

# Wine Tasting Vocabulary

*A brief synopsis of useful terms*

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**Acidity** Critical component of wine: wines lacking sufficient acidity seem dull, lifeless; excessively acidic wines are sharp or tart. Acidity is offset by residual sugar (of, for example, so-called dessert wines) and by *alcohol*.

**Aftertaste** Sensations which remain after a wine is swallowed composed of aromas and tastes. Synonymous with *finish*. The best wines possess persistent, *complex* aftertastes.

**Alcohol** Primary component, mainly responsible for *body* or *weight*; also contributes to *aroma* and plays an important role in balancing acidity and tannin. Has a *sweet* taste.

**Aroma** Olfactory sensations vital to perception and pleasure of wine and derived primarily from fermentation. Aroma is perceived directly when holding a glass to the nose, and through the retro nasal passages when the wine is in the mouth. Customarily, the nose of a *young* wine is termed *aroma* while that of a mature or aged wine is described as *bouquet*.

**Astringent** Dry, puckering sensation in the mouth usually caused by *tannin*. Tannins are typical of red wines intended for bottle aging; they tend to soften with time.

**Balance** A good wine exhibits harmony or balance of constituent parts. Some wines may only come into balance with aging in bottle.

**Bitter** Unpleasant taste to most people. Although sensitivity varies widely, the most acute palates are often the most sensitive. *Tannins* may be perceived as bitter by some tasters.

**Body** The fullness or *weight* of a wine mainly due to its *alcohol* content. Neither positive nor negative; certain types of wines tend to be light-, medium- or full-bodied.

**Bouquet** The smell of an aged or mature wine; very different from that of a young wine. See *aroma*.

**Clean** Free of off-odors and tastes, a desirable quality. However, potential faults (for example, volatile acidity) may add to *complexity* at low concentrations.

**Closed** Commonly employed metaphor for a wine which expresses little of its inherent flavor characteristics because the wine is *young*, or because of its stage of development.

**Coarse** A negative term referring to a poorly made wine, often aggressively *rough*.

**Complexity** A highly desirable if elusive attribute of wine, referring to the range of aromatic and taste sensations. The greatest wines offer heightened complexity.

**Concentration** Volume of constituent elements, notably dry extract and alcohol; the intangible sense of “raw material” at the core of a wine. See also *substance*.

**Corked** The unattractive odor of a wet cork caused mainly by 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) or related compounds. Other forms of taint may often be falsely identified as “corkiness.” The incidence of corked wine has been reduced by improvements in cork sterilizing procedures.

**Delicate** Positive descriptor of appealing light wines.

**Depth** Refers to the impression of overall flavor; the most impressive wines have depth while great classics are profound.

**Dry** Opposite of sweet. How “dry” a wine is perceived to be depends on other components, and the taster. Aside from obvious exceptions (late harvest dessert or selected fortified wines such as Port or Cream Sherry), the vast majority of wine is dry. Unfortunately, this fundamental term is misunderstood by many consumers.

**Elegant** An imprecise, metaphorical term to describe a finely balanced wine; often used in conjunction with *finesse*.

**Fine** A wine of excellent quality.

**Finesse** Attribute of delicate, well-balanced wines. Usually not used for *powerful* wines. See *elegant*.

**Finish** Sensations which linger on the palate, referring both to their intensity and *complexity*. See *aftertaste*.

**Firm** Dry, sometimes somewhat *astringent finish*. Usually positive, a firm wine is well structured; a wine which appears overly firm is *rough* or even *hard*.

**Flowery** Attractive aroma of certain wines resembling flowers when very young.

**Fresh** Positive trait of a young white or red wine possessing noticeable acidity.

**Fruity** The aromatics of young wines which tasters associate with fruits (apple, lemon, raspberry, etc.). Most youthful wines may be described as fruity to varying degrees, unless they are dominated by oak. *Fruity* is not synonymous with *sweet*.

**Hard** *Severe*, assertively *dry* or *astringent*; may dissipate with aging.

**Length** The amount of time the *aftertaste* or *finish* remains in the mouth and nasal passages. A wine may be described as short or *long*.

**Light** Possessing little *body*; may simply be the character of the wine type (Muscadet or Mosel Riesling), or it may be a demerit for wines which should have more body.

**Long** Flattering descriptor for a wine having a persistent, lasting *finish*.

**Minerality** The invented English equivalent of a French word favored by some tasters to describe a *dry* wine with “stony” flavors akin to a salty mineral water (which contains dissolved solids leached from soil). Scientists dispute the direct conversion of soil chemical constituents into specific wine taste characteristics. To be used with care.

**Neutral** Lacking discernible taste characteristics. Typical of many ordinary mass market wines, especially whites (e.g., Pinot Grigio).

**Oaky** Strongly marked by maturation in oak barrels: woody, *spicy*, vanilla, coconut, etc.

**Powerful** Mouth-filling, full-bodied, vigorous wine, usually with elevated alcohol content.

**Quality** The most challenging term of all: the degree to which a wine satisfies the standards of its origin, type and price. Knowledge and experience are needed to assess quality; a professional taster should be able to distinguish *quality* from personal preference. Conversely, a beginner equates his or her own individual taste response with the merits of the wine.

**Rich** Generously endowed with flavor; most likely *ripe* and full-bodied.

**Ripe** Exhibiting qualities of grapes harvested when fully but not overly mature.

**Rough** *Astringent* to some extent, but short of *coarse*. Roughness may be a function of a wine's youthfulness; a rough wine may become *soft* with age.

**Round** Feel in the mouth indicating subdued acidity together with a soft center.

**Severe** *Hard* and very *firm*. Severe wines will probably not improve with keeping as they may also be imbalanced.

**Soft** Antithesis of *astringent*, *rough* or *hard*. A soft wine may be appealingly smooth or velvety in texture; conversely, it could lack *acidity*.

**Spicy** Most "spices" in wine come from wood barrels, not from the grapes; for example, cinnamon, cloves, pepper. Compounds which tasters describe as vanilla and smoke similarly originate largely from oak.

**Style** Describes the specific context of a wine, as in "light, dry, unoaked" or "full bodied, rich and barrel aged." Distinct from *quality*. However, "stylish" refers to a *fine*, *elegant* wine.

**Substance** Comprehensive descriptor for the combined impression of the *body* and flavor of a wine.

**Supple** Pleasing textural quality of red wines implying a certain softness on the palate; not *hard* or *severe*.

**Sweet** Noticeable sugar, usually remaining after fermentation or from added concentrate in popular mass market wines. Sweetness may be concealed by acidity. *Alcohol* also has a sweet taste, although it is rarely identified as such. Surprisingly, the core concept of sweet vs. *dry* eludes many novice wine drinkers.

**Tannin** An important component of red wine especially, particularly those intended for cellaring; with bottle aging, tannins are polymerized and eventually fade, losing their *astringent* or *rough* textural imprint. Collectible red wines (top Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon, Hermitage, Barolo, Brunello) normally possess high tannin levels facilitating the aging process and giving them potentially long lives in bottle.

**Thin** Watery, lacking flavor interest and *body*.

**Weak** Lacking character and flavor; similar to *thin*.

**Weight** Synonym for *body* and a fundamental descriptor. Weight varies as a function of grape variety, climate, vintage and wine style.

**Young** A wine exhibiting any number of *flowery*, *fruity* and/or *fresh* characteristics. Some wine types and individual wines may retain youthful characteristics even after several years in bottle.