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Andrew Jefford

'Understanding wine means wrestling with flavour and texture'

WINE IS A noisy subject. Its unique synthesis of sensorial, emotional and intellectual attractions stimulates a multitude of conversations. Most of these, though, skirt the subject; the taste of wine itself is rarely discussed.

But what about tasting notes? In reality, they don't tackle taste head on, from zero knowledge. They're a set of conventional and stylised remarks, often reliant on allusive metaphors, penned by an insider elite to justify critical assessments of wines (usually scores) to other insiders. They almost always assume some knowledge of the sensual identity of the wine in question. They're a sensorial share-tipping service, if you like.

Understanding the taste of wine means wrestling with aroma, flavour and texture. The last two matter most because many wine drinkers don't notice aroma: they simply pour and swallow. Even people who do gauge aroma – such as you and me – find it more ethereal and extraneous, and less impactful and engaging, than flavour itself. We observe aromas, whereas we feel and absorb flavours and textures. Aroma can also be capricious in a way that flavour and texture rarely are. Great wines, for example, are often aromatically dull or dumb in youth. Reduction smells disgusting, yet many wine insiders ignore it.

I acknowledge, of course, that neurologists suggest flavour is preponderantly aroma. Most of us, though, are happy to distinguish between smelling something with our noses and tasting it in our mouths, even if we know that a sizeable percentage of 'flavour' in the mouth is retronasal aroma. I'm pointing all this out because wine drinkers – including *Decanter* readers – rarely comment on certain fundamentals of flavour, so misled and distracted are they by the powerful cultural identity of wines and winemakers.

Other elements of flavour are muddled because of linguistic imprecision. (The term 'soft' is particularly treacherous. Are most Australian red wines 'soft'? Yes, because they're generally low in tannin.

What I've been drinking this month

I've been enjoying the natural wines of the pioneering Tuscan organic producer **Fattoria La Vialla** and appreciating the industriousness upon which their direct-sales approach is based. The sparkling **Le Chiffon 2014** is cloudy and sediment-laden, yet not deviant in flavour: texturally rich and alive with fruit flavours. The cloudy **Barricato Bianco 2013** (Vernaccia, presumably) was impressive, too: structured and hauntingly aromatic, with gentle, caressing acidity. They probed my comfort zone – and expanded my horizons.

No, because they're generally high in acidity.) We don't know our own subject.

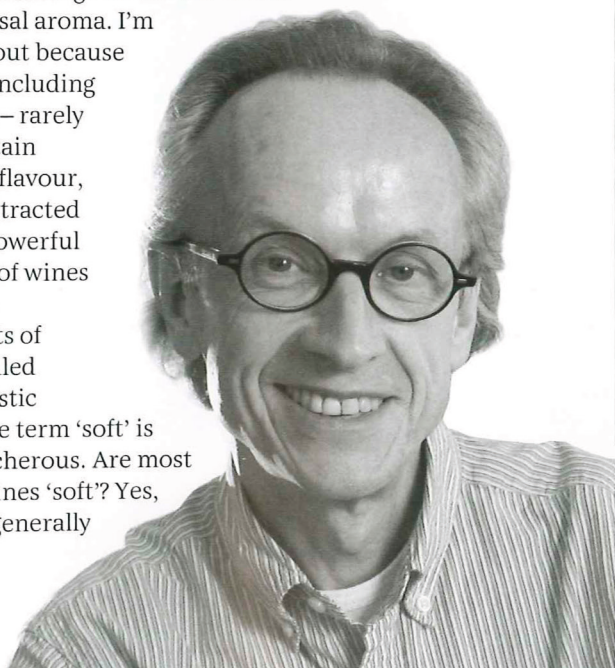
My column is short, so I'll address two key topics: tannin and acidity. I believe that tannin is key to all great red-wine creation. Almost all European fine or ambitious red wines begin life with natural skin tannin in abundance. The single quality most non-European competitors lack is succulent, copious tannins. (Napa is an exception, which is perhaps why its prices rival those of Bordeaux.) Even red Burgundy has a tannic presence, which other Pinots struggle to match, but styles of Burgundian extraction vary greatly. This is the basis for the gastronomic appeal of European fine red wine.

By natural skin tannin, I'm talking about those compounds that are derived from grape skins (and pips) during the different stages of fermentation and maceration, rather than something powdery spooned out of a bag or leached from a barrel.

This fundamental difference in tannin presence, mass and style is widely unremarked, and the issue seems to be little recognised outside Europe, where few red-wine makers even measure total phenolics. Nor is the very different personality of tannin profiles ever addressed (Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Tannat tannins can all be indigenously prolific, but each 'feels' very different, and bears a different relationship to fruit flavour and acidity in wine). Simply name-checking 'tannin' is not good enough.

Acidity is commented upon as if it were a simple, universal quality of all wines. However, there are vast differences in levels, flavours and styles of acidity, which is such a dominant component of flavour that on its own it can render a wine sublime or undrinkable. It's a vital aspect of terroir, since soils furnish varying levels of final acidity for the same grape variety in identical climate zones, often depending on potassium. Added acidity differs from natural acidity; so too does the acidity of unripe or barely ripe fruit compared to ripe or overripe.

All of this is there in the wines; all of this matters hugely – yet we carry on trading our pretty but whimsical allusions. **D**



Andrew Jefford is a *Decanter* contributing editor. Read his 'Jefford on Monday' blog on www.decanter.com/jefford