

How to Pour | How much wine to serve?

A standard tasting pour is about half the size of a regular serving, at around 2–3 ounces (75–90 ml), and a bottle of wine contains about 10 taste servings.

How to Taste

Visualize It | To evaluate the appearance and color of a wine, you need to look at it against a white surface under good, natural light. This is why a clear glass is important. Some of the things to look for are the depth of color, hue, and clarity.

Swirl It | The most often-skipped step in tasting a wine is the swirl. With the glass flat on a table, grab the bottom of the stem and swirl it vigorously—you want to increase the surface area of the wine and aerate it, which will release more of its aromas. Don't swirl it for more than five or six seconds though; it's not a cocktail. Get a sense of the wine's viscosity, or "legs." You can judge the legs by watching for the streaks of wine that crawl down the glass after you swirl it. Bigger wines, with more sugar and/or alcohol, will have more pronounced legs, but ultimately, they don't tell you much about its taste or quality.

Nose It | Don't be afraid to get your nose down in the glass and take a good hard whiff. The brain can distinguish about 10,000 different smells, so when you dip your beak into a glass of wine, you've got your work cut out. Our sense of taste is heavily influenced by our sense of smell, and no two people smell an odor the same way. Keep this in mind when the goober next to you starts commenting on the subtle teriyaki aromas and enticing whatever-berry notes.

Think about the first smells that come to mind, no matter how far out, and write them down. It's OK to have a cheat sheet of wine descriptors, but don't rely too heavily on it. Again, use your own instincts. The common aroma wheel includes descriptors such as: fruity, woody, pungent, floral, spicy, nutty, and chemical. It takes your nose 20 or 30 seconds to reset and recover, so if you go in for another whiff, it pays to wait.

Taste It | After you've gotten some initial impressions of the wine, you're ready to taste it. Finally! Take another brief smell, then a small sip, and swirl it around in your mouth until it coats almost every part your tongue. This will also warm up and aerate the wine, and help release its flavors. If you're tasting a series of wines and really want to keep your senses at their best, you should spit out the wine after this step. No fun, right? OK, go ahead and swallow it.

Profile It | There are three broad categories used to describe a wine's taste: sweetness, acidity, and tannin. Sweetness and acidity are familiar tastes and are related to the dryness of the wine. The acidity gives wine its lift, while the absence of it makes a wine taste flat or "flabby." Tannin comes from the skins, seeds and stems, and creates a dryness in the mouth in the finish (the lingering flavors after you swallow). Too much tannin can also create a bitter taste.

After you taste a wine, be sure to take some time before moving onto the next bottle. Write down some initial impressions while they are fresh—"enjoy the dryness combined with an earthy, peppery flavor..." and such. If you are tasting strong wines, be sure to clear your palette with some water and crackers, bread or fruit.

Of course, the point of tasting is not to identify every last aroma and flavor. The goal is to figure out what you do and don't like about a wine and allow your wine knowledge and vocabulary to evolve.

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