AFTER 25 YEARS WORKING IN THE WINE INDUSTRY.
AND A FEW MORE YEARS TASTING IT.

By John DeCherney
Edited by Meghan Chambers
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What is wine?

Wine is the fermented juice of grapes. Almost all grapes yield white juice, and the color of wine comes from contact with the skin of the grape. The same grape will taste very different when grown in different places (read more under “Terroir”). A varietal is a wine labelled as being made from a primary grape variety. Common varietals, light-bodied to full-bodied.

Great myths & truths when purchasing wine.

Older is not necessarily better.

More expensive is not necessarily better: a $20 bottle of Cab is not necessarily twice as good as a $10 bottle of Cab.

French is not necessarily better, however...Girardin Charmes Chambertin is to Chardonnay what White King Salmon is to Mrs. Paul’s Frozen Fish Sticks (see “Terroir,” again).

All of this aside...

1. Drink what you like, all of the other rules take a backseat to this one.

2. Vintages do not always matter, but when they do, they matter a lot.

3. Wine will deteriorate once opened, but most young wine can usually last a few days after opening.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wine Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHITE ZINFANDEL</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied white, sweet, “picnic wine”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RIESLING</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied white, sweet to off-dry, apricots &amp; peaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GEWURZTRAMINER</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied white, spicy, floral &amp; apricots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAUVIGNON BLANC</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied white, crisp, clean &amp; acidic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHENIN BLANC</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied white, medium-dry, green peppers. Ex: Vouvray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEMILLION</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied white, medium-dry, figs &amp; hay, usually blended with Sauvignon Blanc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VIOGNIER</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied white, intensely floral &amp; aromatic, great variation by producer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PINOT GRIGIO /GRIS</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied white, very dry in Italy and rounder in Oregon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHARDONNAY</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied white, oaky &amp; toasty, “big”.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GAMAY</strong></td>
<td>Light-bodied red, fruity &amp; floral. Ex: Beaujolais.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PINOT NOIR</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red, black cherries &amp; roses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BARBERA</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red, high acid &amp; easy to drink with bright fruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SANGIOVESE / CHIANTI</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red, cherry &amp; berry fruit, “accessible.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MALBEC</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red (dry), soft tannins, low acidity, berry &amp; plum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MERLOT</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red (dry), black cherry &amp; spice, moderate tannins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CABERNET FRANC</strong></td>
<td>Medium-bodied red, raspberries &amp; currants, “less assertive Cabernet brother.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SYRAH / SHIRAZ</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied red, raspberries &amp; white pepper, “big.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PETIT SIRAH</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied red, massive &amp; intense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ZINFANDEL</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied red (dry), ripe berries, cedar, &amp; jammy fruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CABERNET SAUVIGNON</strong></td>
<td>Full-bodied red (dry), plums, currants, &amp; tobacco, rich, tannic, &amp; “complex.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Terroir, a brief aside.

AKA - WHAT WON’T THOSE WACKY FRENCH THINK OF NEXT?

Terroir is the wine-making notion that each grape and wine should express the “essence” or the “soul” of the area in which it is grown, and the corollary that certain wines only do well or express themselves best in specific regions.

In other words...

“The French do not speak of soil, but of terroir, one of those wonderful words which encapsulates many different things. It expresses the coming together of climate, soil, and landscape, thereby incorporating the influences of temperature, rainfall, sunlight, soil depth, structure, pH, minerals, and water retention capacity; of slope, aspect, and drainage. To the French in particular, terroir assumes almost mystical importance.”

- James Halliday, Wine Atlas of Australia & New Zealand

Think of it like this - the song is “Imagine.” Do you prefer it from the region of The Beatles or Avril Lavigne?
How to read labels:

Labels have four main components:
1. PRODUCER
2. REGION / APPELLATION
3. GRAPE
4. VINTAGE

However, not all labels will have each component.
Wine & Food.

First, see rule #1 on page 2. But here are some general suggestions to consider.

Pair strong wines with strong foods, light wines with light foods. For example:

- CCC Rule: Cream + Cheese + Chardonnay (i.e. fettucine alfredo & a rich white wine)
- With spicier food, try for a lighter, off-dry wine (i.e. pad thai & off-dry Riesling)
- Fruit-based sauces with fruit-forward wines
- About red meat:
  - Beef with Burgunday, lamb with Bordeaux
  - Wild game with Syrah & Shiraz
  - Burgers and pizza with zinfandel (egalitarian wine & food)
- Foods that kill wines (overwhelm your taste buds):
  - Very spicy foods
  - Highly acidic foods (vinaigrettes, apples, citrus)
  - Artichokes & asparagus have a tendency to make wines taste metallic & harsh

On special occasions:

For when you open that special bottle of wine - make something simple. Highlight the wine.

When in Rome - drink what the Romans drink. Don’t be afraid to ask for local favorite or recommendations when travelling.
Burgandy & Chablis.

A DIGRESSION & TIRADE.

Back in the 60s and 70s, American wine companies started inventing generic names for their wines. Jug red wine became “Burgundy” and jug white wine became “Chablis” based on two wine-growing regions in France. Neither of these terms has the vaguest relations to the wines that are actually grown in these regions, but the name stuck. In France, Burgundy is Pinot Noir if red, and Chardonnay if white. Chablis is always Chardonnay. Always.

To further complicate the issue, a large unnamed winery in Modesto produces wines called “Burgundy” and “Hearty Burgundy,” which are NOT from France and NOT Pinot Noir. Burgundy is made mostly from Zinfandel and Hearty Burgundy is made from an unusual hybrid of Cabernet Sauvignon and Carignane called Ruby Cabernet. I have no idea what goes into “Chablis,” and I really don’t care to know - my guess is Colombard.

If you come across a recipe using either of these terms, I would recommend a medium-bodied red wine for Burgundy and a light, very dry white wine for Chablis. You are entitled to look askance at your friends if they use these words.
Wine Speak: FINDING THE “MOT JUSTE.”

If you want to be able to describe wine in a way that makes sense to others, pick and choose from the below samples. To me, there are two schools of thought - do you want to describe a fruit salad or a person?

**Fruity.** This one makes me shriek. Under “What is wine?” we learned that wine is made from grapes, so all wine is perforce “fruity.” What kind of fruit are we talking about about? Apricots for Riesling, grapefruit for Sauvignon Blanc, citrus and tropical fruit for Chardonnay & so on.

**Elegant or Refined.** The alternative to “smoky, oaky, toasty” is anthropomorphism. Let me know when you start calling one wine Audrey Hepburn and the other Marilyn Monroe.

**BASIC DESCRIPTIVE WORDS:**

**Nose or Bouquet.** Smell- the aromas that you perceive when swishing wine in your glass. Try these: Floral for Gewürztraminer; Grassy for Sauvignon Blanc; Tropical Fruit for Australian Chardonnay. If you want to swing for the wall try: Dusty Rose for Oregon Pinot Noir; Cigar Box for California Cabernet and Bordeaux; Jammy for young reds like Syrah from Paso Robles and other hot climates. Extra points: Flinty or Wet Stones for Chablis.

**Body.** Body is a more elegant way of saying viscosity - how thick the wine is with a nod to the intensity and length of the flavor. You may hear people discuss the wine’s “legs”; the trails that are left by the wine after swirling. These people are probably still wearing Nehru jackets; ignore them.
DESCRIPTIVE WORDS CONTINUED:

**Tannins.** Tannic acid is a component in grapes that is found in the skins & seeds of the grape and contribute to the wines’ ability to age. It is that astringent flavor you get if you leave your tea bag in the water too long. White wines are never described as tannic.

**Finish.** The length, style, and qualities of the wine that you still taste after you have swallowed the wine. Finish is for wine. Aftertaste is for toothpaste; don’t use that word.

A SMATTERING OF EXTRAS:

**Flabby or fat.** Despite the fact that these two words mean the same thing when applied to the human physiology they have quite a different meaning when applied to wine. Flabby would refer to a wine that may not have enough acidity to balance the sweetness; California Rieslings sprint to mind. Fat is for big, rich wines with lots of flavor.

**Lacks concentration.** Watery, plain & simple.

**Tightly wound.** This refers to a young wine that has not had the time to develop all of its flavor components and maybe being drunk too young. I have heard this applied to White Burgundy and Napa Valley Chardonnay. For red wines in the same state you might say...

**Closed in.** Red wines that are been consumed young and the fruit is still “out of balance” with the tannins. Try decanting the wine or finding something more...

**Accessible.** Pretty obvious. A wine that is made to be drunk young. Some wines are accessible by definition. Saying that a Beaujolais is accessible is redundant so watch your step.
John DeCherney is the regional manager of Specialty Imports, Southeast Alaska. He is a former co-owner of the Fiddlehead Restuarant in Juneau, and chef to Alaska State Governors Cowper and Hickel.

Specialty Imports is Alaska's only wholly Alaska-owned importer and distributor of fine wine, beer, and spirits. It was founded in Anchorage in 1979 by Shawn Beck, who still runs the company. There are now offices in Fairbanks, Juneau, and Kenai.

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