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## Why there's more than one way of writing about wine

Taste is individual and subjective, but tasting notes can be unhelpfully prescriptive

Tamlyn Currin AUGUST 13 2022

In the space of a couple of weeks, the JancisRobinson.com editorial inbox received three emails on the subject of tasting notes. One reader wrote, “Whilst I’m certainly not questioning her palate, Tamlyn has to be taking the mickey out of us with some of her tasting notes in the champagne article.”

He was particularly offended by the way I described a wine’s acidity by its shape, which I perceived as four-cornered, developing into an arrow of piercing triangularity on the finish. One reader, a Switzerland-based Master of Wine, wrote: “I just wanted to say that I think your tasting notes are superb! You are my favourite tasting note writer of the past two years — great imagination and descriptions!”. The third email read, “Just a comment and pet peeve. Why do the reviewers seem to need to put every fruit in their descriptions?”

Tasting notes are as controversial as scoring systems within the wine world. But while the arguments for and against scoring are well worn, the conflict around the language we use to describe wine is more of a war by stealth. People love to take pot shots at the way other people write. I’ve watched this happen for years, not only in wine-related forums and across dinner tables, but also in books and articles written by professionals. Many of these criticisms are undisguised attacks against fellow wine writers, always from a position of contemptuous superiority.

Entire books have been written and courses designed to teach us how to communicate what we taste. The format is almost always rigid, prescriptive and pedantic. It comes with a tacit understanding that there is a right and a wrong way to do things. Descriptions should conform to broadly accepted groups of fruit, flowers, spices and herbs, with a few other reference points such as chocolate, bread, nuts or smoke “allowed” on occasion.

It's useful, especially for novices, and brings discipline to business communications. But scientific [research has shown](#) over and over that wine tasting is a uniquely individual experience, based on a myriad of complex cultural, anatomical and psychological factors. The simple truth, which many wine experts prefer to ignore, is that there is no such thing as pure objectivity when it comes to prefer to ignore, is that there is no such thing as pure objectivity when it comes to reviewing wine. By extension, there is no such thing as a right or wrong way to write about it.

My first lesson in metaphor came from Jancis, who told me more than 15 years ago that it is more important to describe the shape of the wine in your mouth than to list flavours. Back when I was tasked with transcribing tasting notes from her hieroglyphic shorthand, I found myself typing up a tasting note for a 1976 Mosel. It read: "Piano teacher". I knew exactly what she meant.

I had a piano teacher growing up. She was 75 and parchment thin, very strict, always disapproving. I didn't practise my scales, and my fingers were rapped with a ruler on a regular basis. The house smelt of potpourri and mustiness. Jancis had added a note clarifying that the term was "my shorthand for a smell of macerated raisins and very slightly musty velours" but it wasn't necessary. "Piano teacher" said it all.

Some of the wine writing that sticks with me the most is that which leans on metaphor. In *Reading Between the Wines*, the importer and writer Terry Theise describes the variety Scheurebe as "Riesling just after it read the *Kama Sutra*". After reading that, you will never taste a Scheurebe again without a naughty smile flitting across your face.

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In *The Wine Dine Dictionary*, Victoria Moore, in describing Sangiovese, writes, "Where Merlot is smooth, as if it's been smoothed in and grouted up, Sangiovese has texture, like the crenulations of the battlements found all over Tuscany." If you've ever had a glass of Tuscan Merlot and Tuscan Sangiovese side by side, you will know exactly what she means.

[Andrew Jefford](#) writes of Barbaresco that "you taste drama and dust and bitterness as the wine turns to liquid rags in your mouth, and sails off with an angry asperity". When writing about 2010 Mas del Serral made by Pepe Raventós, he tells the reader to see "a scene as intricately constructed as a watch". "This sparkling wine," he writes, "is the cloister of Santo Domingo de Silos: a honeycomb of light, chased about by dragons, centaurs and mermaids imagined by lost stone carvers" That's **Back when I transcribed Jancis's tasting notes, I found myself typing one for a 1976 Mosel. It read: 'Piano teacher'. I knew exactly what she meant** about by dragons, centaurs and mermaids imagined by lost stone carvers. That's quite a metaphor.

Master of wine Nick Jackson wrote a groundbreaking book based on his experience learning to identify wine blind, not through the tried-and-tested matrices of

BLIC— balance, length, intensity, complexity — but through the perceived shape of the wine in the mouth based on acidity. It was both revelatory and liberating for me, who tastes in a multisensory, multidimensional sphere, to finally come across someone who identified Albariño as cuboid and Chardonnay as cylindrical.

It was Mary Hesse who argued that metaphor is more than decorative, that it has “cognitive implications whose nature is a proper subject of philosophic discussion”. I have a vested interest in agreeing with her. The way I write about wine is sometimes so extremely metaphorical that my editors protest. A tasting note I wrote for a Roussillon reads:

“Put your old leather boots on — the ones that feel like second skin, that you’ve loved for years. Pick up that hip flask filled with damson wine. There’s a punnet of ripe cherries on the kitchen table — put them in your backpack. Slam the back door behind you, grab the strong hand of the person you love most, stride out into the cold winter wind feeling the rough stones of the dirt track below your feet and start walking towards that rugged peak etched against a wide sky.

Smell the scent of dry winter garrigue, feel the burn of muscle and your heart pounding as you begin to climb, the earth falling away beneath you. Get to the top, find a rock, turn your face into the cut of the wind, open that hip flask, bite into a cherry, feel the juice running down your chin, and laugh. That is this wine.”

I know. There are no cherries in winter. But imagine how it would feel if there were.

From time immemorial, humans have sat around their (real and metaphorical) fires and told stories. These may have been about gods, ancestors and spirits, but the actuality was not what mattered. The spirit of them was intended to resonate with the spirit of the listener.

We allow diversity of literary styles, of music, of art. Why not the way we describe a wine? Diversity underpins the resilience of a thing. It gives everyone a voice and opens up a closed system of communication. I appreciate that not everyone is comfortable with getting their tasting notes in metaphorical form.

By the same token, not everyone relates to a wine described by its detectable volatile compounds, acidity levels and measurable dry density. As with jazz, pop, classical and folk, everyone can find the style they are most comfortable with. Perhaps I don’t write about wines in the way my fellow wine writers do, but without different voices, we can reach more people. The world is big enough for us all.

## Bottles with multi-metaphor appeal

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A few wines that have told me stories recently

**Sugrue, Rosé Ex Machina 2016 England £60 RRP** A jolt of electricity, defiant, like a bullet to the heart.

**Contrà Soarda, Il Pendio 2018 IGT Veneto £26 Vin Cognito** Soul-searching bitterness embroidered into its saline succulence.

**Brookdale, Single Vineyard Chenin Blanc 2020 Paarl £29.99 Museum Wines** A blue-ink stain curlicues a story of dust and stillness and roots and tomorrow.

**Enric Soler, Font-Rubí, Nun Vinya Dels Taus 2019 Spain £46 Vin Cognito** Chalk boards in an abandoned school, still bearing the smudge of cursive instruction.

**Dom Mee Godard, Les Michelons 2020 Morgon £30 RRP** A forest dryad, tasting of moss and shadows.

**Dom de Bosc-Long, Braucol (any vintage) Gaillac £11 RRP** drawer, creaking in protest at being disturbed from its closure.

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*Tamlyn Currin is sustainability editor and staff writer at [JancisRobinson.com](http://JancisRobinson.com). Jancis Robinson is away. More columns at [ft.com/jancis-robinson](http://ft.com/jancis-robinson).*

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