

How to Taste Wine

A structured approach to getting more from every glass · kazmicellars.com

Tasting wine is a skill — one that improves rapidly with practice and a simple framework. The structured approach used by sommeliers and Masters of Wine is not pretentious ritual. It's a systematic way to slow down, notice what's actually in the glass, and build a vocabulary for what you're experiencing. The four steps: Appearance → Nose → Palate → Conclusion.

STEP 1 — APPEARANCE

Color Depth	Tilt the glass at 45° over a white surface. How deep is the color? Pale / Medium / Deep / Opaque. Depth tells you about the grape variety (thin-skinned = paler), the climate (warmer = deeper), and the winemaking (skin contact time for reds).
Hue	Look at the core and the rim separately. Core shows the primary color; rim shows how the wine is developing. Purple rim = young red. Brick/orange rim = aged red. Green tint in a white = cool climate, young. Amber in a white = aged or oxidative.
Clarity	Is the wine clear or cloudy? Most commercial wines are clear. Slight haze in natural or unfiltered wines is normal and intentional. Significant cloudiness may indicate a fault.
Viscosity / 'Legs'	Swirl the glass. The 'legs' (droplets running down the inside) indicate alcohol level and sometimes residual sugar. More legs, slower movement = higher alcohol or sugar. Note: legs are not a quality indicator — they are a physics phenomenon.

STEP 2 — THE NOSE

First Impression	Before swirling, take a short sniff. This gives you the first volatile aromatics — often the most delicate and easily lost. Note the immediate impression.
Swirl and Assess	Swirl the glass vigorously — this aerates the wine and volatilizes aromatics. Now take a deeper sniff, with your nose partially inside the glass. Hold for 2–3 seconds. What's your dominant impression? Fruit? Earth? Oak? Spice?
Intensity	How pronounced are the aromas? Neutral / Light / Medium / Medium-Plus / Pronounced. Great wines tend to be pronounced — you don't have to search for the aromas, they come to you.
Primary Aromas	Fruit, flowers, fresh herbs, minerals — what you smell from the grape itself. Green fruit = cool climate or unoaked. Tropical = warm climate. Dark fruit = ripe vintage or thick-skinned grape.
Secondary Aromas	Butter, cream, bread, brioche, cheese rind — from fermentation and yeast. Prominent butter in a Chardonnay? Malolactic fermentation. Brioche in a Champagne? Extended lees aging.
Tertiary Aromas (Bouquet)	Oak, vanilla, leather, tobacco, earth, mushroom, truffle, dried fruit — from aging. The more tertiary aromas, the more developed and aged the wine. A wine that smells purely of fresh fruit with no tertiary notes is young.
Faults to Watch For	Cork taint (TCA): damp cardboard, wet dog. Oxidation: bruised apple, sherry-like. Reduction: struck match, rubber, rotten egg. Volatile acidity (VA): nail polish remover, vinegar. Brett: barnyard, Band-Aid. If you smell any of these strongly, the wine is faulty.

STEP 3 — THE PALATE

Sweetness	The first thing you register. Even in 'dry' wines there's a spectrum. Dry wines have no sweetness perception. Off-dry wines have a slight sweetness. The sugar level is measured in grams/litre — below 4g/L is technically dry, but wine tastes vary.
Acidity	The tartness and freshness you feel — mainly on the sides and back of the tongue. Does your mouth water after swallowing? High acidity. Low acid wines feel flat and 'flabby.' Scale: Low / Medium / Medium-Plus / High / Very High.
Tannin (reds only)	The drying, gripping sensation in your mouth — especially your gums. Low tannin wines are smooth and silky. High tannin wines (young Barolo, Cab Sauv) feel almost mouth-drying. Tannin quality matters too: firm/ripe vs harsh/green. Scale: Low / Medium / Medium-Plus / High / Very High.
Alcohol	The warming sensation in your throat and chest. Wines over 14% often feel 'hot.' Under 11% feel light. Alcohol should be in balance with the wine's other elements — not dominating. If the alcohol stands out, the wine is unbalanced.
Body	The weight and texture of the wine on your palate. Compare to milk: skim (light), whole (medium), cream (full-bodied). Determined mainly by alcohol, tannin, and extract.
Flavor Characteristics	Now taste — what flavors do you actually perceive? These should mirror the nose but the palate reveals more. The wine may open up new characteristics that weren't evident on the nose. Note the flavor intensity — how concentrated are the flavors?
Finish	What's left in your mouth after swallowing? Length: Short / Medium / Long / Very Long. What flavors linger? A great wine finishes long with complex, evolving flavors. A simple wine fades immediately. The finish is one of the most reliable quality indicators.

STEP 4 — CONCLUSION

Quality Level	Based on everything: Faulty / Poor / Acceptable / Good / Very Good / Outstanding. Quality is determined by balance, complexity, intensity, and finish — not price, brand, or score.
Readiness	Is the wine ready to drink now? A closed, tight wine may need more time. An oxidizing wine with fading fruit has passed its peak. Most wines have a drinking window.
Food Pairing	What would this wine call for at the table? High acid = fatty, rich food. High tannin = protein and fat. Sweet = salty or sweet dishes. Delicate = delicate food.
Your Conclusion	The most important step: Did you enjoy it? Why? Why not? Building a personal vocabulary around what you like and don't like is the entire point.

BUILDING A TASTING NOTE

A tasting note is simply a written record of what you observed in each step. It doesn't need to be long or flowery. The goal is precision, not poetry.

Appearance:	Deep ruby with a garnet-brick rim and some orange at the very edge. Clear and bright.
Nose:	Pronounced. Dried cherry, leather, tobacco, dried rose, iron, a hint of tar. Classic Nebbiolo aged bouquet. No primary fruit visible — entirely tertiary.

Palate:	Dry. High acidity. High, firm tannins — drying but not harsh. Full body. Flavors mirror the nose: dried cherry, tobacco, iron, anise. Long finish with warming alcohol.
Conclusion:	Outstanding. Ready to drink now — the tannins have resolved. Barolo, probably 10+ years old. Pair with braised beef or aged Parmigiano. Would not improve further with more aging.

■ *The best way to develop your palate: taste the same grape from different regions side by side. Burgundy Pinot vs California Pinot vs New Zealand Pinot — same grape, three completely different expressions. The comparison teaches more in one session than reading alone ever can. Blind tasting with friends accelerates development rapidly.*

TASTING NOTES

Four tasting note forms — one per wine. Use these to record what you see, smell, and taste in a structured way. The more you write, the faster your palate develops. Photocopy these pages to build a permanent tasting library.

How to use:

- 1 Look first** — Tilt the glass against white. Note colour, intensity, and clarity before smelling anything.
- 2 Smell before swirling** — First impressions matter. The most volatile aromas escape immediately — catch them.
- 3 Swirl and smell again** — Swirling aerates the wine. Complex aromas open up. Compare to your first impression.
- 4 Take a small sip** — Let it move around your whole mouth. Different areas detect sweetness, acid, bitterness.
- 5 Count the finish** — After swallowing — how long does flavour last? Short (5s) · Medium (10s) · Long (20s+).
- 6 Write immediately** — Your first impressions are your most accurate. Memory fades once the glass is empty.

These forms follow the WSET Systematic Approach to Tasting (SAT) — the same framework used by professional sommeliers and Master of Wine candidates worldwide.

TASTING NOTE

#1 of 4

WINE INFORMATION

Producer	Vintage
Wine Name	Price
Grape(s)	Region
Date Tasted	Occasion/Location

APPEARANCE

Colour White: Pale Yellow Golden Amber Rosé: Salmon Copper Red: Purple Ruby Garnet Tawny

Intensity Pale Medium Deep

Clarity Clear Slight Haze Cloudy

NOSE — smell before swirling, then after

Condition Clean Corked / TCA Oxidised Reductive

Intensity Delicate Medium Pronounced Powerful

Fruit Red Fruit Dark Fruit Citrus Tropical Stone Fruit Dried Fruit

Other Floral Herbal Oak / Vanilla Earth Spice Animal / Leather

PALATE — sip, let it move around your whole mouth

Sweetness <input type="checkbox"/> Bone Dry <input type="checkbox"/> Dry <input type="checkbox"/> Off-Dry <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Sweet	Acidity <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Very High
Tannin <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Very High	Body <input type="checkbox"/> Light <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Full <input type="checkbox"/> Very Full
Alcohol <input type="checkbox"/> Low <11% <input type="checkbox"/> Medium 11–13% <input type="checkbox"/> High 13–15% <input type="checkbox"/> 15%+	Finish <input type="checkbox"/> Short <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Long <input type="checkbox"/> Very Long

Character Fruit-forward Oak-driven Earthy Mineral Spiced Complex

OVERALL IMPRESSION & TASTING NOTES

SCORE

:

/ 100

Buy again? Yes No Maybe

Value: Overpriced Fair Great

FOOD PAIRING IDEAS

TASTING NOTE

#2 of 4

WINE INFORMATION

Producer	Vintage
Wine Name	Price
Grape(s)	Region
Date Tasted	Occasion/Location

APPEARANCE

Colour White: Pale Yellow Golden Amber Rosé: Salmon Copper Red: Purple Ruby Garnet Tawny

Intensity Pale Medium Deep

Clarity Clear Slight Haze Cloudy

NOSE — smell before swirling, then after

Condition Clean Corked / TCA Oxidised Reductive

Intensity Delicate Medium Pronounced Powerful

Fruit Red Fruit Dark Fruit Citrus Tropical Stone Fruit Dried Fruit

Other Floral Herbal Oak / Vanilla Earth Spice Animal / Leather

PALATE — sip, let it move around your whole mouth

Sweetness Bone Dry Dry Off-Dry Medium Sweet

Acidity Low Medium High Very High

Tannin None Low Medium High Very High

Body Light Medium Full Very Full

Alcohol Low <11% Medium 11–13% High 13–15% 15%+

Finish Short Medium Long Very Long

Character Fruit-forward Oak-driven Earthy Mineral Spiced Complex

OVERALL IMPRESSION & TASTING NOTES

SCORE

/ 100

Buy again? Yes No Maybe

Value: Overpriced Fair Great

FOOD PAIRING IDEAS

TASTING NOTE

#3 of 4

WINE INFORMATION

Producer	Vintage
Wine Name	Price
Grape(s)	Region
Date Tasted	Occasion/Location

APPEARANCE

Colour White: Pale Yellow Golden Amber Rosé: Salmon Copper Red: Purple Ruby Garnet Tawny

Intensity Pale Medium Deep

Clarity Clear Slight Haze Cloudy

NOSE — smell before swirling, then after

Condition Clean Corked / TCA Oxidised Reductive

Intensity Delicate Medium Pronounced Powerful

Fruit Red Fruit Dark Fruit Citrus Tropical Stone Fruit Dried Fruit

Other Floral Herbal Oak / Vanilla Earth Spice Animal / Leather

PALATE — sip, let it move around your whole mouth

Sweetness Bone Dry Dry Off-Dry Medium Sweet

Acidity Low Medium High Very High

Tannin None Low Medium High Very High

Body Light Medium Full Very Full

Alcohol Low <11% Medium 11–13% High 13–15% 15%+

Finish Short Medium Long Very Long

Character Fruit-forward Oak-driven Earthy Mineral Spiced Complex

OVERALL IMPRESSION & TASTING NOTES

SCORE

/ 100

Buy again? Yes No Maybe

Value: Overpriced Fair Great

FOOD PAIRING IDEAS

TASTING NOTE

#4 of 4

WINE INFORMATION

Producer	Vintage
Wine Name	Price
Grape(s)	Region
Date Tasted	Occasion/Location

APPEARANCE

Colour White: Pale Yellow Golden Amber Rosé: Salmon Copper Red: Purple Ruby Garnet Tawny

Intensity Pale Medium Deep

Clarity Clear Slight Haze Cloudy

NOSE — smell before swirling, then after

Condition Clean Corked / TCA Oxidised Reductive

Intensity Delicate Medium Pronounced Powerful

Fruit Red Fruit Dark Fruit Citrus Tropical Stone Fruit Dried Fruit

Other Floral Herbal Oak / Vanilla Earth Spice Animal / Leather

PALATE — sip, let it move around your whole mouth

Sweetness Bone Dry Dry Off-Dry Medium Sweet

Acidity Low Medium High Very High

Tannin None Low Medium High Very High

Body Light Medium Full Very Full

Alcohol Low <11% Medium 11–13% High 13–15% 15%+

Finish Short Medium Long Very Long

Character Fruit-forward Oak-driven Earthy Mineral Spiced Complex

OVERALL IMPRESSION & TASTING NOTES

SCORE

/ 100

Buy again? Yes No Maybe

Value: Overpriced Fair Great

FOOD PAIRING IDEAS