

The Components of Wine

The five structural components of wine are: fruit, sugar, alcohol, acid, and tannin. Aside from contributing flavor and structure these components also contribute texture. What does the wine feel like in the mouth? Is it light and ethereal, or heavy and viscous? Is it sweet and syrupy, or thin and tart? Is it course and earthy, or soft and fruity? These are all varying expressions of the five components that give every wine its unique flavor profile that is experienced in the mid palate phase.

There is actually one other structural component and that is oak. When wine is aged in oak barrels, it goes through a number of changes that can influence all of the other components. The most noticeable change however is that it adds its own distinctive flavor to any wine that it touches.

Think of oak as a spice used in cooking. There are different kinds of oak, different strengths and various treatments of oak, such as toasting. When a barrel is toasted, which is to say that it is actually cooked on a flame, it imparts a smoky characteristic to the wine. For the most part, oak adds flavors of vanilla, cinnamon, clove, caramel, coconut and a host of others.

Sometimes a wine is overpowered by oak. When it is not, its fruit is said to be married to oak, which brings up the subject of balance. For me personally, balance is the most important thing. When a wine has all of its components working together in harmony, with no single component infringing on another, a wine is said to be balanced. Whether you enjoy a wine that is more fruit forward, or one that is more austere, balance is still the key to quality.

A balanced wine is one in which all of the wine's components work together to provide an enjoyable experience. While a wine that is out of balance will seem disjointed, it is not necessarily true that it will remain so. Often wines are thrown out of balance during the bottling and shipping process and will sort themselves out with several months of bottle age.

By the same token, wines that are in balance today may lose their balance over time. A typical example might be that a wine's fruit fades significantly sooner than its acid or tannin. Generally, however, balanced wines tend to stay in balance, while wines that are out of balance will grow increasingly so over time.

Let's discuss the other components briefly and then get back to our wine tasting. The first component, which is fruit, is the most obvious. Wine is, after all, made from grapes (other fruit wines not withstanding). For the most part, the grapes are ripe and sweet when harvested. They are then fermented, a process in which the second component sugar is converted to the third component alcohol.

The fermentation can be stopped at any time, or urged on until all of the sugar is converted. A ripe grape, then, can produce a sweet wine of lower alcohol, or a dry (non sweet) wine with higher alcohol. That is why very sweet wines that do have high alcohol, like port, are actually fortified with neutral grain spirits. Again, the interplay between fruit, sugar and alcohol in the finished wine should be balanced, a state in which no single component takes over.

The fourth component, acid, occurs naturally in grapes (although it can be added) and imparts a tartness to the wine that is only a flaw if overdone. Acid gives the wine staying power in the cellar, and a needed counterpart to fruitiness, especially in sweeter wines. It also helps the wine to work well with foods that are rich in fat. It is the acid in the wine that cuts through the fat and cleanses the palate.

I find it rather unfortunate that many wines are compared and then assessed when tasted without food, because most wines are intentionally produced to show their best at the dinner table. Higher acid levels that might be considered a distraction at wine competitions are actually considered a benefit at mealtime. The same can also be said about the fifth component tannin.

Tannin is the astringency you get when you bite into a grape seed, stem, or skin. It is present in the wine as a result of the grapes being crushed; although like acid it can sometimes be added. While astringency is not, in and of itself, pleasant, it does provide a necessary component to wine.

Like acid, tannin allows a wine to age, without losing its structure. Tannin is the backbone, if you will, that supports the fruit. It imparts a sense of depth to the wine, as well as the heft to hold up to certain foods. The reason that a big, brawny Napa Valley Cabernet is the perfect match for a rib eye steak is in large part due to its tannin.

Now that we've considered all of the various components that go into the taste and texture of a wine, let's go back to the mid-palate stage of our tasting. As I noted, you may now swallow or spit. Some wine tasters will actually perform a little exercise first, in order to maximize their perception of the mid palate. They hold the wine on their tongue, open their lips just slightly, and then suck air into their mouth slowly and steadily so that it further aerates the wine. When done correctly, it sounds like a gurgle and may seem quite ridiculous to the uninitiated, but it is a valid technique.

Once you have swallowed, again you will want to focus on what happens next. Now that the wine is gone, you will notice that certain flavors will linger. This is known as the finish. Just as the entry may have given a different impression than the aroma, or perhaps echoed the same flavors; the same can be said for the finish as compared to the mid-palate. While certain flavors take center stage, others may quickly disappear. You may even experience entirely new flavors and nuances that were not previously apparent.

If a wine's finish dissipates quickly, it is said to be short, whereas a long finish may last for a full minute or longer. Share your observations with your fellow tasters and consider their opinions. Very often people will point out a subtle nuance and express it in a way that others can pick up on. This is not merely the power of suggestion, although certainly that can occur. It is the way in which we learn from each other and a large part of the reason why wine enthusiasts like to taste wine in group settings.

As each member of the group gives their impression, try to arrive at a consensus of opinion. Do the majority of participants like or dislike the wine, and why? Taste the same wine a second time now that you have the benefit of other people's comments. Assess the wine analytically regarding its components and balance, as well as subjectively by freely associating what you are experiencing. Encourage others to get creative in their descriptions and have fun. This is what it's all about.

As you move from glass to glass, refresh your palate intermittently with food and water. Feel free to revisit wines you sampled earlier so that you can compare them side by side in a different order. Wine can be so subjective that it becomes difficult to tell if you are having a different view of a wine you previously tasted because of the order in which you sampled it, or because your palate is growing saturated, or because the wine has changed now that it has been opened for more than an hour, which happens often. It is all part of the intellectual challenge of tasting wine, and once again, a lot of fun.