

## ON WINE TASTING

Calvin Trillin wrote an essay on wine tasting in the *New Yorker* in August 2003. He admits in the essay that he is an anti-wine snob who prefers beer, and his essay made fun of wine tasting. He described a blind tasting among wine experts in which red and white wines were served in black glasses, so the color of the wine was hidden. Trillin gloated that the experts could not always tell the difference between red and white wines, much less identify the grape and wine-growing region.

Trillin's making fun of wine tasting was like striking out the pitcher. There has been so much nonsense associated with wine tasting that it is easy to make fun of it, especially if you are as witty as Trillin.

Taste is so complex that any simplistic test can go awry for many reasons. I make coffee every morning, using, for a week or two, the same batch of beans which I keep in the freezer. I measure exactly, grind for the same length of time, use the same water, and brew at the same setting in the same machine. But the coffee never tastes the same. Some mornings it is extraordinarily delicious, and sometimes bitter and flavorless, depending on my mood, what food I have eaten or not eaten, how I slept, the temperature of the house, how hot or cold the coffee is in the cup, the left over aromas of what was cooked the night before, how much fuzz is on my tongue, what is on the breeze coming in the door, and, for all I know, the position of the stars and planets. Set up a black glass test for coffee, and I might fail it. Is it coffee or tea?

I have learned that different parts of your mouth taste certain things. The tip of the tongue tastes sweetness, the sides of the tongue taste acid, the middle of the tongue tastes tannin, the back of the tongue tastes alcohol. Or something like that. Tannin makes your mouth dry, and alcohol makes it water. Or something like that.

I may not always be able to tell red from white in a black glass, but almost every wine I put in my mouth has a different taste, and I can learn to recognize what I like and don't like. And what I like and don't like can change with time and experience.

A friend of mine in San Francisco shares my liking for Pinot Noir, and we have shared many bottles together. One day as I visited him he poured a glass of red wine for me and one for himself in the kitchen and brought the glasses into the living room where we were having a discussion. When we had finished the wine, I complimented him on what I thought was an excellent Pinot Noir. I asked him whose it was.

"Gallo Hearty Burgundy", he replied. I thought he was kidding. So he went into the kitchen, brought out the jug and poured me another glass. Damned if it wasn't the same wine, and it was delicious. I later learned that what Gallo puts into Hearty Burgundy bottles depends on what wines they have a surplus of, so sometimes Hearty Burgundy incorporates wine from a very good vintage. I have since had some Hearty Burgundy I did not like at all because I was led to buy it from that experience.

But I can usually tell the quality of a wine that I like and have some experience with. I have learned that I like Pinot Noir, for example, better than a half dozen other red varietals, but not all the time, of course. I can tell which regions I like the best. For example I prefer Pinot Noirs from the California central coast (Santa Barbara, San Luis, etc.) to those from Carneros, and Carneros over Napa, Napa more than Sonoma., and almost anywhere more than Oregon. Of course you could fool me with any particular wine from any particular region on any particular day, e.g. Hearty Burgundy. But you cannot fool me every time.

This week I had lunch at a new restaurant in Napa. I ordered a glass of Pinot Noir, selecting one from a Central Coast winery I was not familiar with. When the wine came I was surprised. It did not taste as I had expected it to. It was quite velvety, and it had a sharp, spicy-hot finish. I asked the waiter to tell me again the brand of the wine because it was very unusual in my experience and I liked it a lot. He brought the bottle to the table, and apologized. It was an Oregon Pinot Noir. He had made a mistake in pouring from the wrong bottle.

I learned then that my bias against Oregon Pinot Noirs needs adjustment, but I had been correct when the wine did not seem to me to be a typical Central Coast wine. (Of course, it COULD have been.)

Similarly, I like oaky Chardonnays; many others prefer the buttery French style. I like Chenin Blanc, especially with lobster. Few wineries produce Chenin Blanc; most people are indifferent to it. I won a bottle of Chenin Blanc at a fair last year by correctly identifying it in a blind tasting. The booth running the contest told me I was the first person to correctly identify it. I'll bet I was the only one who liked that wine and drank it every now and then.

For almost everyone, there are two kinds of wine: wine you like and wine you don't. But, the more you drink, the more discriminating your taste can become, if you let it, and if you work at it a bit. Then there will start to be wines you like more than others; there will be wines you are indifferent to as well as those you dislike. You will discover which varietals you enjoy most, and least, and from which regions. You will find that wineries each have different styles, so some brands will appeal to you more than others. You will learn that price is not a reliable measure of what you like and don't like, but it is one factor. Eventually, you will learn to recognize cherries in Carneros Pinot Noir, green peppers in Santa Barbara cab, and lemons in Napa valley floor Chardonnay; and be surprised when those tastes are not there or you find them in something else.

If you are lucky, then there will from time to time be a wine of a particular varietal, and region, and year that you absolutely love, that is wine *in excelsis*, in part because of the particular company and the particular food with which you drank it. You will remember that wine, and that occasion for a long, long time. You may also find that wine will never taste as good again.