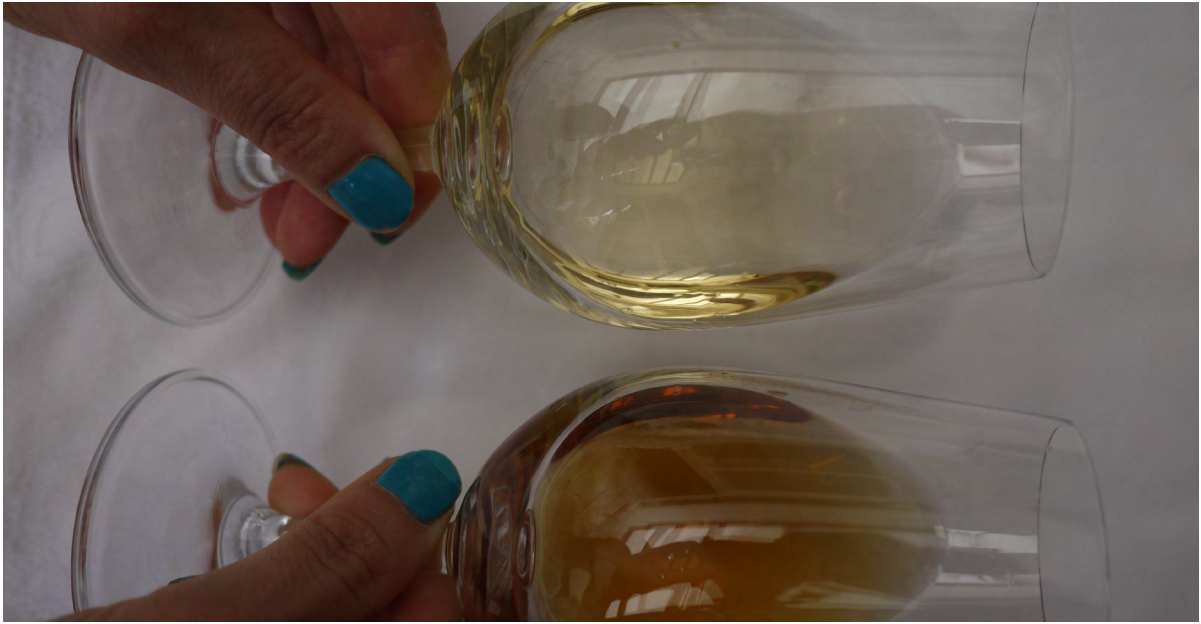
COLOUR INTENSITY: PALE – MEDIUM – DEEP

You can assess the colour intensity if you tilt your glass at 45° angle, so that the liquid comes closer to the rim of the glass and see where the colour fades. That's why it is important to pour the recommended sample quantity.



Holding wine at an angle to assess colour intensity: here showing medium (Valpolicella) and deep ruby (Napa Cabernet Sauvignon).

If the colour from the bottom of the glass starts fading before it reaches the core (middle of the glass), the wine has a pale intensity. If the colour pigment goes all the way to the rim of the glass the intensity is deep, everything in the middle is medium intensity.



Two white wines assessed for colour intensity. One medium – an Alsace Pinot Gris – and one deep – a beautiful Sauternes from Château de Fargues.

Keep in mind that the colour intensity in combination with the colour itself can start to give you some hints about the grape variety and age of the wine.

In red wines, the colour intensity can give you a hint about the type of grape used. For example, lighter colours indicate thinner grape skin varieties like Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Grenache while a deeper colour points to thicker grape skin types like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot or Shiraz. Put a glass of Pinot Noir and a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon next to each other and see the difference.



Light, medium and deep red and white wine.

COLOUR PALETTE

WSET uses the following colours, being very specific of when you can call them:

- *White wine*: lemon – gold (if there is a hint of orange or brown) – amber (noticeable level of browning) – brown
- *Rosé rose*: pink – salmon – orange
- *Red wine*: purple (noticeable blue or purple) – ruby – garnet (noticeable orange/ brown, but still more red than brown) – tawny – brown

What colour and its intensity can tell us about the wine?

- A lemon white and purple-red will be a young wine without much ageing in the winery or bottle.
- A gold white wine is usually a wine with some bottle ageing (more than five years).
- An amber/ brown white wine and a garnet/ brown red wine will be usually very old or wine that has been deliberately oxidised.
- White wines become darker with age, as the white grapes pigments become darker with ageing.
- Red wines become lighter in colour and can take on a brownish tint with age, as red grapes pigments break down and get lighter in colour.



LEGS OR TEARS

The lines on the side of the glass that the wine makes when you swirl it and let it settle are called legs (sometimes called tears of wine). Depending on their clinginess on the glass surface, the viscosity, thickness of the lines and their duration give hints about body or sugar content or alcohol level.

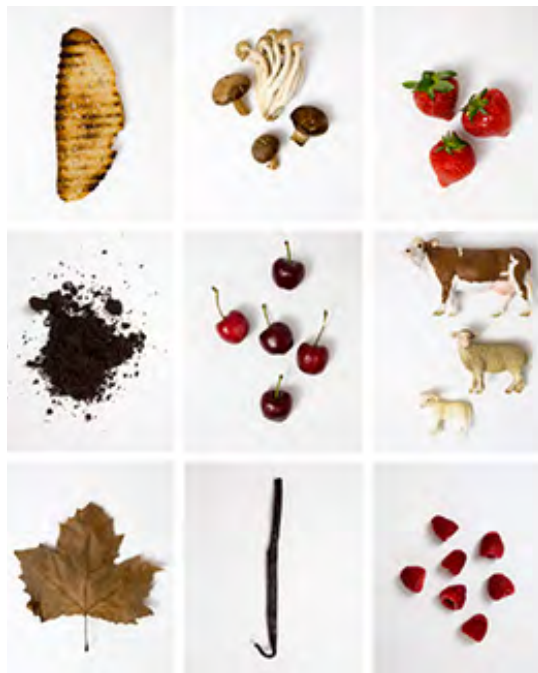
Here are some tips:

- If the wine moves around the glass quickly, most probably is a light body wine.
- If the wine moves around the glass slowly, almost oily, making big, slow-moving tears, most probably is a full-bodied wine and/or a wine with higher residual sugar and/or a wine with higher alcohol.

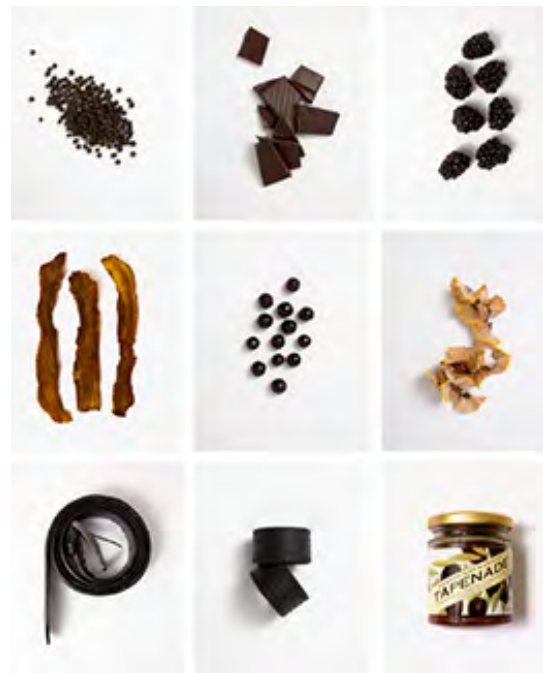


STEP 5: USE YOUR NOSE

Of all the senses we use to analyse wine, smell is the most important. The human body has more sensors to identify smell than taste buds in the mouth. As a rough proportion, 'your nose knows' and will give you 60-80 percent of the analysis of a wine, while the rest will come from sight and taste.



Pinot Noir aromas from Berry Bros (bbr.com)



Different aromas from Syrah/Shiraz wine like chocolate and liquorice. (Source: bbr.com)



BUILD YOUR SMELL MEMORY

Smell is deeply linked to one's memories, like Proust and his madeleines. We all smell things in life in general and in wine in particular, but the most difficult aspect is to recognise specifically what you are smelling. This comes with practice and training. The smell memory is there but, like learning the vocabulary of a different language, our brain needs help to link the words with the experience. That's why making your own aroma board or using **Le Nez du Vin** will help you build these associations. Also tasting in a group helps because you can share notes with other people as you taste.



Le Nez du Vin can help build strong smell memory associations

But try not to overthink when you are smelling. Let your instinct take control and tell you what you are getting. And it's good advice to taste in silence to let the wine talk before you start discussing it in earnest.

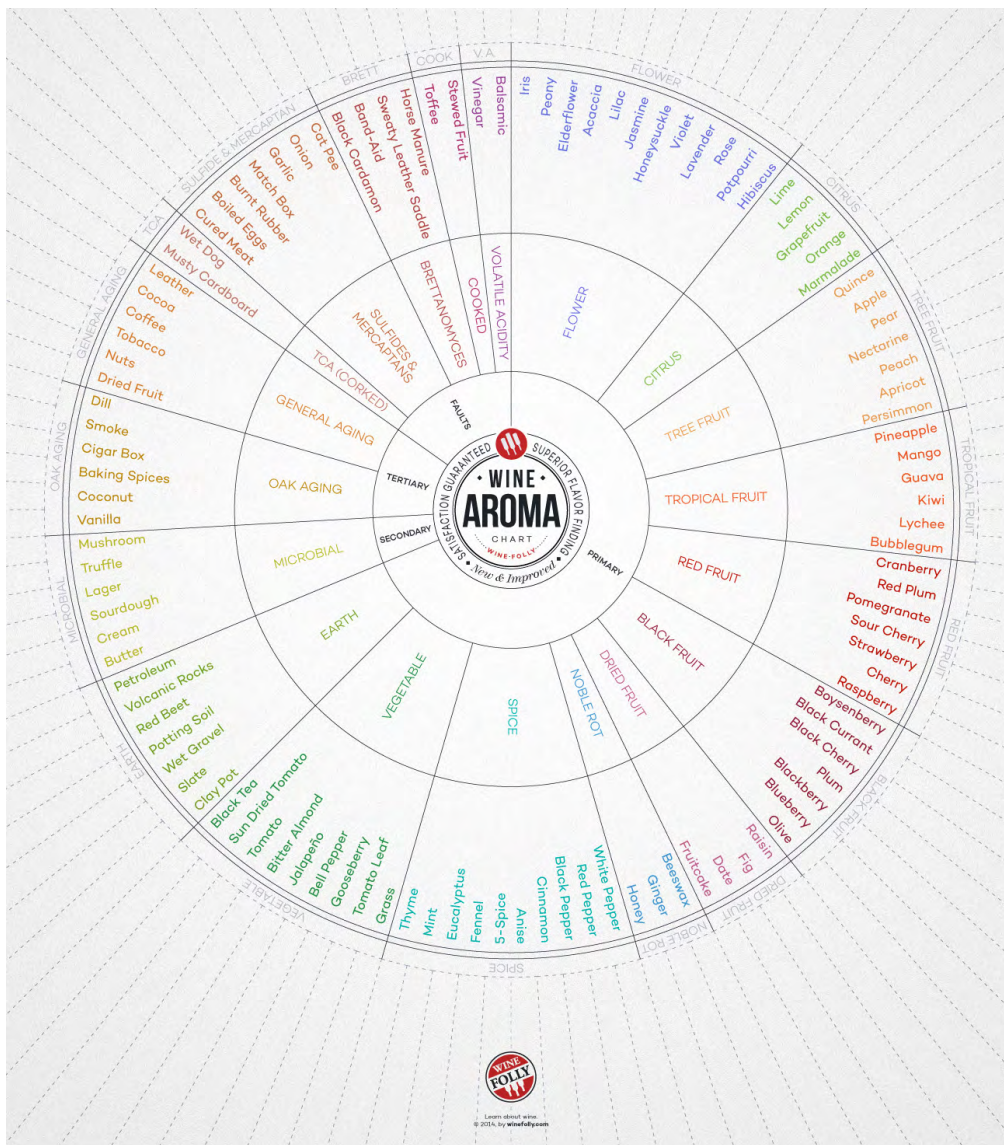
HOW TO SMELL WINE

- Swirl the glass. This will allow the volatile aromas to evaporate.
- Smell the lower end of the rim and then the upper part of the rim. I usually get fruit aromas on the lower end and smoke, mineral aromas and ageing aromas on the upper part.
- After several smelling attempts, sometimes your nose will refuse to tell you anything. Don't worry. Smell your arm above your hand (where you keep your watch) and resume smelling. This acts like a reboot for your sensors.

- If you're still not getting anything specific, the wine may be too cold, your nose may be faulty (you have a cold, perhaps?) or the wine is just too nondescript and simple to give you more than the most basic aromas. But I promise good wine will soon stop 'smelling like wine' and start revealing its secrets with practice.

USE CLUSTERS AND CATEGORIES

Write down what you are smelling and then group them into aroma clusters and categories. Document which one is predominant. Usually a more complex wine will be more difficult to smell, as your brain will be confused with so many aromas. But take it easy and one at a time.



Original Source: Wine Aroma Wheel by Wine Folly

You will hear a lot about aroma clusters. What are they in simple terms?

Aroma category	Cluster descriptors	Typical examples	What do they indicate?
Primary aromas	Fruits, flowers, herbs, herbaceous, pungent spice, minerals	Lemon and apples in Chardonnay or black pepper and pencil shavings in a Syrah / Shiraz	Grape variety and terroir
Secondary aromas	Autolytic, MLF (malolactic fermentation), oak (new, old, French, American, small casks, big casks)	Biscuit and brioche aromas in Champagne or vanilla aromas in some new world Chardonnays	Wine-making processes
Tertiary aromas	Deliberate oxidation, fruit development, bottle age	The nutty flavour of old sherries or the complex forest floor and mushroom aromas of a classic pinot noir	Maturation and ageing

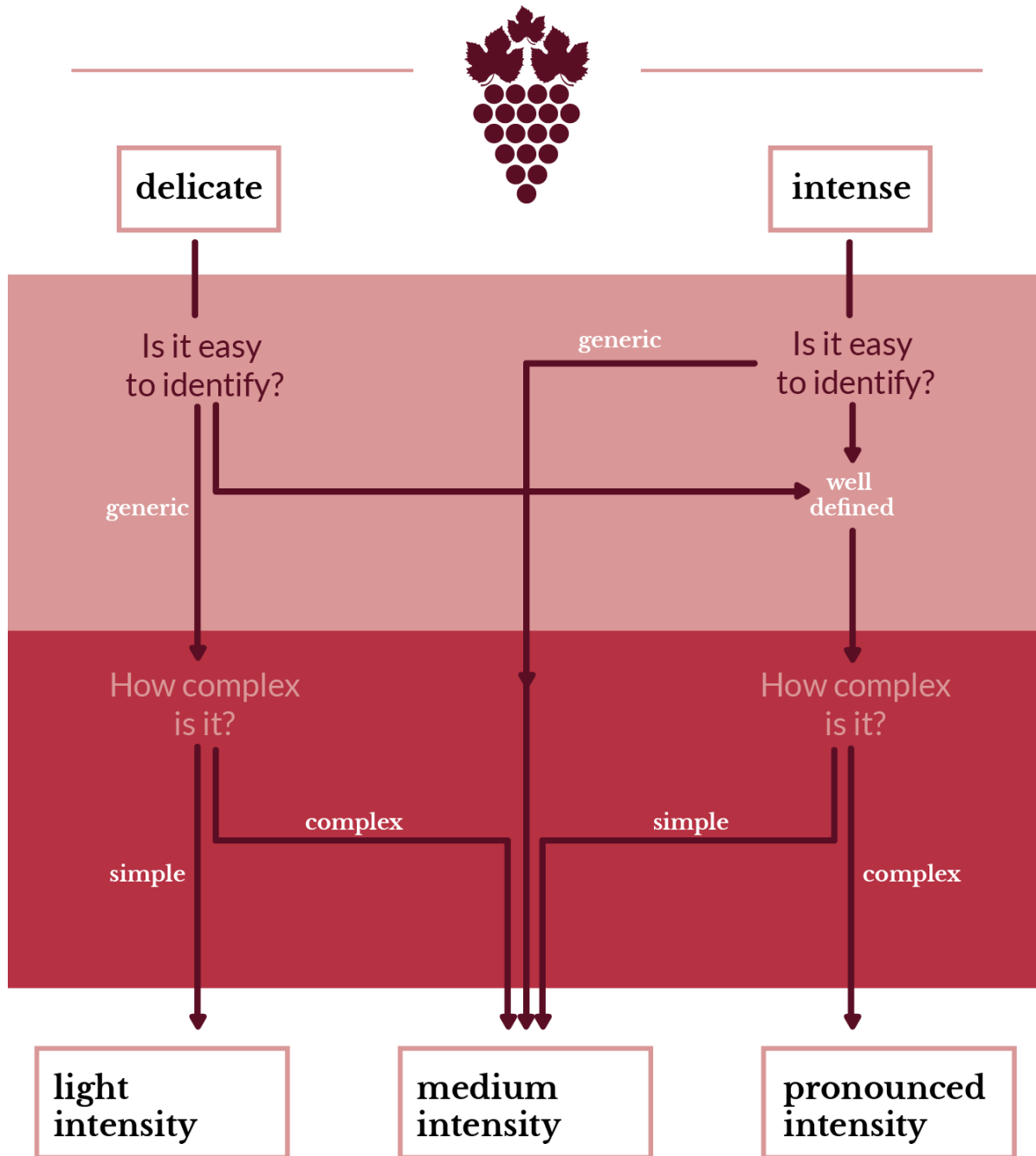
If you want to dive into more details, you can check the [WSET Level 3 Wine Lexicon](#).

ASSESS INTENSITY

Besides identifying specific aromas and grouping them in their respective clusters, you can start forming an opinion about two elements you need in reaching the quality assessment: aroma intensity and complexity. Intensity, on a scale of light-medium-pronounced, is an interesting clue to the style of wine.

Being very visual and structured, I made this diagram in my effort to crack the concepts of intensity, based on the fragments of information given during the one-day WSET tasting class. In normal terms it should not be such a hard topic. But when you are in an exam it is not so straightforward.

AROMA INTENSITY IN WINE



DELICATE VS. INTENSE

Delicate: the aromas are subtle. This feels like the scent a woman wearing a good quality perfume leaves behind her.

Intense: the aromas will hit your nose straight away. Feels a bit like a man that put on too much aftershave. Usually very aromatic wines like Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Muscat or heavily-oaked wines will be intense.

SIMPLE VS. COMPLEX

Simple: there is not much going on. You will have only primary aromas coming from the fruit in most cases and not too many of them.

Complex: you will start smelling two or three distinct clusters of primary, secondary and tertiary aromas. They can be entirely primary (like floral, citrus fruit, tropical fruit, herbal) or can be secondary or tertiary as well. In simple terms, there is a lot going on in that glass.

GENERIC VS. WELL DEFINED

Generic: you will struggle to pin-point specific aromas and everything will be muddled. For example, you will smell red fruit, but you would struggle to say if it is cherry, strawberry or raspberry.

Well-defined: you will be capable of identifying easily specific aromas without having to think too much. you will be capable of saying without difficulty that the wine smells of roses, tar, truffles and tobacco, for example, in an aged Barolo.

RIPE VS UNRIPE

You can also assess how the fruit feels. Usually, an unripe fruit (herbaceous: green bell pepper, grass, leafiness, asparagus) will indicate a cooler climate, while a ripe fruit (dried fruits, jammy, preserved fruits) will come from a warm climate. You don't want the extremes as this will make the wine unbalanced.



CONSIDER DEVELOPMENT DURING WINE TASTING

Is the wine youthful, developing, fully developed or tired and past its best?

Assessing the development of the wine on the nose can give you indications about level of readiness for drinking. This is useful information to have on hand if you are laying down wine in a cellar.

- Youthful: if you only get primary aromas (fruit) or primary and secondary aromas (wine making), the wine can be called youthful. This is not a bad thing, as some wines are meant to be drunk young. Think Beaujolais Nouveau or a bright Sauvignon Blanc. This is for wines which are younger than three years.
- Developing: the wine starts getting tertiary aromas (ageing), which means it is on its way to become developed. In a developing wine you will get all three aroma clusters (primary, secondary and tertiary) with the first two being still predominant. This means that that wine can be subject to further ageing, as you think it will develop nicely and will become more complex with time.
- Fully developed: you will be able to call a wine fully developed if the main aroma cluster is the tertiary one, even if you are still smelling primary and secondary aromas. A fully-developed wine is ready to drink, like a full ripe fruit. While it may stay that way for a while it is unlikely to improve with further ageing.
- Tired/ Past its best: some wines can age for a long time or remain stable for a long time but it is always evolving in the bottle. Sometimes, it can deteriorate as pleasant fruit turns to jamminess, for example. This is different from wines that are faulty in some way. It's just that they have evolved past their best.

PART 3

taste, tannin and body



In this article – part three of our series on wine tasting for beginners – we explore taste, tanning, alcohol, body, acidity and the experience of actually drinking the wine. Yay tasting!

STEP 6: TASTE THE WINE

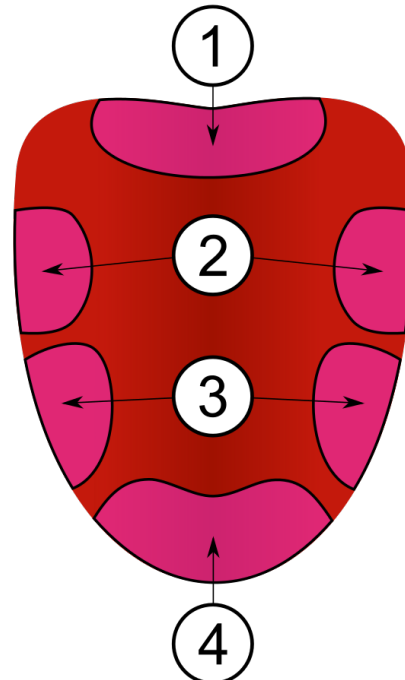
Once we've looked at the wine and smelled it, we just need to tie up the loose ends. Palate assessment – actually tasting the wine – is the most pleasant of all the wine assessment stages, as you actually get to have the real feel of the liquid you are tasting. You're actually drinking the wine!

Use your tongue

Our tongue and taste buds can taste: bitterness, sourness, saltiness and sweetness. You can detect Tannins on the tongue and gums.

Here are some tips:

- Take small sips: the first sip is for your mouth to get used to the wine. You might acknowledge some of the wine characteristics, but I would just use it as a mouth wash, as you do with rinsing the glass before the next tasting
- Suck some air in over the wine in your mouth. Chew a bit the wine as well and let it wash over your whole mouth to bring all your sensors into play.
- Try to focus on few items from your assessment at a time: leave flavour characteristics to the end.
- Spit the wine. This is embarrassing at first but essential if you want to stop your blind tasting turning into a blind drunk tasting. Professional tasters might sample dozens of wines a day and they wouldn't get past the first few if they swallowed all of it.
- On the palate, the key elements are:



Map of the taste buds: The myth of the tongue map; that 1 tastes bitter, 2 tastes sour, 3 tastes salt, and 4 tastes sweet. Source: By MesserWoland

balance, flavour intensity and finish.

The balance concept means that acidity, alcohol and tannin can all sit at the same table equally. None of them is jumping out.

SWEETNESS

This measures the level of residual sugar in the wine. Most wines will be dry (consumer preference today), which means that the residual sugar will be less than 4g/L.

The table below describes the sweetness categories based on WSET systematic approach:

Sweetness	Residual sugar
Dry	Less than 4g/L
Off dry	5-9g/L
Medium – dry to medium- sweet	10-45g/L
Sweet	Above 45g/L
Luscious	The very sweetest wines

To adapt your palate to these levels of sweetness I would suggest that you make sugar solutions, using the proportions in the table and taste them yourself. You can also add a couple of drops of lemon juice, as most wines will have various levels of acidity. Most white and nearly all red wine is dry so if you get a sweetness that can tell you a lot about the identity of the wine.

ACIDITY

This is the sensation of sourness and freshness in a wine. This is a good thing, as it preserves the wine and it gives its backbone. It also makes it refreshing to drink.

I find very difficult to judge wine acidity if the fruits in the wine are very ripe, especially in a red wine. One trick I learned to do from school: you swirl the wine in your mouth and then you spit and tip your head forward. If a waterfall of saliva comes down in your mouth, the wine has a high acidity. Other people can detect acidity as a tingling on their gums.

I tried using the Litmus paper, dipping it in every tasted wine, but wine is an acidic drink, no matter if we call it a low acidity or a high acidity. Unfortunately, that was a dead end.

It will take some time until you calibrate the acidity perception. As a rule of thumb, a saliva waterfall, means always high acidity. Somewhere in the middle is medium. Almost nothing, low acidity.

TANNIN

Tannin is extracted from red grape skins, grape stems, seeds and oak. It is the mouth drying and astringent sensation that you feel on your gums. If you drink black coffee or black tea, you will easily identify the sensation. Tannin is an important component in red wine (and a few whites). If it comes from the grape itself, this helps a wine have a longer ageing potential. As a rule, the thicker the grape skin, the higher the tannin. The good news is that tannin becomes milder and more integrated with the wine as it ages.

Of course, there are different levels of tannins in the wine. This was easy for me in determining which one is low, medium or high. You just need to taste a Pinot Noir (low tannin), a Malbec or Merlot (medium tannin) and a Cabernet Sauvignon or Nebbiolo (high tannin) in the same tasting and you will figure out easily which one is which.





ALCOHOL

This is another tricky one, as it is quite difficult to teach your palate to identify different levels. We are lucky that the alcohol content is written on the label, so this is also the easiest variable to calibrate. For me, the moment of truth came when I realised that wines above 13% abv start slightly burning my gums. Other people feel a sensation of warmth at the back of their mouth.

Most wine these days is medium alcohol with 13% – 14% abv and the historical trend is to higher levels of alcohol. Everything below 11% abv would be low alcohol, while everything above 14% abv will be high. Above 14.5% abv, I feel a warmth in my mouth, but you can be tricked if the grapes are very ripe. Usually, the higher the sugar content in the grapes, the higher the alcohol. This is why wine from sunnier, New World regions are often higher in alcohol because fruit there ripens more, generating more sugar to turn into alcohol.

BODY

I touched a bit on the body when we were talking about tears, legs and viscosity. Body is defined as the mouthful sensation and can be light – medium – full. A light body wine will feel very watery in your mouth (as if you are having water with different flavours). A full body will feel like a juice with pulp, with a lot of things going on and a bite to it. You can almost chew it. A medium body will be like a normal juice, somewhere in the middle. A lot of wine text books use the comparison with skimmed milk, semi-skimmed and full milk. But that comparison doesn't work for me.

Try and have it with orange juice with a dash of vodka or vermouth in it (I reckon 25ml of a 40% abv alcohol and 50 ml of non-alcoholic liquid to give you a rough 15% abv drink). Have three own cocktail made glasses: one with orange flavoured water for light body, one with normal orange juice and one with a freshly squeezed orange juice (don't cheat, same quantity of alcohol in each glass!).

You also need to be aware that a high acidity makes wine feel lighter in body, while sugar, higher levels of tannin, alcohol might affect the sensation of body.

FLAVOUR INTENSITY AND CHARACTERISTICS

Flavour intensity and characteristics identification is a similar process with the aromas detection on the nose. Usually, our palate should be able to confirm to us what we smelled on the nose. The reason for this is that when the wine gets warmed up in the mouth, the volatile aromas rise up to the back of your nose (retro-nasal passage) and you actually smell rather than taste. Keep in mind that if you get something completely different on the palate you should go back to the smelling exercise.

A couple of considerations:

- Warming up the wine on the palate might bring to your attention aromas that you did not identify on the nose. This is normal, as on the palate, the wine releases more volatile aromas.
- Fruit and flowers flavours can be less strong on the palate than on the nose
- Savoury, mineral, earthy, spicy aromas are stronger on the palate than on the nose

Now take a look back at the tongue map and pay more attention where you taste different flavours.

FINISH

Finish is the aftertaste that stays in your mouth after you spat or swallowed the wine. You should note down your impressions on the finish and the length. Was it a pleasant? Was there something that you didn't like about it?

In the wine assessment, finish can be short, medium or long. A short finish lasts for only a couple of seconds. This is usually found in generic, inexpensive wines. A medium finish lasts up to one minute, while a long finish can last a minute and more, triggering layers of pleasant taste in your mouth, after you spat or swallowed. A long finish is the attribute of a fine wine.

I tend to chew a bit and make a mental record of what flavours I get and for how long they last before I make my assessment.

PART 4

assessing quality



STEP 7: ASSESSING QUALITY

After going through all this complicated process, we reached the most important one: the quality assessment of the wine we are tasting. There are debates in terms of the criteria used to assess the quality of the wine. Some prefer to do the assessment with the price in mind and you will often meet this phrases: 'good value for money' or 'very good for the price'.

USING THE WSET SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

Personally, I like the WSET approach when they recommend rating based purely on quality, with the price not being part of the equation. Frankly, when you do blind tasting, you don't know the price or the make of the wine. There are **plenty** of **studies** that **show** that people's expectations affect their evaluations so evaluating the wine blindly is likely to produce more honest assessments.

Usually there is a price quality link, but don't get fooled by this. There are a lot of famous but massively overpriced wines out there. They might be expensive because they come from famous regions, famous producers and people want to collect them or just speculate based on limited quantities. The flip side is that you can also find relatively cheap wines with outstanding quality. You just need to know how to spot the good stuff.

COLLECTABLE VS DRINKABLE

During my last trip to Italy I came across this concept in the fine wine category: there are wines for wine collectors and wines for wine drinkers and aficionados. Belonging to the second category, I have no interest in collecting wine to keep in a museum or for speculative future profit. I like to enjoy my wine and I want to die happy with an empty cellar.



Case of Domaine de la Romanée Conti wine
– very expensive, very collectible

When assessing the quality of the wine, four aspects you can take four factors into consideration: balance, intensity, finish and complexity.

BALANCE, INTENSITY, FINISH, COMPLEXITY

Balance. A wine is balanced if all the elements of the wine support each other – all the legs of the table are the same length. Sweetness, acidity, tannin, fruitiness, aromatic components, alcohol should be well integrated. I think it would be easier if I give below some examples of unbalanced wine:

- Wine is sweet without being acidic – it will taste cloyed.
- Wine is too acidic – it will taste tart, aggressive, sour.
- Not enough fruit – wine will seem thin, austere.
- Harsh tannin, woody tannin – wine might be too young or the wine maker tried to compensate the lack of fruit tannin with wood tannin – an unpleasant astringent sensation, tastes like chewing a wood spoon.
- Too little acid or tannin – wine will seem unstructured and clumsy.

Intensity of the aroma and flavours or concentration.

Finish, including how pleasant and lasting is the wine flavour aftertaste.

Complexity – look from different angles:

- Fruit itself, if the grapes are very concentrated, coming from old vines or express a particular terroir.
- Combination of secondary and /or tertiary aromas.
- Expression of a specific place, wine region making style.






STEP 8: RATINGS





































I have listed the ratings recommended by WSET in the chart below. We can easily understand them and are objective. To reach the conclusion, we take into account the four criteria listed in Step 7: balance, aroma intensity, finish, complexity to which we add a fifth one: character. The character means that the wine is a true representation of its grape varieties or regional style.

I am leaving out the “Faulty” rating, as this implied that the wine has flaws that make it undrinkable.



WINE RATING					
	 Balance	 Aroma intensity	 Finish	 Complexity	 Character
Outstanding ★★★★★	elegant, balanced	pronounced aroma/flavour intensity	long, pleasant finish	complex	has character and precisely represents a grape variety, style, region location
Very good ★★★★	elegant, balanced	medium or pronounced aroma/flavour intensity	medium or long finish	complex	clear expression of the grape variety and precise regional character
Good ★★★	balanced	medium aroma and flavour intensity	medium finish	simple or little complexity	shows some characteristics of the grape variety or region (eg: cool or warm climate)
Acceptable ★★	a little out of balance	light/ medium aroma/flavour intensity	short/medium finish	simple	the wine is generic and fails to express a grape variety or region, but it is drinkable
Poor ★	out of balance, minor faults or any dominant flavour of components make it unpleasant				



Outstanding ★★★★★	   	wine is free of criticism, almost flawless, so four combined positives out four
Very good ★★★★	           	wine has at least three combined positives out of four
Good ★★★	           	wine has at least two combined positives out of four
Acceptable ★★	   	wine has at least one positive out of four
Poor ★	   	no positive out of four



The WSET textbook doesn't explain this concept of 'a positive', so I tried to formulate my own interpretation. In my view, a positive means the ultimate expression of one criteria, such as complete balance, pronounced intensity, long finish and complexity. A combined positive means that you have two medium conclusions, such as medium finish and medium intensity which you can consider a positive together.

STEP 9: IDENTITY

If you know what you are assessing, you can skip the joys of trying to identify the wine. The film *Somm* shows aspiring Master Sommeliers trying to develop this skill. It looks like voodoo Deryn Brown stuff when they do it but actually you need a combination of heuristics, knowledge and good a good tasting memory.

You need to know:

- The main grape varieties
- How they vary in different climates
- Different wine making styles
- The styles of the famous wine-making regions

But here's the thing: even if it takes time to become an expert, just starting down this road and testing your skills in blind tasting can dramatically enhance your enjoyment of wine. And can help you understand why you like some wines more than others.

Remember, even the most experienced tasters don't get it right all the time. Indeed, for WSET Level 3, identifying the wine in a blind tasting is only worth a few points. You can easily pass the exam if you identify all the other elements.

I am still a beginner in this art of blind tasting identification and at my level of knowledge I need to identify the grape and maybe guess the region.

However, you can ask yourself the following questions:

WHAT IS THE GRAPE VARIETY?

White: is the wine aromatic (Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Muscat) or more neutral (Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Garganega)

Red: is the wine lighter in colour – thin skins (Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Grenache) or darker – thick skins (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Shiraz, Carmenere), does it have low tannin (Pinot Noir) or high tannins (Cabernet Sauvignon, Nebbiolo)?

WHAT WAS THE CLIMATE?

Do you find the wine more fruity, with more alcohol and body, less acidity, riper tannin (warm climate) or with fresher fruit, higher acidity, lighter body, more astringent tanning (cool climate)?

IS IT OLD WORLD OR NEW WORLD?

Do you find the wine more savoury, with higher acidity and tannin (Old World) or it tastes fruitier, with fruit more clearly defined (New World). How wine aromas appear to you: more subtle and complex (Old World – France) or well defined (New World)?



STEP 10: READINESS FOR DRINKING

There are four main categories we can consider when we talk about readiness for drinking and the potential for ageing. For the wines that have potential for ageing, they depend on the grape varietal and the quality of the vintage.

- Too young
- Can drink now, but has potential for ageing
- Drink now, not suitable for further ageing
- Too old

When we talked about the nose, we have made a first assessment of the development of the wine.

The wine development assessment will lead you to the readiness for drinking conclusion, per below:

- Youthful
- Fully Developed
- Tired/ past its best

Conclusion	Too young	Can drink now, but has potential for ageing	Drink now, not suitable for further ageing	Too old
Development	Youthful	Developing	Youthful Fully Developed	Tired/ past its best
Other notes	You think that the wine will be much better in a few years' time and it is a waste to drink now	You think that with time the wine will develop more	Wine either best drunk young or wine that has already aged and further ageing will not improve it	

FINAL STEP: PRICE

Unfortunately there is no magic formula when it comes to the price of the bottle of wine. There are different factors that affect the price of the wine. Also, in some cases, the price is not a true representation of the wine quality.

Price/ bottle = grape cost + wine making cost + ageing cost + producer margin + transportation cost + seller margin + duty + VAT

For WSET, inexpensive wine is everything below £6 per bottle. Premium wine is more expensive than £20 per bottle, with the mid-priced and high-priced in the middle.

Remember that when you buy a bottle of cheap wine in the UK, the Treasury is taking the lion's share of your money in **tax**. Excise duty is £2.08 per 75cl bottle of still wine and £2.67 per 75cl bottle of sparkling wine. And then there is 20% VAT on top of that.

