



WHAT CONSTITUTES A HIGH QUALITY WINE?

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Learning Outcomes: *The goal of most winemakers is to produce wines of distinction. This chapter discusses many factors that are used to help define greatness.*

Chapter Outline

Characteristics of a Great Wine

Thoughts on Industry Development

Characteristics of a Great Wine

If fruit such as strawberries or apples are made into wines, the public expects them to have the flavor of fresh fruit. Fortunately, no such expectations apply to grape wines, partly because few consumers have any preconceived notions regarding wine grape flavors.

This allows for a broad degree of stylistic freedom. What the public does expect, however, is a well-balanced wine, one that possesses a whole symphony of integrated flavors and aromas. To produce such a wine requires an understanding of the grape and how each processing variable influences the balance of fruit, wood, bacterial and yeast aroma, and flavor notes.

What is a great wine? This is a question that has been posed for centuries, as well as at our Winemakers' Sensory Sessions. As the Virginia industry moves from an emerging to an established wine region, this becomes a very important topic.

Is it enough to simply provide naïve pleasure, or must a wine make an eloquent statement? Wine is art and, as Jean Anouilh stated, the object of art is to give life a shape. To many in the wine world, real wines convey a sense of place, a genuine originality.

The relativity of experience certainly impacts one's evaluation. Greatness in wine is much like a profound expression of art or music: it depends upon personal experience and is very subjective. Even though there is no singularity of definition, with but few exceptions, greatness in art, music, or wine, though difficult to define precisely, enjoys a broad consensus.

Any sensory evaluation is, naturally, subjective. Like many of the finest things in life, however, there is NO agreement as to what represents high quality. As Robert Parker states, "No one should feel forced to feign fondness for a work of Picasso or Beethoven, much less a bottle of 1961 Latour."

Exceptional wines emerge, or appear to emerge, from a philosophy which includes the following:

- Proper varieties planted in the correct climate.
- Allowing the expression of the vineyard's *terroir*.
- Allowing the purity and characteristics of the grape variety or blend to be faithfully represented.
- Minimalistic or non-interventionist winemaking.

One feature commonly associated with the finest wines relates to authenticity. Most consider that the world's finest wines emanate from fruit grown in well-placed vineyards with microclimates favorable to the specific varieties. There is no such thing as the best grape or best clone. A good variety is one well-suited to its growing environment, and a blend of clones will always be superior to one so-called super clone.

Most US consumer's palates are not tuned to *terroir*. We want jammy fruit, lasting fruit, and lots of intensity. Such wines may fool our senses in the same way that our primary physiology responds to the fat in a McDonald's hamburger. Many of these are "feel good" products, the vinous equivalent of comfort food, as Randall Grahm suggests.

Is this bad? No, of course not, as long as these wines are well made. They can, however, obscure our link to the vineyard, certainly if a host of addition products are employed. Such obscurity will limit the pace of development of the Virginia industry. Such wines appeal to a certain attitudinally-challenged denominator. Some of these wines may be a key link to our biological predisposition to favor fruit over complexity.

Some in the wine industry continue to equate quality with quantity. This is true, regardless of whether we are talking about degree of ripeness, oakiness, or tannins. Are we making wines that are easy to like, but sometimes difficult to love? We need to concentrate on means of adding some texture without deforming the ethereal essential character of a wine.

We should not have the illusion that we can control everything. Minimalistic winemaking philosophy, when possible, allows for an intrinsic character, so that what is placed in the bottle represents as natural an expression of the vineyard, variety, and vintage as is possible. This requires restraint in the use of addition

adjuvants, cold treatments, and filtrations.

The following are a few characteristics of a great wine adapted, in part, from one of the world's leading wine critics, Robert Parker (*Parker's Wine Buying Guide No. 7*, Simon and Schuster, 2008). With which of these do you agree? What would you add or delete?

The Ability to Please Both the Palate and the Intellect

Great wines offer satisfaction on a hedonistic level, and also challenge and satiate the intellect. The world offers many delicious wines that appeal to the senses, but lack profundity. The ability to satisfy the intellect is subjective, but experts often prefer wines with multiple dimensions, both aromatic and flavor.

The Ability to Hold the Taster's Interest

Profound wines could never be called monochromatic or simple. They hold interest, not only providing an initial tantalizing tease, but possessing a magnetic attraction due to their aromatic intensity and nuance-filled layers of flavors.

The Ability to Offer Intense Aromas and Flavors without Heaviness

In some parts of the New World it has been easy to produce wines that are oversized, bold, big, rich, but heavy. It has been said that Europe's finest wines have intense flavors without heaviness. The ability to provide intensity without heaviness is a possible strength that Virginia needs to build upon.

The Ability to Taste Better with Each Sip

Most of the finest wines are better with the last sip than the first, revealing more nuances and more complex aromas and flavors as the wine unfolds.

The Ability to Improve with Age

In the past, longevity was certainly not a feature of importance to most Virginia winemakers. However, as discussed at the 2011 Wineries Unlimited meeting, for better or worse, many consider this is an indisputable characteristic of great wines.

Some of our wineries produce wines they suggest will age. What they really mean is that their wines will survive. They can endure in the bottle, but they are much more enjoyable in their exuberant youthfulness.

If you open a bottle and drink a glass and replace the closure, a wine with longevity should stay fresh for the better part of a week. Most New World wines, including those produced in Virginia, are generally dead the next day, while many of the finer Old World wines are not. Why?

To varying degrees, wines consume oxygen. We can speak of a wine's current reductive rate and its total reactive potential over its lifetime.

Likely, longevity has to do with oxidative strength or oxidative buffering capacity (resisting oxidation) over the life of the wine. Oxidative strength is linked to the phenol content, lees involvement, and possibly this nebulous concept of minerality.

Minerality, or capacitance, of a wine, its persistence, is thought to give the

primary flavor a sense of soulful depth or relief, providing a shadow or added dimensionality. This could relate to a number of viticultural parameters and practices, including soil and the biological nature of the soil.

Some believe that this resistance to oxidative change, which does relate to a wine's minerality, is a sort of Rorschach test. Perhaps the higher the minerality is, the greater the buffering capacity, and the greater the aging potential.

We are beginning a study of selected Virginia wines to help gain some understanding of the relationships between oxidative strength and longevity.

Whatever definitions of wine quality we adopt for Virginia, we need to continue to evaluate our products in the context of the international marketplace, and assure ourselves that we are moving forward, not laterally, from one season to the next.

Art is not the cultivated taste. It is the cultivation of taste. – Nikki Giovanni

Thoughts on Industry Development

How can we maximize the potential for the industry? The following is my pensée, that is, a few platonic thoughts regarding wine industry development.

The Presence of Desirable Fruit Numbers is not an Assurance that the Wine will be Any Good

Most realize this on an intellectual basis, but in practice we remain heavily dependent on numerical gauges. As an industry, many remain formulaic in their approach. Growers and wine producers alike must increase their understanding of what numbers mean and do not mean. Ultimately, people drink wine and not

numbers. Brix, for example, will only tell one of the potential alcohol, not whether your grapes are ripe or possess desirable aroma or flavor.

The Absence of Defect does not Necessarily Equate to the Presence of Wine Quality

In order for Virginia to realize its full potential, our wines must convey a sense of place and originality. We must continue to create complexity and flavor interest in our products. Additionally, we must increase our understanding of the relative value of our wines, compared to others in the marketplace.

Wine May not be Infinitely Malleable

Winemakers can only add so much acid, so much sugar, so much ultra-this and mega-that, before the sum of the wine's parts no longer create a greater whole. Large changes in a wine's chemistry milieu may lead to lasting scars. They may obscure our understanding of terroir-based features and the uniqueness of our region.

Don't Follow the Leaders – Don't Go with the Pack

The pack has no idea where it is heading. Each producer must develop his/her own palate and style true to vineyard source. Remember the famous line of Wayne Gretzky, the hockey player, when asked to comment on the reasons for his success: "I skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been."

Understand the importance of Relativism

Study Questions

1. What are the possible reasons why there would be differences between so-called wine expert's opinions of a wine vs. consumers preferences?

2. Daoism shares some thoughts which are worthy of reflection. " All the world knows beauty but when that becomes beautiful this becomes ugly." While we are assuming to be identifying an intrinsic property that something has goodness or badness, Daoism emphasizes that all we are doing is comparing, and that that comparison is always relative to our own taste. We project our own taste into comparisons of intrinsic attributions of value that are simply our relative preferences. Given the subjectivity of wine evaluation, while do we constantly compare one wine with another? What values to such comparisons have? If they do have value can they be established to have consistency?