

Wine Country Minute 00:60

Expert's Picks Answers to Your Questions About Wine



You have questions about wine. We promised answers. Here's the first in a series of experts' responses to questions from Wine Country Minute readers. We reached out to Steven Izzo, Sommelier and Wine Director of San Francisco's Waterbar Restaurant for his perspective.

Q: How should I differentiate among various aromas in wines?

A: Try experiencing as many wines as you can.

I always think about freshness first. Your nose is the first thing a wine attacks. You want a pleasant aroma. Does this wine smell fresh, good? Second, wine is made from a very sweet berry so it should have some fruit quality. Do you smell apple or citrus?

Then, what are the non-fruit qualities? That can be anything from florals to earthy smells like mushroom to cooking spices like nutmeg and cinnamon. Finally, is the alcohol really strong in my nose; is there a burning? That's going to show if the wine is out of balance.

You want to go from overall freshness to the fruit qualities to the non-fruit qualities; and I always think about alcohol, too.

Try smelling a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc next to a Sonoma County Chardonnay - big difference. The Sauvignon Blanc is going to have strong citrusy and grassy aromas, almost a jalapeno pepper smell. Domestic Chardonnay is going to have a lot of oak aromas, cooking spices, more tree fruit like apples and pears and less citrus.

There's hundreds and hundreds of aromas that can be pulled out of wines. A great thing to do is get the Wine Aroma Wheel developed by Ann Noble at the University of California, Davis. It really breaks down aromas.

Q: I would like to know wine better. How do I narrow down the topic?

A: The first step, and we think you'll like this one, is start with wines you enjoy drinking. If you had a pinot noir with dinner and you liked it, try another one the next time you go to a restaurant, or even more useful, a local wine shop.

The next step might be looking at a reference book to find out a bit more about the wines you like. You might read up on different styles, like how California coastal pinot noirs are made compared to French Burgundy. (A red wine from Burgundy generally is a pinot noir; one of the tricky things about wines is they often have aliases.)

The best thing to do is create a relationship with a wine shop or two so you can tell them what you like and what you're ready to spend and then see what they recommend. They'll get to know you; you'll get to know them. That's how I explore the world of wine myself.