

Good wine, great wine: the Quarin method Palate over nose

By Jean-Marc Quarin, independant Bordeaux wine critic

In 1970, the INAO, the French body in charge of regulating French agricultural products with Protected Designations of Origins, and the AFNOR, the French organization for standardization, designed a new tulip-shaped wine-tasting glass, which eventually replaced traditional tastevins and run-of-the-mill round-shaped glasses. With it also came a new need: sniffing and appraising the nose of the wine.

Since then, people's interest in wine has grown and so has glassmakers' creativity. Today, nose appraisal of the wine is enjoying an incredible boom. Who has never felt out of place at a tasting when scents of cassis, musk, apricot – or even apricot from California - were being mentioned? (Apparently not so unusual an experience in well-reputed master classes with people attending not even yet able to sort rose fragrances among floral notes). And although, as a wine taster, I am particularly sensitive to fragrances, smells and aromas, I don't really believe scents should be the focal point of communication on wine, unless perhaps among specialists. For people who are not so familiar with wine, smells and aromas are usually very personal interpretations and cannot possibly lead to an objective analysis of the wine.

What's more, for Bordeaux wines, particularly when they are still young, the over-intensive appraisal of the nose is not relevant.

When appraising Bordeaux, tannins matter far more than fragrances and aromas. When a Bordeaux wine is less than 3 years of age, there often is an opposition between the intensity of its nose and the presence of tannins: the more fragrant the nose, the thinner the body – the less fragrant the nose, the denser the body. But a grand vin cannot be without a strong and solid structure and if it is, it appears diluted, thin, and unable in time to do credit to its origins and terroir. If too much emphasis is put on the nose, wine tasters run the risk of choosing the second wine over the grand vin when they are tasted blind side by side and so may well overlook the better one of the two, the crafting of which has demanded the winemakers and owners' very best skills and energy. A young grand vin is less boisterous and less fragrant; it is broodier, denser, more tannic and less easy to understand and that is precisely why the only way to analyse it is through its palate, where tactile feelings can be read and interpreted. They give out vital clues and clear indications on the structure of any wine and on its potential.

We must also remember that Bordeaux wines are sold en primeur, i.e before the elevage is over, 12 to 16 months before bottling, and so at a time when the nose is not yet finalized- and won't be for another good 10 months in bottle. For the best vintages, it will take an extra 15 to 20 years for the wine to find its best expression. It will then be impossible to ignore the standard it has reached and a tasting method, the purpose of which is to determine the wine's potential, will no longer be of any use. And so, though it may sound odd to you, if you wish to learn how to taste young Bordeaux and decide whether to cellar them or not, I suggest you avoid thinking in terms of savours - scents, aromas and savours are all very much intertwined in tasting. The main thing is to concentrate on the physical presence of the wine in the mouth. Experience has shown that when the palate is well in place, the nose generally follows.

But how do we do that?

Jean-Marc Quarin will lead us to share this unique experience by comparing 4 wines side by side. 45 enthralling minutes that could well change your approach to the taste of wine forever.

« If there is a cartesian rigor to Quarin's thought process, cartesian doubt doesn't trouble him for a moment! his book is a tour de force of information, opinion, and clarity; a work of scholarship, scope, sensitivity, and innovation; a major contribution to the literature of bordeaux—a triumph, no less ». Michael Schuster, THE WORLD OF FINE WINE ISSUE 37 2012