

What Makes Wine Great?

The ultimate question for wine drinkers has some surprising answers.

BY KAREN MACNEIL

Over the course of my 30 years in the wine industry, I've often heard the phrase, "A wine is good if you like it." Good? Maybe. But *great* wine is most certainly not great merely because we like it. Liking a wine is subjective. If you're in a charming café on the French Riviera with the person you love, even a mediocre wine tastes just fine.

But knowing when a wine is truly great is different. It requires that we attempt a larger understanding of why certain wines have garnered respect and why, over time, they've been cherished for their integrity and beauty. In other words, objectively speaking, what makes a great wine great?

This is the most central question any wine drinker could ask, for who doesn't want to drink at the top of the pyramid? After decades pondering this question (and tasting thousands of wines a year), I've come to the conclusion that all great wines share nine essential attributes. Here they are.

DISTINCTIVENESS In the simplest sense, if you buy a Granny Smith apple, you want it to taste like one. In fact, the more Granny Smith-ish the Granny Smith apple is, the more it can be appreciated for what it is and savored for what it is. Great wines are like that. They are great because they are distinctive, not because they exhibit sameness.

BALANCE Balance is the characteristic a wine possesses when all its major components (acid, alcohol, fruit, and tannin) are in equilibrium. Because no one component sticks out more than any of the others, a balanced wine has a kind of harmonious tension of opposites. I often think of a Thai soup when I think of balance—sweetness, heat, acidity, spice—they're all there in perfect contrapuntal tension with one another, and as a result the soup tastes harmonious.

PRECISION Great wines do not have flavors that are muddled or blurry, but rather flavors that are precise, well-defined, and expressive.

Remember those old-style radios? If you didn't dial in the frequency perfectly, you could still hear the music, but the integrity and beauty of the music were lost in static. Using sound as a metaphor for flavor, I would offer that a great wine has a precise flavor that is the equivalent of the sound of a church bell in the mountains.

COMPLEXITY Wines fall along a spectrum from simple to complex. Simple wines are monochromatic in flavor and monodimensional in appeal. They may be delightful, but in a sense they have only one thing to say.

By comparison, complex wines have multifaceted aromas and flavors, which reveal themselves sequentially over time. A complex wine is therefore not "knowable" in one sip.

LENGTH The better the wine, the longer its persistence on your palate, even after you've swallowed. By contrast, the flavor of a very ordinary wine disappears almost as soon as you swallow it. (This can be a blessing.)

No one knows why certain wines possess a long finish, but empirical observation tells us that all great wines share this characteristic.

CHOREOGRAPHY While an ordinary wine sits like a couch potato on your palate, a great wine will appear to move physically and spatially. There will be wavelengths of flavor, force, volume, and velocity that can be spellbinding. The wine may seem to "grow" or blossom in the mouth. It may start with explosive flavors, then crescendo and fade out slowly. The wine may seem like a Swedish massage—or its opposite, shiatsu. Whatever the movement, we know this: When lots of movement happens, chances are you're in the midst of a great wine.

CONNECTEDNESS Connectedness is the bond between a wine and the land it was born in. Connectedness, like cultural



identity, makes a thing different from other things and therefore worthy of appreciation. It was, for example, innately satisfying when, not so long ago, Frenchmen still wore berets. Small as this behavior was, it revealed a connection between people and their culture.

Wine without connectedness to the ground from which it came may be of good quality, but there is a limit to how deep one's aesthetic appreciation of it can be.

BEYOND FRUITEDNESS Great wines are never merely fruity. Great wines go beyond fruit and are woven through with complicated aromas and flavors—things like tar, bitter espresso,

roasted meats, worn leather, exotic spices, minerals, rocks, wet bark, and dead leaves, to name a few. These beyond-fruit characteristics give wine an even broader and deeper sensory impact and make it more intellectually stimulating.

ABILITY TO EVOKE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

Finally, great wines incite emotion. They stop you in your tracks. Send chills down your spine. Make you write things like “oh my God” as a tasting note. Great wines appeal not only to the intellect; they have the rare power to make us feel. ✨

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