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# Exploring Wine

## FOR DUMMIES®

By Ed McCarthy and Mary Ewing-Mulligan

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# Introduction

**W**e love wine. We love the way it tastes, we love the fascinating variety of wines in the world, and we love the way wine brings people together at the dinner table. We believe that you and everyone else should be able to enjoy wine – regardless of your experience or your budget.

But we'll be the first to admit that wine people, such as many wine professionals and really serious connoisseurs, don't make it easy for regular people to enjoy wine. You have to know strange names of grape varieties and foreign wine regions. You have to figure out whether to buy a £20-a-bottle wine or a £5-a-bottle wine that seem to be pretty much the same thing. You even need a special tool to open the bottle once you get it home!

All this complication surrounding wine will never go away, because wine is a very rich and complex field. But you don't have to let the complication stand in your way. With the right attitude and a little understanding of what wine is, you can begin to buy and enjoy wine. And if, like us, you decide that wine is fascinating, you can find out more and turn it into a wonderful hobby.

Because we hate to think that wine, which has brought so much pleasure into our lives, could be the source of anxiety for anyone, we want to help you feel more comfortable around wine. Some knowledge of wine, gleaned from the pages of this book and from our shared experiences, will go a long way toward increasing your comfort level.

Ironically, what will *really* make you feel comfortable about wine is accepting the fact that you'll never know it all – and that you've got plenty of company.

You see, after you really get a handle on wine, you discover that *no one* knows everything there is to know about wine. There's just too much information, and it's always changing. And when you know that, you can just relax and enjoy the stuff.





# Wine 101

## IN THIS ARTICLE

- *Transforming grapes into wine*
- *Finding out what red wine has that white wine doesn't*
- *Discovering the differences between table wine, fortified wine, and sparkling wine*

**P**lenty of people enjoy drinking wine but don't know much about it. Knowing a lot of information about wine definitely isn't a prerequisite to enjoying it. But familiarity with certain aspects of wine can make choosing wines a lot easier, enhance your enjoyment of wine, and increase your comfort level.

## How Wine Happens

Wine is, essentially, nothing but liquid, fermented fruit. Most wines in the world – 99.9 per cent – are made from grapes, but you can substitute raspberries or any other fruit.

After the grapes are crushed, *yeasts* (tiny one-celled organisms that exist naturally in the vineyard and, therefore, on the grapes) come into contact with the sugar in the grapes' juice and gradually convert that sugar into alcohol. Yeasts also produce carbon dioxide, which evaporates into the air. When the yeasts are done working, your grape juice is wine. The sugar that was in the juice is no longer there – alcohol is present instead. (The riper and sweeter the grapes, the more alcohol the wine will have.) This process is called *fermentation*.

If every winemaker actually made wine in this crude a manner, you'd be drinking some pretty rough stuff that would hardly inspire someone to write a wine book. But today's winemakers have a bag of tricks as big as a sumo wrestler's appetite. That's one reason why no two wines ever taste exactly the same.

Winemakers can control the type of container they use for the fermentation process (stainless steel and oak are the two main materials), as well as the size of the container and the temperature of the juice during fermentation – and every one of these choices can make a big difference in the taste of the wine. After fermentation, they can choose how long to let the wine *mature* (a stage when the wine sort of gets its act together) and in what kind of container. Fermentation can last three days or three months, and the wine can then mature for a couple of weeks or a couple of years or anything in between.

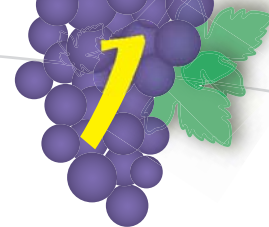


If you have trouble making decisions, don't ever become a winemaker.

## Local flavour

Obviously, one of the biggest factors in making one wine different from the next is the nature of the raw material, the grape juice. Different varieties of grapes (Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, or Merlot, for example) make different wines.

Grapes, the raw material of wine, don't grow in a void. Where they grow – the soil and climate of each wine region, as well as the traditions and goals of the people who grow the grapes and make the wine – affects the nature of the ripe grapes, and the taste of the wine made from those grapes.



## What Colour Is Your Appetite?

Your inner child will be happy to know that when it comes to wine, it's okay to like some colours more than others. You can't get away with saying "I don't like green food!" much beyond your sixth birthday, but you can express a general preference for white, red, or pink wine for all your adult years.

### (Not exactly) white wine

Whoever coined the term "white wine" must have been colourblind. All you have to do is look at it to see that it's not white, it's yellow.

*White wine* is wine without any red colour (or pink colour, which is in the red family). *White Zinfandel*, a popular pink wine, isn't white wine. But yellow wines, golden wines, and wines that are as pale as water are all white wines.

Wine becomes white wine in one of two ways:

✓ White wine can be made from white grapes – which, by the way, aren't white. *White* grapes are greenish, greenish yellow, golden yellow, or sometimes even pinkish yellow. Basically, white grapes include all the grape types that are not dark red or dark blue. If you make a wine from white grapes, it's a white wine.

✓ The second way a wine can become white is a little more complicated. The process involves using red grapes – but only the *juice* of red grapes, not the grape skin. The juice of most red grapes has no red pigmentation – only the skins do – and so a wine made with only the juice of red grapes can be a white wine. In practice, though, very few white wines come from red grapes. (Champagne is one exception.)



Serve white wines cool, but not ice-cold. Sometimes restaurants serve white wines too cold, and you have to wait for the wine to warm up before you drink it. If you usually drink your wine cold, try drinking your favourite white wine a little less cold sometime, and you'll discover it has more flavor that way.

## Is white always right?

You can drink white wine anytime you like – which, for most people, means as a drink without food or with lighter foods.

White wines are often considered *apéritif* wines, meaning wines consumed before dinner, in place of cocktails, or at parties. (If you ask the officials who busy themselves defining such things, an *apéritif* wine is a wine that has flavours added to it, as vermouth does. But unless you're in the business of writing wine labels for a living, don't worry about that.)

A lot of people like to drink white wines when the weather is hot because they're more refreshing than red wines, and they're usually drunk chilled (the wines, not the people).

### There's no such thing as plain white wine

White wines fall into four general taste categories, not counting sparkling wine or the really sweet white wine that you drink with dessert. Here are the four broad categories:

- ✓ Some white wines are *fresh, unoaked whites* – crisp and light, with no sweetness and no oaky character. Most Italian white wines, like Soave and Pinot Grigio, and some French whites, like Sancerre and some Chablis wines, fall into this category.
- ✓ Some white wines are *earthy whites* – dry, fuller-bodied, unoaked or lightly oaked, with a lot of earthy character. Some French wines, such as Mâcon or whites from the Côtes du Rhône region, have this taste profile.
- ✓ Some white wines are *aromatic whites* – characterized by intense aromas and flavours that come from their particular grape variety, whether they're *off-dry* (that is, not bone-dry) or dry. Examples include a lot of German wines, and wines from flavourful grape varieties such as Riesling or Viognier.
- ✓ Finally, some white wines are rich, oaky whites – dry or fairly dry, and full-bodied with pronounced oaky character. Most Chardonnays and many French wines – like many of those from the Burgundy region of France – fall into this group.

## Red, red wine

In this case, the name is correct: Red wines really are red. They can be purple red, ruby red, or garnet, but they're red.

Red wines are made from grapes that are red or bluish in colour. So guess what wine people call these grapes? Black grapes!

The most obvious difference between red wine and white wine is colour. The red colour occurs when the colourless juice of red grapes stays in contact with the dark grape skins during fermentation and absorbs the skins' colour. Along with colour, the grape skins give the wine *tannin*, a substance that's an important part of the way a red wine tastes. The presence of tannin in red wines is actually the most important taste difference between red wines and white wines.

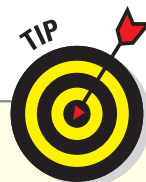
Red wines vary quite a lot in style, partly because winemakers have so many ways of adjusting their red-winemaking to achieve the kind of wine they want. For example, if winemakers leave the juice in contact with the skins for a long time, the wine becomes more *tannic* (firmer in the mouth, like strong tea; tannic wines can make you pucker). If winemakers drain the juice off the skins sooner, the wine is softer and less tannic.

Thanks to the wide range of red wine styles, you can find red wines to go with just about every type of food and every occasion when you want to drink wine (except the times when you want to drink a wine with bubbles, because most bubbly wines are white or pink).

### WARNING!



One sure way to spoil the fun in drinking most red wines is to drink them too cold. Those tannins can taste really bitter when the wine is cold – just as in a cold glass of very strong tea. On the other hand, many restaurants serve red wines too warm. If the bottle feels cool to your hand, that's a good temperature.



Red wine tends to be consumed more often as part of a meal than as a drink on its own.

There's no such thing as just plain red wine. Here are four red wine styles:

✓ *Soft, fruity reds* are relatively light-bodied, with a lot of fruitiness and little tannin (like Beaujolais Nouveau wine from France, some Valpolicellas from Italy, and many cheaper U.S. wines).

✓ *Mild-mannered reds* are medium-bodied with subtle, un-fruity flavours (like less expensive wines from Bordeaux, in France and some inexpensive Italian reds).

✓ *Spicy reds* are flavourful, fruity wines with spicy accents and some tannin (such as some Malbecs from France or Argentina, and Dolcettos from Italy).

✓ *Powerful reds* are full-bodied and tannic (such as the most expensive California Cabernets; Barolo, from Italy; the most expensive Australian reds; and lots of other expensive reds).



## Are there any wines without sulphites?

Sulphur dioxide exists naturally in wine as a result of fermentation. It also exists naturally in other fermented foods, such as bread, cookies, and beer. (Various sulphur derivatives are also used regularly as preservatives in packaged foods.)

Winemakers use sulphur dioxide at various stages of the winemaking process because it stabilizes the wine (preventing it from turning to vinegar or deteriorating from oxygen exposure) and safeguards its flavour. Sulphur has been an

important winemaking tool since Roman times.

Very few winemakers refrain from using sulphur dioxide, but some do. Your wine shop may carry a few wines whose sulfite content is so low that their labels do not have to carry the phrase *Contains Sulphites*.

Some people complain that they can't drink red wines without getting a headache or feeling ill. Usually, they blame the sulphites in the wine. Red wines, however, contain far less sulphur than white

wines. That's because the tannin in red wines acts as a preservative, making sulphur dioxide less necessary. Red wines do contain histamine-like compounds and other substances derived from the grape skins that could be the culprits. Whatever the source of the discomfort, it's probably not sulphites.

So if you wish to limit your consumption of sulphites, dry red wines should be your first choice, followed by dry white wines. Sweet wines contain the most sulphur dioxide.



## A rose is a rose, but a rosé is “white”

Rosé wines are pink wines. Rosé wines are made from red grapes, but they don't end up red because the grape juice stays in contact with the red skins for a very short time – only a few hours, compared to days or weeks for red wines. Because this *skin contact* (the period when the juice and the skins intermingle) is brief, rosé wines absorb very little tannin from the skins. Therefore, you can chill rosé wines and drink them as you would white wines.

Of course, not all rosé wines are called rosés. Many rosé wines today are called *blush* wines – a term invented by wine marketers to avoid the word *rosé*, because back in the '80s, pink wines weren't very popular. Lest someone figures out that *blush* is a synonym for *rosé*, the labels call these wines *white*. But even a child can see that White Zinfandel is really pink.



The blush wines that call themselves *white* are fairly sweet. Wines labeled *rosé* can be sweetish, too, but some wonderful rosés from Europe (and a few from America, too) are *dry* (not sweet). Some hardcore wine lovers hardly ever drink rosé wine, but many wine drinkers are discovering what a pleasure a good rosé wine can be, especially in warm weather.

## Other Ways of Categorizing Wine

Regular wines – red, white, or pink – without bubbles are called *light* wines in Europe and *table* wines in America. Sometimes they're even referred to as *still* wines because they don't have bubbles moving around in them.

### Table wine

*Table wine*, or light wine, is fermented grape juice whose alcohol content falls within a certain range. Furthermore, table wine is not bubbly. (Some table wines have a very slight carbonation, but not enough to disqualify them as table wines.) According to U.S. standards of identification, table wines may have an alcohol content no higher than 14 per cent; in Europe, light wine must contain from 8.5 per cent to 14 per

cent alcohol by volume (with a few exceptions). So unless a wine has more than 14 per cent alcohol or has bubbles, it's a table wine or a light wine in the eyes of the law.



Here's a real-world definition of table wines: They're the normal, nonbubbly wines that most people drink most of the time.

### Liqueur wine

Many wines have more than 14 per cent alcohol because the winemaker added alcohol during or after the fermentation. That's an unusual way of making wine, but some parts of the world, like the Sherry region in Spain and the Port region in Portugal, have made quite a specialty of it.

In Europe, this category of wines is called *liqueur wines*, which carries the same connotation of sweetness. Another term is *fortified*, which suggests that the wine has been strengthened with additional alcohol.



*Dessert wine* is the legal terminology for these sweet wines, probably because they're usually sweet and often enjoyed after dinner. That term is misleading because dessert wines aren't *always* sweet and aren't *always* consumed after dinner. (Dry Sherry is categorized as a dessert wine, for example, but it's dry, and some people drink it before dinner.)

## Sparkling wine

Sparkling wines are wines that contain carbon dioxide bubbles. Carbon dioxide gas is a natural byproduct of fermentation, and winemakers sometimes decide to trap it in the wine. Just about every country that makes wine also makes sparkling wine.

In Europe, the United States, and Canada, *sparkling wine* is the official name for the category of wines with bubbles. Isn't it nice when everyone agrees?

Champagne (with a capital C) is the most famous sparkling wine – and probably the most famous *wine*, for that matter. Champagne is a specific type of sparkling wine (made from certain grape varieties and produced in a certain way) that comes from a region in France called Champagne. It's the undisputed Grand Champion of Bubbles.



Unfortunately for the people of Champagne their wine is so famous that the name *champagne* has been borrowed again and again by producers elsewhere, until the word has become synonymous with practically the whole category of sparkling wines. For example, until a recent agreement between the United States and the European Union, U.S. winemakers could legally call any sparkling wine *champagne* – even with a capital C, if they wanted – as long as the carbonation was not added artificially. Even now, those American wineries that were already using that name may continue to do so. (They do have to add a qualifying geographic term such as *American* or *Californian* before the word Champagne, however.)

For the French, limiting the use of the name *champagne* to the wines of the Champagne region is a *cause célèbre*. European Union regulations not only prevent any other member country from calling its sparkling wines *champagne* but also prohibit the use of terms that even *suggest* the word *champagne*, such as fine print on the label saying that a wine was made by using the “champagne method.” What's more, bottles of sparkling wine from countries outside the European Union that use the word champagne on the label are banned from sale in Europe. The French are that serious.

## Keeping Leftover Wine

A sparkling-wine stopper, a device that fits over an opened bottle, is really effective in keeping any remaining Champagne or sparkling wine fresh (often for several days) in the refrigerator. But what do you do when you have red or white wine left in the bottle?

You can put the cork back in the bottle if it still fits, and put the bottle into the refrigerator. (Even red wines will stay fresher there; just take the bottle out to warm up about an hour before serving it.) But four other methods are also reliable in keeping your remaining wine from oxidizing. These techniques are all the more effective if you put the bottle in the fridge after using them:

✓ If you have about half a bottle of wine left, simply pour the wine into a clean, empty half-sized wine bottle and recork the smaller bottle. We sometimes buy wines in half-bottles, just to make sure that we have the empty half-bottles around.

✓ Use a handy, inexpensive, miniature pump called a Vacuvin in most wine stores. This pump removes oxygen from the bottle, and the rubber stoppers that come with it prevent additional oxygen from entering the bottle. It's supposed to keep your wine fresh for up to a week, but it doesn't always work that well, in our experience.

✓ Buy small cans of inert gas in some wine shops. Just squirt a few shots of the gas into the bottle through a skinny straw, which comes with the can, and put the cork back in the bottle. The gas displaces the oxygen in the bottle, thus protecting the wine from oxidizing. Simple and effective. Private Preserve is a good brand, and highly recommended.

✓ A new device, called WineSavor, is a flexible plastic disk that you roll up and insert down the bottle's neck. Once inside the bottle, the disk opens up and floats on top of the wine, blocking the wine from oxygen.

To avoid all this bother, just drink the wine! Or, if you're not too fussy, just place the leftover wine in the refrigerator and drink it in the next day or two – before it goes into a coma.



# Grape Expectations: Grape Varieties

## IN THIS ARTICLE

- *Sorting out the traits of grapes*
- *Exploring white grape varieties*
- *Talking about red grape varieties*

Grapes are the starting point of every wine, and therefore they're largely responsible for the style and personality of each wine. Grapes also are one of the easiest ways to classify wine and make sense of the hundreds of different types of wine that exist.

### REMEMBER



The specific grape variety (or varieties) that makes any given wine is largely responsible for the sensory characteristics the wine offers — from its appearance to its aromas, its flavours, and its alcohol–tannin–acid profile. How the grapes grow — the amount of sunshine and moisture they get, for example, and how ripe they are when they're harvested — can emphasize certain characteristics rather than others. So can winemaking processes such as oak aging. Each grape variety reacts in its own way to the farming and winemaking techniques that it faces.

### REMEMBER



Skin colour is the most fundamental distinction among grape varieties. Every grape variety is considered either a white variety or a red (or "black") one, according to the colour of its skins when the grapes are ripe. (A few red-skinned varieties are further distinguished by having red pulp rather than white pulp.)

## What a Personality! Personality Traits of Grape Varieties

*Grape variety* refers to the fruit of a specific type of grapevine — the fruit of the Cabernet Sauvignon vine, for example, or of the Chardonnay vine. *Personality traits* are the characteristics of the fruit itself — its flavours, for example.

Individual grape varieties also differ from one another in other ways:

- ✓ **Aromatic compounds:** Some grapes (like Muscat) contribute floral aromas and flavours to their wine, for example, while other grapes contribute herbaceous notes (as Sauvignon Blanc does) or fruity character. Some grapes have very neutral aromas and flavours and, therefore, make fairly neutral wines.
- ✓ **Acidity levels:** Some grapes are naturally disposed to higher acid levels than others, which influences the wine made from those grapes.
- ✓ **Thickness of skin and size of the individual grapes (called *berries*):** Black grapes with thick skins naturally have more tannin than grapes with thin skins; ditto for small-berried varieties compared to large-berried varieties, because their skin-to-juice ratio is higher. More tannin in the grapes translates into a firmer, more tannic red wine.

The composite personality traits of any grape variety are fairly evident in wines made from that grape. A Cabernet Sauvignon wine is almost always more tannic and slightly lower in alcohol than a comparable Merlot wine, for example, because that's the nature of those two grapes.

## Built for Speed: The Performance Factors of Grape Varieties

*Performance factors* refer to how the grapevine grows, how its fruit ripens, and how quickly it can get from 0 to 60 miles per hour.

The performance factors that distinguish grape varieties are vitally important to the grape grower because those factors determine how easy or challenging it will be for him to cultivate a specific variety in his vineyard – if he can even grow it at all. The issues include

- ✓ How much time a variety typically needs to ripen its grapes
- ✓ How dense and compact the bunches of grapes are
- ✓ How much vegetation a particular variety tends to grow



## A Primer on White Grape Varieties

This section includes descriptions of the most important white *vinifera* varieties today, as well as the types of wine that are made from each grape. These wines can be varietal wines or place-name wines that don't mention the grape variety anywhere on the label (a common practice for European wines). These grapes can also be blending partners for other grapes, in wines made from multiple grape varieties.

### Chardonnay

Chardonnay is a regal grape for its role in producing the greatest dry white wines in the world — white Burgundies — and for being one of the main grapes of Champagne. Today, Chardonnay also ends up in a huge amount of everyday wine.

The Chardonnay grape grows in practically every wine-producing country of the world, for two reasons:

- ✓ It's relatively adaptable to a wide range of climates.
- ✓ The name Chardonnay on a wine label is, these days, a surefire sales tool.

Because the flavours of Chardonnay are very compatible with those of oak, most Chardonnay wine receives some oak treatment either during or after fermentation. Except for Northeastern Italy and France's Chablis and Mâconnais districts, where oak is usually not used for Chardonnay, oaky Chardonnay wine is the norm, and unoaked Chardonnay is the exception.

Chardonnay itself has fruity aromas and flavours that range from apple – in cooler wine regions – to tropical fruits, especially pineapple, in warmer regions. Chardonnay also can display subtle earthy aromas, such as mushroom or minerals. Chardonnay wine has medium to high acidity and is generally full-bodied. Classically, Chardonnay wines are dry. But most inexpensive Chardonnays these days are actually a bit sweet.

Chardonnay is a grape that can stand on its own in a wine, and the top Chardonnay-based wines (except for Champagne and similar bubblys) are 100 per cent Chardonnay.



Oaked Chardonnay is so common that some wine drinkers confuse the flavour of oak with the flavour of Chardonnay. If your glass of Chardonnay smells or tastes toasty, smoky, spicy, vanilla-like, or butterscotch-like, that's the oak you're perceiving, not the Chardonnay!