

Today marks the first foray into a new column where Chris Lake, director of the Southern Oregon Wine Institute (SOWI) at Umpqua Community College, and I will discuss topics of general interest related to the art and science of grape growing and winemaking. Chris' background is viticulture, or grape growing, so he'll be focusing on vineyard issues while my training has centered on enology, or winemaking.

I'd like to begin our commentary by discussing what I think is a somewhat vague concept to most wine consumers: wine balance. The general idea of wine balance is fairly straightforward. Balance is achieved when the different elements in a wine interact harmoniously, with no one aspect of the taste or aroma overpowering the others. In fact, because no one aspect is dominating another each aspect may be experienced individually at different times and the interaction of these components together makes for a more pleasing and interesting experience. That sounds great, but what are we actually talking about?

One of my favorite authors on the topic of wine balance is the late French wine educator and consultant Emile Peynaud. Peynaud's book "The Taste of Wine" gives a detailed framework about how the different taste components in wine interact. Peynaud stated that the main taste components effecting balance in white wines were acid and sweetness, while those affecting red wine balance are acid, sweetness, and astringency. Let's explore the interaction of these components in more detail.

Sweet and Sour

The major factor in white wine balance is the interaction between acidity and perceived sweetness. The tastes of acidity and sweetness counteract each other. A simple example of this is lemon juice, a product so tart that few taste it alone, may be transformed into pleasantly refreshing lemonade by the addition of large quantities of sugar. Like lemonade, all wines also contain acids which make wines taste tart and refreshing. Some wines, most commonly whites, contain some amount of sugar to counteract the acidity. A slightly complicating factor in wine is that alcohol and chemical compounds derived from oak barrels can give us the impression of sweetness without sugar. Thus higher alcohol wines and those exposed to new barrels during aging can seem slightly sweet without actually containing any sugar.

Astringency

Red wines are slightly more complicated because they contain chemicals called tannins which give wines astringency. Astringency is not strictly a taste, instead it is the feeling of roughness or dryness inside the mouth caused by tannins which are derived from the skins and seeds of grapes. Red wines are made in contact with the skins and seeds of the grape and thus red wines have much higher levels of astringency than white wines. Astringency levels in red wines vary significantly among grape varieties and wine styles. For instance, generally a Pinot Noir will be less astringent than a Cabernet Sauvignon. The feeling of astringency is increased when wine acidity is increased, so tart wines are generally less astringent than lower acid wines. Astringency is also affected by sweetness, with increasing sweetness decreasing the feeling of astringency. Until recently most red wines did not have sugar left in them, but the perception of sweetness could be increased by increasing both the alcohol content and new oak influence.

Balance Achieved?

Peynaud described balance in red wine as a competing triangle between the perceptions of sweet, sour, and astringent. Wines that contain higher amounts of acid without sugar or the perception of sweetness may be described as tart, acidic, or green, while those containing too little acid or too much sugar may seem flabby, flat, or rich (sometimes called cloying in wine reviews). Wines with too much astringency can be described as severe, harsh, rough, and tannic. Wines with “balance” are described as well structured, round, mellow, or harmonious.

Wines with a balanced taste profile of sweetness, sourness, and astringency are the goal, but there is still a lot of wiggle room for winemakers to express themselves stylistically. The winemaker may make a refreshing Riesling with high acidity and low alcohol, but moderated by a noticeable amount of residual sugar. Or she may make a tart, lively Pinot Noir with lower astringency so that the wine doesn't seem overly harsh. Or He may make a big, burly Cabernet with loads of astringency, but mellowed by high alcohol content and very low acidity. These wines will taste very different but each may still be considered a balanced wine if the interaction between the different tastes is harmonious.

Finally, wine reviewers also talk about balance with regard to aromas in wine. Here again the idea of balance is that one character of the wine aroma; be it fruity, oaky, vegetable, or other aromas does not dominate. Instead these aromas share the stage together and thus make the wine complex and interesting. For example, recently there has been heated discussion in the industry about “over-oaked” wines. The resulting backlash against wines with too much oak aroma has produced a whole new category of “un-oaked” or “naked” wines. So what is balanced? As you might imagine from the large selection of wine styles available, at some level the idea of balance in wine becomes an issue of personal preference. Like beauty, wine balance is ultimately in the eye of the beholder.