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Party Time

Tips on conducting an in-home wine tasting and curbing inflated egos.

By Francis Fecteau

Wine-Know-It-Alls are curious creatures, designed to bring down every convivial moment at the pull of a cork. You know the type: They recite wineries visited and bottles bought, and they insist that what they smell in their glass is what you should smell in your glass. "What? Are you *serious*? You don't smell Malaysian tree-rat urine? I soooo get Malaysian tree rat Urine."



But there is no right or wrong answer on such things as wine aromas, despite their best insistence. Sense-memory is a palette of personal experience. Wine should bring people to the table, not drive them away.

Wine with friends should always be fun, and none should be allowed to indulge in their more boorish tendencies. Wine-Know-It-Alls should be banished to the back yard to sulk in their box of wine and boozy adjectives, where they can swap pretensions with one another and proclaim that a wine may be marsupial yet pouchless, jaunty yet joyless. I imagine a joyless circle of hell for these sorts.



However, if you must keep them in the room, the critical element in creating an enjoyable wine party is one that levels the playing field for all and allows for equal measures of input. My personal favorite, and a regular in my own wine party arsenal, is the "blind tasting." The party organizer takes responsibility for selecting the proper range of wines and gathering cash from attendees (a simple per-head charge to cover the cost of the wine). The organizer is critical: If you tell your friends to bring bottle X to the tasting, left to their own devices, they will no doubt bring bottle Y. And a wine party with 10 bottles of "critter" wines (wine bottles that feature adorable animals) will be a bore.

The wine-tasting party selection can encompass most anything; the critical element is variety. Wines can range from the very cheap to very expensive, cool climate vs. warm climate, or expressions of one varietal— for example Cabernets from Australia, South America, Napa, Sonoma, etc. Or, consider wines made from a variety of production styles (see the sparkling wine suggestion below). Wine variety and range of selection demonstrates contrasts, which help people develop their palates and thus their enjoyment.

Keep the wines in numbered brown paper bags. Firmly tape the bags around the bottle neck. Remove and hide the foils, corks, screwtops and such prior to your guest's arrival; it eliminates temptations to peek and cheat. Let people rate the wines on a scale of 1 to 10; subdivide the categories if you wish, with scores for aroma, flavor or texture.

Take notes and talk. I usually attach a scorecard for each guest. As the wines' identities are revealed, we all have a terrific laugh at each other's expense. "You liked that? Really?" And the best part? Everyone gets a little embarrassed and a little less intimidated— even the sulking wine expert in the corner.

My personal favorite blind-tasting focuses on sparkling wines. Nowhere in the wine universe are people more biased and less open in terms of style and selection. In a sparkling-wine tasting, my selections usually include a Spanish Cava, fizzy Prosecco from Italy, an American domestic sparkling wine or two (maybe one ultra-cheap, the other pricey), Moscato from Italy, an industrial production Champagne (such as Veuve Clicquot's Yellow Label Brut) along with a trendy grower Champagne. It's a global sampling of wine with bubbles and the results are eye-opening as egos deflate. At the very least, it's a good excuse to drink and laugh at (and with) your friends.

