

Running a great Wine Party



A guide from



Taste Of The Grape

Entertaining & informative wine tastings

to running a successful wine tasting
party

Running a wine tasting party at home

Taste of the Grape has many years of experience of running wine tasting events and parties for corporate and private clients.

We realise that not every occasion requires a professional wine event company, and we have produced this guide for people who would like to host a simple wine tasting themselves.

The world of wine is a fascinating place, with so much to explore. We hope you find our ideas and guidance useful and wish you the very best for your wine tasting adventures.

What kind of wine tasting?

A great wine tasting party should be above all else fun. Unless your guests are dedicated 'oenophiles' with cellars full of old vintages, the emphasis should be on discovering some lovely wines, learning something about them, and enjoying them in pleasant company.

The topics you can choose for your tasting are endless – exploring the wines of a specific country or region, or from a specific grape variety. Selecting a theme is helpful – it reduces the number of wines you might need to choose from, and it can be linked to a topic of personal relevance such as a holiday destination. Any part of the wine world will have plenty of wines to choose from, so choosing a topic will not constrain you.

Examples of topics you might choose:

New Zealand wines

Wines made from the Pinot Noir grape

Sparkling wines

Matching wines with cheese



How much time should you allow?

Whether the wine tasting is central to your event, or part of a bigger event or party, you should plan on taking no more than an hour to do 'the tasting'. This could be broken up into three twenty minute sessions, interspersed with courses at a dinner party.

How many people?

A group of four could enjoy a great wine tasting party, provided they restricted themselves to tasting quantities (see Glossary) as they explore the chosen wines. This would leave more than half a bottle of each wine, some of which could be drunk with food later, or taken home – or kept by the host for later consumption!

The maximum number of guests is really governed by the size of the room. We suggest you plan on people wanting to sit – this is an informal party, and people will want to be able to relax, put their wine glasses down, and even write some notes at times. We suggest for do-it-yourself, twelve is the maximum number – allowing a decent tasting quantity from each bottle, and giving the host a good chance of remaining in control as the tasting progresses.

How many wines?

We suggest no more than six wines to be 'formally' tasted. Depending on the overall event and number of guests, you could serve other wine or wines on arrival and after the tasting. One bottle of each wine tasted will be plenty for 12 guests.

Which wines to choose?

Well, recommending specific wines is beyond the scope of this short guide.

In terms of 'types' of wine, we suggest you go to your local wine merchant, explain what you are doing and agree a line-up that suits your topic and budget based along the following lines:

- * A light fruity white
- * An aromatic white or an oaky white
- * A sparkling wine (to be tasted 'blind' - see Glossary)
- * A light fruity red
- * A heavier full bodied red
- * A sweet wine or fortified wine

Provided the total cost is within your budget we suggest at least one of the wines should be relatively expensive (£20 or more) – so that your guests have a chance to try something they might otherwise never dare to pick off the shelves!

A good wine merchant will provide tasting notes for the wines, which will be interesting to compare with what people identify at your wine tasting party.

If you want to include food, ask your wine merchant for suggestions on good matches—for example the classic match of Sancerre with Crottin de Chavignol goat's cheese.

What kind of wine glass?



Ideally each guest should have two wine glasses and a water tumbler.

Professional wine event companies use ISO wine tasting glasses, which are recognised internationally as the standard design for wine tasting. These are made of clear glass, so the wine's colour and clarity can be examined. The rounded bowl and narrow sides allow the wine to be swirled, which releases aromas, while the rim which is narrower than the bowl helps contain all the aromas, making 'nosing' (or sniffing) the wine easier. Their size discourages pouring too much, so people focus on sipping smaller quantities and keeping them in the mouth for longer so all the flavours can be tasted.

It should be easy to hire ISO glasses from a local merchant, or if you have enough glasses of a similar shape then those would be fine – just be careful about how much you pour!

Any other equipment?

- * A table cloth or banquetting roll makes clearing up afterwards easier – a few drops spilt here or there are inevitable.
- * A corkscrew may be needed (although more and more quality wines are using screw caps, which are much less prone to variability and risks of wine taint). See the Glossary on how to open a bottle of Champagne.
- * Silver foil to cover any bottles of wine you want to taste 'blind' (see Glossary).
- * Pens or pencils, and paper for tasting notes (a sample tasting sheet is appended to this guide, along with the Glossary of wine descriptors).
- * Water – you should encourage your guests to drink plenty of water during the tasting, both to clear their palates and to balance the alcohol consumption!
- * A container to tip dregs into.
- * Bread or crackers – don't serve nibbles during the tasting. Spicy tastes or messy fingers will distract from wine appreciation!
- * A small prize.

How to run the tasting

The focus is on enjoyment and so the host needs to explain what is happening, keep things moving, and keep the emphasis on fun. This is probably the biggest challenge for a d-i-y tasting, and why many people prefer to bring in the professionals. However, the following hints should help...



- ◆ Make sure people realize the wine tasting has started. Get their attention, make any introductions necessary and explain how things are going to work.
- ◆ Explain wine tasting technique (see Glossary), demonstrating it, or using the You Tube video referenced in the Glossary.
- ◆ Pour Wine 1 and get people to practice their technique and discuss the appearance, aromas and tastes of the wine.
- ◆ Encourage people to talk about what they are seeing, smelling and tasting – and make sure they know there are no 'right' answers. Wine appreciation is a very individual experience, and different people will identify different aromas in the same wine, and will prefer the tastes of different wines.

If you would like to have a competitive element, ask everyone to write down on their sheet (or choose from multiple options) what they think the wine would cost in a shop. Or keep the bottle covered up and ask them to write down (or choose) what grape variety it is made from or what country it is from (depending on the topic of your tasting), and what they think it would cost.

- ◆ Ask people to keep Wine 1 in their first glass, and pour Wine 2 into their second glass. The same approach to tasting and note taking – but encourage people to compare the wines and identify what the differences between them.
- ◆ And so on. If Wine 3 is a fizz, you could challenge people to identify whether it is champagne or not. Ask them to compare Wines 4 and 5. And let them relax with Wine 6 – they can exchange their tasting papers with their neighbour, and mark each other as you read out the answers.
- ◆ Award a small prize to the winner.



And that's it! Remember to keep the mood light, and non-judgemental. We hope that if you follow this guidance, you and your guests will learn something new about wine, drink some wines you may not otherwise try, and have a lot of fun.

Glossary

Wine tasting quantity

At most wine tastings you would expect to get at least 15 tasting quantities out of a 75cl bottle of wine, ie 50ml/glass.

If you don't have 15 guests, don't be tempted to pour a lot more into everyone's glass, as you don't need that much to go through tasting technique (see below), and you don't want people's palates overcome too soon – or too much wine being tipped away!

Wine tasting technique

There are four stages to appreciating a wine, which you should go through before you conclude on whether you think it is well made, good value – and whether you like it!

Its Appearance

Its 'Nose', ie its aroma or smell.

Its Taste

Its Finish

More information on each of the stages of tasting is included in Wine Descriptors on the back of the sample tasting/quiz sheet at the end of this guide.



Tasting a wine 'blind'

Definitely something to be approached with the intention of having fun rather than being tested. However, tasting blind allows for some fun competition – identifying (or guessing) what is the grape variety, what country it is from, even how old the wine is. Covering the bottle with silver foil is the easiest way of disguising it, though you could blindfold your guests. The latter option has the potential for some mess, though it is fun to see people swear the red wine they are drinking is really white!

Opening a bottle of Champagne

No sabres here. The secret of opening a bottle of Champagne (or any wine where the cork is under pressure), is to do it slowly, gently and firmly.

Remove the wire and foil over the cork. Hold the bottom of the bottle firmly with your right hand and the cork with your left. Turn the bottle by quarter turns, until you feel the cork start to move. Reduce the amount you turn as the cork starts to come out, and keep the cork in your left hand as it gently exits with a fizz rather than a pop.

Wine Descriptors

See the reverse of the sample tasting notes/quiz sheet at the end of this guide.





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Sample Tasting Notes/Quiz Sheet

Wine	Tasting notes				Quiz questions 2 marks/right answer				In conclusion	
	Appearance	Aroma	Taste	Do you like it?	Is this wine made from	Is this wine from	How much is this wine worth	Marks gained	Other notes	
1					Sauvignon Blanc Pinot Gris	New Zealand Italy	£12.50 £7.50			
2					Riesling Viognier	France Australia	£10 £15			
3						Champagne New World	£30 £18			
4					Pinot Noir Gamay	California France	£9 £25			
5					Shiraz Malbec	South Africa Argentina	£12 £18			
6					Chenin Blanc Semillon	South Africa Chile	£15/half £25			
Total Marks										

Wine Descriptors

It sometimes seems that there is a weird vocabulary used by wine connoisseurs. In reality, it is much more simple, and most wines can readily be described by in the following way.

Appearance

Hold the glass up in front of you to look at the glass in profile, and then gaze down on it tilted so you can see the surface of the wine. Ideally have a white surface of piece of paper behind the glass as you examine it.

Any wine in good condition should be clear and 'bright', not cloudy or dull.

White wines can range in colour from the palest lemon to almost russet. The darker the colour, the more likely it is that the wine is older – and while some white wines age beautifully, in general a 'darker' colour in a white wine is an indication that it may be past its best.

Red wines can range in intensity of red, russet and purple colours. Generally more intense colour denotes greater youth. As a wine ages, it starts to fade towards the rim.

Aroma

The most important thing to remember about aromas is that people's perception of them are subjective, their noses are different and the words they use to describe what they are smelling will be different. So there is NO RIGHT ANSWER. We give some simple examples below, intended to start people off on their exploration – it's not an exhaustive list by any means, and imagination should be encouraged!

Swirling the wine in the glass releases aromas, and cupping the glass in your hand will help to warm up a very cold wine, which will encourage more aromas to emerge.

A wine should smell clean – no musty or unpleasant smells that might suggest the wine is faulty. Very few wines are faulty, so this would really be an exception.

Then you look for words that describe what you are smelling. Some common ones are:

Flower/Fruit

Elderflower, gooseberry, apple, citrus, pineapple, lychee for white wines

Blackcurrant, blackberry, cherry, strawberry, plum for red wines.

Herbaceous/Vegetal

Freshly mown grass for white wines and the infamous 'cat's pee' for New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.

Farmyardy aromas are a particular characteristic of good Pinot Noirs!

Spice/Earthy/Mineral

Cloves, cardamons, pepper (white or black)

Flinty, Leathery, Sandy/Salty

Because people's noses and vocabularies are so different it's very unlikely that everyone will agree on what a wine smells of, and this really doesn't matter. What matters is that people find what they smell attractive – and then it's interesting whether they get the same sensations when they taste the wine.

Taste

Most of the 'flavours' tasted in a wine are actually the wine's aromas experienced in your nose.

You will get more taste from the wine by giving it a good 'sluicing' around your mouth. Don't just sip it straight down, leave your inhibitions behind and pretend you are using a mouth wash. But keep your mouth closed!

The specific sensations experienced in the mouth are:

Acidity – a sensation felt on the sides of the tongue (try a sip of weak lemon juice).

Sweetness – felt on the tip of the tongue.

Tannins – a drying sensation felt on the insides of your cheeks.

Mouthfeel – an overall sensation (hopefully pleasant) of richness and viscosity.

Finish – how long the taste of the wine lingers pleasantly on the palate.