

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

# WINE

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

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**WINE**

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This guide will give you the tools to persuade marvelling listeners that you are a connoisseur of rare ability and experience – without anybody discovering that, until you read it, all you really knew about wine was that it's red, white or somewhere in between.

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## IN VINO VERITAS

**W**ine has a mystique like no other drink and few other subjects. Many people are often defeated by it, thinking that in order to claim any knowledge of it they need to have visited various vineyards in France, to have a cellar (i.e., not a cupboard under the stairs), or to be able to identify exactly where a wine comes from without looking at the label.

This, needless to say, is nonsense. Long gone are the days when the wine drinker would ignore anything that didn't come from France or Germany. New World wine countries – Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Chile, Argentina and South Africa – have put themselves firmly on the map. Sleeping giants like Italy, Spain and Portugal are realising their potential with new and exciting styles. Even Greek wine, once a lost cause, has improved. The grapevine, in fact, is being cultivated in the most implausible places, from the hills of Maharashtra to the paddy-fields of Thailand and even the sheep-filled wilderness of Patagonia. And with global warming gathering pace, Falkland Islands Cabernet Franc and Greenland Gewürztraminer may not

be far off. The message to the bluffer, then, is not to be intimidated by the mystique.

Some familiarity with the old traditions and etiquette is desirable, however, so that you can take on the *bon viveur* at his or her own game. This guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones in which you are most likely to encounter wine and the wine expert, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer.

But it will do more. It will give you the tools to persuade legions of marvelling listeners that you are a connoisseur of rare ability and experience – without anybody discovering that, until you read it, all you really knew about wine was that it's red, white or somewhere in between.

## THE BASICS

**P**ut in the most simple terms, wine is fermented grape juice. People may make, talk about and even drink elderflower wine, peach wine, kiwi-fruit wine or whatever, but as a wine bluffer you do not need to know about them. And on no account discuss them. These fermented fruit concoctions have no mystique, and thus no bluffing potential.

Non-alcoholic wines are *not* wines. Wines, like some human beings, have an absolute need to be alcoholic. And they are made from grapes – and only grapes.

### COLOUR

Wine comes in three basic colours: red, white and rosé. To look like a pro, tilt the glass slightly away from you so that you can look through the edge of the wine where it touches the glass. This can give the most telling indication of hue, and therefore age. To look like a *poseur*, tilt the glass in front of a white background, such as a piece of paper. The best way to assess a wine's 'brightness' (intensity of colour) is to look down through the glass.

**Red** Ranges from purple to light brown. A bright, intense colour is an indication of youthfulness and, occasionally, higher acidity. Young wines tend to be bright all the way to the edge, but the colour fades at the edge, gradually turning brown, as the wine ages. Old reds often have a pale, brick-red colour. Colour is also determined by the grape variety and, more specifically, by the thickness of the grape skins, where the pigments are found. For example, thick-skinned Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah grapes produce darker, perhaps purple, wines; thin-skinned Pinot Noir might be a lighter cherry-red.

**White** Ranges from practically colourless through to pale green, straw-coloured, pale copper and deep gold to amber. Generally, very pale colours indicate a light, dry, unoaked wine, while deepening hues imply richer styles, possibly oaked and maybe sweeter. Colours usually deepen as the wine ages.

**Rosé** Ranges from the insipid pale-pink of so-called 'blush' wines from the USA, which taste as candy-like and confected as they look, to the bolder, deeper shades of metrosexual rosés from places like Navarra in Spain and Tavel in France's southern Rhône region.

## **SWEET AND DRY**

First, it's as well to remember that anything calling itself 'medium' is, in fact, sweet. Second, all wines (except those made from grapes affected by 'noble rot'; see 'Botrytis')

page 150) are naturally dry. The sweetness comes either from stopping the fermentation before all the sugar has been converted to alcohol, or from adding unfermented grape juice, or from adding sugar, usually in liquid form.

All this doesn't mean you should scorn sweet wines. The ignorant have turned up their noses at them for so long that a very rewarding bluffing line can be cultivated in, say, the little-known sweet white wines of the Loire, or the really fine German Auslesen, Beerenauslesen and Trockenbeerenauslesen. It is a relief to know that the last two can be shortened to BA and TBA, respectively. If you want to create a real frisson, then recommend an Austrian TBA from a place called Rust.

## **FORTIFICATION**

Most wines are unfortified – that is to say, they have only the alcohol provided by God in the form of sun and grapes. But some wines, like Port, Sherry, Madeira and the two venerable old white wines, Marsala and Malaga, are strengthened by the addition of anything from brandy to industrial alcohol. Fortified wines, like fortified towns, should not be taken lightly. They get you buzzing more quickly but can land you with the most appalling after-effects if you're not careful.

## **STILL OR SPARKLING**

This should be self-explanatory. Wines come in either thick, heavy bottles with corks wrapped round with wire which are impossible to get out, in which case they are

sparkling (i.e., fizzy, but for some reason this word must not be used of wines), or in ordinary bottles with ordinary corks which are impossible to get out, in which case they are still. The fun begins when you discover that many still wines are slightly fizzy, or rather, sparkling. Sometimes this is intentional, as with Portuguese Vinho Verde (literally 'green wine'). Even when it is not intentional, it's not necessarily considered a fault. The thing to do, in any case, is to say 'Hmm... slightly *pétillant*' (if it's French) or 'Possibly *spritzig*' (if it's German).

## UNDERSTANDING THE LABEL

You will come across one additional obstacle in the path of appreciating wine: that of deciphering the sometimes arcane and confusing information that is printed on the label. The worst offenders here are undoubtedly the Germans, who compound the sin of overcomplicating their wine nomenclature with the use of unreadable Gothic type. If you can understand a German wine label, you can understand anything. French wine labels, on the other hand, are the leaders in sheer pretentiousness:

***Grand Vin de Bordeaux*** Well, Bordeaux is a big area; the wine in question may not be all that grand.

***Château La Tour de St-Hippolyte*** Some jumped-up little wine is trying to bask in reflected glory.

***Appellation Bordeaux Supérieur Contrôlée*** Don't get too excited: the 'superior' just means it has a degree more alcohol.

***Cuvée fûts neufs*** Oh no! It tastes like a DIY cabinet!

***Millésime 1995*** Don't take this too seriously. It's just a printed number.

***Mis en Bouteille au Domaine*** Some guy with a mobile bottling line comes round to the backyard.

***French Wine Made by Australians*** The Aussies are getting their own back.

If German wine labels contain too much information (and they do), others contain too little. Greek wines are particular offenders. Not only do they tend to be named after Greek gods (Aphrodite, Bacchus), tragic heroes (Othello, Orestes) or – mystifyingly – lavatory cleansers (Demestica), their labels tell you precisely nothing about the vintage, region or anything else you want to know. On the other hand, given the quality of some Greek wines, this may be a sensible policy...

In general, the things to look for on labels so as to hold forth in the appropriate direction consist of the following:

**The vintage** This item is usually clearly visible. Some wines are non-vintage, but of course you know that the only acceptable non-vintage wines are Sherry (which hardly ever has a vintage) and Champagne.

**The grape variety** Don't expect this in all cases. The aristocratic wines, such as Bordeaux and Burgundy, for instance, don't specify their grape varieties. You're expected to know them.

**The country of origin** Always look for this: some bottles carry the mark of shame, aka *EU Tafelwein*. This means they have been dredged up from the European Wine Lake and bottled by bureaucrats.

**The region** Look for initials like AC and DOC (and more recently, AOP and IGP), which tell you that the wine comes from a designated area. With Italian wines, though, this is mostly a bad thing.

**Bottling information** Whether the wine has been bottled at the *château* or estate (always considered a good thing), in the country of origin, or not (always considered a bad thing).

## GREAT VINTAGES OF THE PAST

Vintages are like eighteenth-century battles. The French win most of them, the Germans put in the occasional brilliant victory, and the Italians don't try very hard.

It could be impressive, though probably completely useless, to be able to reel off a few of the great years of the past. Start with some of these below:

- The year of Halley's comet, 1811, and the year of Revolutions, 1848, are two easy ones to remember (probably easier to remember than to drink).
- Then, try 1870 – the clarets of that year took 80 years to come round – and the great pair of 1899 and 1900.
- Good vintages quite often come in pairs: 1928 and 1929, 1961 and 1962, 1970 and 1971, 1982 and 1983,

1985 and 1986, 1995 and 1996, 2000 and 2001, 2005 and 2006.

- On the other hand, good vintages also come singly: 1945, 1959, 1966, 1998, 2003. Or in trios: 1947, 1948 and 1949; 1988, 1989 and 1990; 2008, 2009 and 2010.

There are several things to note here:

1. When talking about great vintages, people always seem to mean great claret (otherwise known as Bordeaux) vintages.
2. Great claret vintages now occur, on average, about two years out of three.
3. So-called ‘vintages of the century’ occur at least twice a decade.

If someone says, ‘Of course, 1928 was a wonderful vintage for claret,’ you can try retorting, ‘Yes, but very poor for Tokay,’ or ‘Yes, but a freak rainstorm practically destroyed the vintage in the Barossa Valley.’ It’s highly unlikely that the other person will know anything about old vintages in obscure areas.

## **A BIT OF HISTORY**

The history of wine is very long and involved, stretching back as long as people have felt the need to pour a restorative glass after a long day’s work. Mercifully, you need deal only with the last century or so, because the vines in Europe, Africa, and very nearly everywhere else

were all but wiped out by a plague of aphids in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

This affliction, properly known as *Phylloxera vastatrix*, attacked and destroyed the roots of most grapevines. Fortunately it took nearly 30 years to do so. During that time – after trying various remedies which included the application of coffee grounds, incense and urine, and the burying of toads at the root – vine growers took the opportunity to import native vine rootstocks from the United States, which were partially resistant to the disease, and graft onto them what remained of the famous grape varieties.

Ironically, phylloxera is now destroying Californian vineyards, the Californians having subsequently (and unfortunately) planted some European grape varieties on less-than-totally-*phylloxera*-resistant rootstocks.

# ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT

**U**nlike some other art forms, wine has to be bought and consumed in order to be appreciated, so some type of initial investment is required. There are also a few bits of fairly vital equipment with which bluffers should familiarise themselves.

## A NOSE

90% of the ‘taste’ of wine is perceived via the olfactory bulb above your nostrils. The taste buds on your tongue can detect only five basic sensations – sweet, bitter, salty, sour and ‘umami’ (useful for Japanese food) – which is why your sense of taste is always impaired by a blocked nose. The prose tumbling forth from the mouths of wine critics comes from a higher plane.

The most legendary nose in the wine business was owned by the late Don José Ignacio Domecq, aka *El Nariz* (‘The Nose’), of the eponymous Sherry firm. His knowledgeable nose was long and beaky, able to penetrate the small, tapered Sherry glasses called *copitas* like the proboscis of a hummingbird. It is probably a case of natural selection,

given that the business was in his family for generations. Non-Sherry tasters do not need such an impressive hooter, but the equipment inside it must be operative.

## **CORKSCREW**

Wine comes in bottles with corks for which, unfortunately, no really satisfactory device for extraction has yet been invented. One can understand why, in the old days, choleric gentlemen used to decapitate bottles with red-hot pincers, but this is sadly out of fashion, and in any case difficult without a blazing fire. You should probably opt for a simple 'waiter's friend', with its unfolding, pocket-knife-inspired design. At the other extreme is the Screwpull Lever Corkscrew, which, at the price of a plane ticket from London to Bordeaux, is only for the serious, but enables even the feeblest to extract the most stubborn cork without perspiring.

Types of corkscrew to be avoided include the bulbous 'Russian doll' variety – you can't see what you're doing with it and the handle tends to come off mid-screw; the double-armed ratchet type, which has a drill-like action that can bore a hole through the cork and can catch your fingers in its ratchets; or the vacuum variety that pumps the air out – this can blow up the bottle. Go for the simplest kind so long as it has a good wire worm screw and a comfortable, firmly attached handle.

Bottles sealed with untwistable screwcaps render corkscrews obsolete – and old fogeys apoplectic. This is silly on two counts because screwcaps remove any chance

of a wine being ‘corked’, or infected by tainted corks, and can be opened quickly in case of emergency. Only the finest wines intended for lengthy ageing – i.e., nothing you would buy in a supermarket – might require a traditional cork. It is thought that the trace amounts of oxygen that pass through a cork *might* help with the ageing process, but the jury is still out on this one. Conversely, an airtight screw-capped wine cannot be ‘screwed’.



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wine should be drunk from a glass,  
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any watertight receptacle will do.

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Plastic corks, in contrast, are the work of the Devil, requiring biceps of steel to remove – or gelignite as a last resort.

## **A GLASS**

It is generally agreed that wine should be drunk from a glass, although for the desperate, any watertight receptacle will do. Glasses have the advantage of not affecting the flavour in the way that leather bottles, metal goblets and dancing slippers can. You can also see what you’re drinking. The kind of glass is relatively unimportant, although a tulip shape, which gathers the bouquet, guiding

it towards your nose (see 'Smell', page 30) is considered best for most wines. Otherwise, the simpler the better – it's easier to wash up.

Bluffers should at least be aware, however, of expensive Riedel glassware from Austria, whose natural habitat is in restaurants with starched linen and *sommeliers* (wine waiters to you and me). Basically, Riedel has created a range of more than 250 glasses, each designed to wring maximum pleasure from specific grape varieties and regions. A Riedel Chardonnay glass, for example, is shaped only for Chardonnay, to show off this wine's aromas to best effect, and guide the wine to the most Chardonnay-friendly part of the tongue. You should also know that squillions of Riedel glasses have been sold. As a bluffer, you could insist on these glasses when dining out, describing them (in the company's own words) as 'precision instruments to convey the message of the wine'. Secretly, you might regard them as tasting tools – for tools.

## **A DECANTER**

Many wine buffs believe that allowing a wine to 'breathe' before serving it is a good idea. This is based on the notion that exposing wine to oxygen helps it to 'open up' and release its bouquet. Simply removing the cork to allow a wine to breathe is useless because the surface area exposed to the air is so small. The best way to let it breathe properly is to pour some into a glass when you open the bottle. This not only increases the surface area exposed to oxygen, but enables you to snaffle a sneaky glass ahead of the game.

Alternatively, you could aerate your wine by pouring it into a decanter, but expect this to cause all sorts of ructions if a wine bore is present. According to the late Professor Émile Peynaud, one of the most revered oenologists in the history of Bordeaux, there is no valid reason for decanting a wine other than to remove any sediment that might be lurking at the bottom of the bottle. Thus, he believed it was pointless to decant anything other than venerable old red wines or vintage and crusted Port. Peynaud even argued that decanting old wines actually serves to diffuse the bouquet, causing them to fade rapidly. Decanting old wines, therefore, is a risky business: less so for everyday plonk.



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Decanting is easy, but it must be  
made to look as difficult as possible.

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Decanting is the process of pouring the contents into a decanter and stopping before the gunge gets in. It sounds easy. It *is* easy. But it must be made to look as difficult as possible. The aim is to make the performance resemble a Black Mass. A candle should be brought into use, supposedly so that you can see when the sediment reaches the neck, but rather more to induce a ceremonial atmosphere. Absolute silence must be observed and a look of rapt concentration maintained until the last drop of clear liquid has been transferred.

After this, a dramatic sigh, a wipe of the brow and momentary indication of emotional exhaustion, as of an actor having just played a great tragic role, may be called for to underline the risk involved. It is particularly important to sniff the cork of the bottle being decanted: it may then be attached to the neck of the decanter. This is roughly equivalent to handing back to the patient an organ that has been surgically removed.

The decanting of white wines has usually been considered unnecessary. Besides, the visual effect could be unpleasantly medical (which is perhaps why white wine is usually put in green bottles). Nevertheless, an effective gambit is to insist on the decanting of fine white Burgundy, especially Meursault and *grand cru* Chablis. For the unscrupulous, this is also a way of passing off your heavily oaked and inexpensive white Rioja or Chardonnay as something more classy. And by all means decant an inexpensive Port if you want to pass it off as vintage.

## **CELLAR AND STORAGE**

Bluffers should not be afraid to talk about their 'cellar', even if they don't possess anything remotely approximating an underground room. A 'cellar' for these purposes is a collection of at least two bottles, or possibly a single bottle of reasonable quality. If you're keeping wine for any length of time, however, there are two important rules to observe:

1. To keep corks from drying out and letting air in, bottles should be kept lying down or, better still, upside down. This will look suitably eccentric, but it

is in fact a relatively common way of transporting or storing wine.

2. Wine should be kept somewhere with a reasonably constant temperature, preferably not above 15.5°C: roughly like a fairly cool day. This is likely to be impossible to achieve, however, in which case it's best to remember that a constant temperature of 21°C is better than a fluctuation between 4.5°C and 15.5°C. The other solution, of course, is simply to drink your wine quickly before it has a chance to go off.

Poor cellaring conditions do have one advantage, however: wine will mature more quickly in them. For example, certain Bordeaux vintages that have taken ages to come around (1970, 1975) might be greatly improved by a spell in a centrally heated flat.

## **TEMPERATURE CONTROL**

After aroma, taste and texture, temperature is the fourth dimension of wine, and it exerts a huge influence on the whole sensory package. Served too cold, white wines lose much of their aroma and flavour – which is no bad thing with a bottle of ‘paint stripper’ but a tragic waste of anything rich and complex, like a fine white Burgundy. Describe a red wine that is served too warm as ‘flabby’ and ‘unfocused’, and complain that the alcohol dominates. Argue that the cruel practice of pre-warming reds on Agas and radiators lends new meaning to the term ‘cooking wine’ and should be banned along with seal clubbing. The

accepted rule these days is that most red wines should be served at room temperature (the French term is *chambré*) and most white wines lightly chilled – that is to say, having spent an hour in the fridge or 12 minutes in the freezer.

Wine snobs tend to be suspicious of the freezer, which really suggests that they once forgot to remove a bottle before it exploded or the contents turned into a Slush Puppie. If, however, you're absolutely gagging for a thoroughly chilled glass of white, and your bottle is stubbornly warm, a wizard wheeze is to pour a glass into a resealable freezer bag and stick it in the freezer for a short spell.

The general consensus is that the optimum temperature for big, spicy reds like Aussie Shiraz, red Rhône and Zinfandel is about 18°C. Medium-bodied reds like Rioja and Chianti are better a few degrees cooler at around 16°C. Fuller-bodied, complex whites like the above-mentioned Burgundy or rich, oaky New World Chardonnays project well at around 12–14°C. Medium to lighter-bodied whites such as Chablis and Sauvignon Blanc are good at about nine or 10 degrees, as is a crisp rosé. Err on the cool side when serving, as a glass of wine warms quickly in your cupped hands: *chaleur de la main*, as the French call it.

It's terribly fashionable to chill certain red wines these days, and the bluffer needs to be *au fait* with the styles where this is socially acceptable. These include lighter-bodied, unoaked, juicy reds like Beaujolais (made from the Gamay grape), Loire reds (Cabernet Franc), and lighter-bodied Pinot Noir, Barbera and Valpolicella.

A light chill seems to exaggerate both their smooth texture and crisp acidity.

You should also chill dry fino Sherry, tawny Port and sweet wines like Sauternes and Muscat de Beauges-de-Venise to show that you seem to know what you are doing.

There is, of course, an intermediate state between chilled and *chambré*, namely cellar temperature. This is a very useful category because it can mean the temperature the wine happens to be when you have forgotten to chill or warm it.