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Wine Selection

As more affordable wines come on the market and wine education becomes more prevalent, increasing numbers of people are adding oenophilia to their list of hobbies. Still, many meeting planners are intimidated by the prospect of selecting wine for attendees. The terminology can be daunting and the choices overwhelming.

To gain confidence in wine selection, start with the basics: Build your knowledge by learning some of the language used to describe wine as well as the fundamentals of matching wines to specific meals. Spend time tasting several different varietals. Seek the advice of the hotel's chef, catering manager, food and beverage director or sommelier. And arrange a tasting for you to sample the wine with the menu you've chosen.

Describing Wine

In order to better understand how to describe wine, think of how you would describe a specific food. You would always include these three aspects: taste, color and texture. In wine, as in food, you would use three aspects as well: body, sweetness range (sweet to dry) and flavor intensity.

Body

The term body refers to how the wine “fills” the mouth. When describing a wine's feeling in the mouth, you would say it is either light bodied, medium bodied or full bodied. Light-bodied wines are easy to drink and go down as easily as water. Medium-bodied wines seem to have more weight on the palate. They fill the mouth with a velvety quality. Full-bodied wines make their presence known in the mouth. They coat the tongue. A simple analogy is that lighted-bodied wines are like water, medium-bodied wines are like skim milk and full-bodied wines are like whole milk.

Sweetness Range

The relative amounts of alcohol and sugar in wine are what make it sweet, slightly sweet or dry. The word dry implies the absence of sugar. Note that fruity does not necessarily mean sweet. All wines are fruity, as they are made from fruit. A common misconception is that if you can taste the fruitiness in wine it is a sweet wine. Actually, it just means is that the wine is higher in sugar than another. Generally, if a wine's alcohol content is above 10.5 percent alcohol it is dry. A sweeter wine might have a content of about 9 percent to 9.5 percent. Very dry wines such as Sauvignon Blanc might have an alcohol content of 13.5 percent.

Flavor Intensity

Because everyone's tastes are different, the flavor of wine can vary according to individual preference. However, in describing the intensity of wine, you could say that a full or intense flavor would be like that of fruit juice concentrate before water has been added. A delicate flavor would be the way the concentrate will taste when water has been added.

If a label states a year, the wine comes from that vintage. If no year appears on the bottle, the wine is non-vintage and a blend of wines from various vintages. Non-vintage wines guarantee a continuity of style and quality for any given wine; they are not necessarily inferior to vintage wine, although they tend to be less expensive. These non-vintage wines are also known as generic or "jug" wines.

Learning the Major Grape Varieties

The following is a list of the major grape varieties that you will find on any well-balanced wine lists, including the dominant flavors and textures commonly used to describe them.

White Wines

Chardonnay

Flavors: Full-flavored, rich, lemon, apple, pineapple, banana, cooked apple, coconut, vanilla, butter, honey

Textures: Fruit, acid, fat

Sauvignon Blanc

Flavors: Newly mowed hay, fresh cut grass, grapefruit, fig, green herbs, bell pepper

Textures: Acid

Pinot Grigio (Italy) / Pinot Gris (France)

Flavors: Citrus, mineral, almond, orange rind, pine

Textures: Range from light, crisp and dry from Italy to rich, fat, honeyed versions from Alsace in France

Viognier

Flavors: Orange blossom, apricot, tropical fruit, anise, mint

Textures: Medium body, dry, low acid

Gewürztraminer

Flavors: Spice, lychee fruit, roses, clove, nutmeg, grapefruit rind

Textures: Medium body, dry, full flavor. Slightly sweet or dry, low acid

Riesling/Johannesburg Riesling

Flavors: Spicy, fruity, peaches, apricots, flowers, petrol

Textures: Acid, medium body, dry to sweet, medium flavor

Rosé/White Zinfandel

Flavors: Zesty fruit, strawberry, cherry, raspberry, cranberry

Textures: Sweet/fruity, sour/acidic

Red Wines

Cabernet Sauvignon

Flavors: Black current, cassis, tea, eucalyptus, mint, chocolate, cedar, tobacco

Textures: Tannic/bitter, acidic

Shiraz / Syrah

Flavors: Black pepper, spice, tar, smoky, meaty, sweet blackberries, black currents, plums

Textures: Medium-heavy body, tannic, low to medium acidity

Merlot

Flavors: Plums, blueberries and cherries

Textures: Light to medium body, dry, soft delicate flavor, velvety tannins, chalky, low acidity

Zinfandel

Flavors: Wild blackberries, raspberries, raisins, prunes, licorice, black pepper, chocolate, violets

Textures: Fruity/sweet, tannic/bitter, both fruity and tannic acid

Sangiovese

Flavors: Strawberry, blueberry, plum, cinnamon, clove, thyme

Textures: Medium body, robust, good acid structure

Pinot Noir

Flavors: Elegant to full-bodied, black cherry, berry clove, violets, earth, smoky

Textures: Fruit, acid, slightly tannic/bitter

Gamay Beaujolais

Flavors: Berries, sweet fruit

Textures: Light to medium body, medium acid

Other Wines

Dry Champagne/Sparkling Wine

Flavors: Apple, cider, maple nut, caramel

Textures: Effervescent dry, semi-sweet or sweet

Pairing Food and Wine

Wine can dramatically improve any meal, but it helps to know how a wine choice can enhance the taste of certain foods. The following guidelines provide a few basics to help you pair the wine with the dominant flavor of the food:

<p>Riesling, Gewürztraminer</p>	<p>Light fruits: melon, peaches, pears Mild fish: poached or sautéed, sole/halibut with delicate sauces Spicy Mexican and Asian cuisines</p>
<p>Dry Champagne/Sparkling Wine, Sauvignon Blanc</p>	<p>Shellfish: crab, calamari, prawns, scallops with light herbs or seasoning Chicken and turkey: lightly grilled, roasted, sautéed Light cheeses: cream or jack Loin of pork: sautéed, lightly grilled, mildly seasoned Pasta: white, creamy, herb and lightly seasoned sauce Mediterranean and vegetarian dishes</p>
<p>Viognier, Chardonnay</p>	<p>Veal steaks: marinated, grilled or with wild mushrooms and cream sauce Fish and shellfish: crab cakes, grilled prawns Pasta, Asian-style chicken salad French, Northern Italian and American dishes</p>
<p>Rosé/White Zinfandel, Gamay Beaujolais, Pinot Noir, Sangiovese</p>	<p>Veal chops and loin of pork: marinated and grilled Mild ragouts and stews Pasta: with marinara and meat sauces Fish: tuna, salmon, swordfish rubbed with herbs and grilled Contemporary French and Northern Californian cuisines</p>
<p>Merlot, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz/Syrah</p>	<p>Duck, quail, squab: roasted with wild mushrooms and red wine sauce Beef and lamb: ribs, steaks, burgers, chops Grilled meats Pastas, pizza, gnocchi: hearty sauces Full-bodied cheeses: Brie, Cheddar, Bleu Dark chocolate Robust cuisines: particularly those that are tomato-based, such as southern Italian, Creole, Southwestern</p>

Additional Things to Consider:

- What are the flavors of the dishes (sauces, garnishes and accompaniments)?
- How formal is the occasion?
- Gauge the tastes of the guests: What would they most enjoy?
- Sparkling wine poured as a before-dinner drink turns any meal into a festive occasion.





ACIDITY

Indicates the degree of tartness in the wine due to natural acids in the grape itself.

AROMA

Refers to the smell of the wine as it relates to its varietal fruit character.

BALANCE

The right proportion of fruit, acid, tannin and varietal character. Harmonious.

BARREL FERMENED

Fermentation of the wine takes place in oak barrels instead of stainless steel tanks, adding richness, complexity and more oak character. Most commonly used for Chardonnay.

BODY

The impression of fullness or roundness in the mouth.

BOUQUET

The aromatic scent as expressed by the winemaking process; the combination of varietal fruit character with all the elements of aging wine.

BUTTERY

Rich, oily texture. Usually used when describing Chardonnay.

COMPLEX

Shows an integration of aroma and flavor, often with subtlety; one of the highest compliments given to a wine.

CORKED

The smell of the wine when spoiled by a bad cork. Typically a musty or wet cardboard smell. Relatively uncommon.

MALOLACTIC

A second fermentation in which the malic (sour) acid is converted to lactic (softer) acid. Creates softer, silkier, more approachable wine.

MATURE

Exhibits the benefits of aging where all the elements have come together.

NOSE

The combination of the aroma and bouquet of the wine.

OAKY

The smell and/or flavor associated with aging wine in small oak barrels. When properly integrated, a positive element.

SMOOTH

Soft, balanced.

SULFUR/SULFITES

A compound that forms naturally during fermentation. Wine makers traditionally supplement with minimal amounts to protect fruit quality and prevent oxidation.

SUR LIE

French for “on the lees.” Wine is aged on the spent yeast “lees” (cells) after fermentation, gaining added flavor and complexity.

TANNIN

The natural components from grape skins and oak contract that makes young wines lightly astringent and sometimes bitter. Tannin subsides as part of the aging process and contributes to the wine’s complexity.