

Knowledge, Wine, and Taste: What good is knowledge (in enjoying wine)?

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Philosophy and Wine: from science to subjectivity
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THE QUESTION: I am asking a very specific question: what good is knowledge about wine when it comes to enjoying the experience of tasting a wine? Can knowledge, about wine in general or about the specific wine you're drinking, help you enjoy that wine? Can such knowledge even make the wine taste better? Assuming you have a basic liking for wine, have a normal sensitivity to aromas and flavors, and know how to expose the qualities of a wine to the responsiveness of your senses, how, if at all, can knowledge about a particular wine affect your enjoyment of it? Can it enhance your pleasure or even, on occasion, detract from it? Or, rather, does it provide its own kind of pleasure, cognitive or even intellectual pleasure, distinct from the pleasure of tasting?

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It's a bit awkward for me to talk about philosophy and wine. Even though I'm very analytical in philosophy and in all but one of my other passions, I'm not very analytical about wine. I talk a lot of philosophy and I drink a lot of wine, but I don't do aesthetics, the sort of philosophy that's relevant to talking about wine, and I don't talk a lot about wine itself, even though I drink it almost nightly and have accumulated a great many bottles of it, too many in fact. Except at dinners and tastings, I don't need to talk about wine: I don't make it, market it, sell it, score it, or write about it. In fact, I'm not very good at talking about wine. I don't write tasting notes, and I can't say I get all that much out of professional tasting notes — I certainly can't tell from reading one what the wine tastes like. I'm keen to try wines of all sorts, and for me there's no substitute for tasting them myself. I recommend wines to people, but the only way I know to justify a recommendation is to pour them a glass. So, despite my reluctance to talk about wine, here I am today.

Before taking up my question, a brief autobiographical note. Until 1993 I had no interest in wine. In my ignorance and inexperience, I had no idea why other people were passionate about it, not only passionate about drinking it but obsessed with knowing about it. Then this changed suddenly, on one autumn evening in Gainesville, Florida, of all places. I was dragged to a tasting of wines from St. Emilion. The group blind-tasted, described, and numerically rated eight wines, most of which I enjoyed immensely. Despite my ignorance and inexperience, my numerical ratings were all very close to the consensus of the group. That was a revelation to this wine heathen: I was convinced that there was something I'd been missing. The clincher was the mystery wine, also wrapped in a paper bag, but not part of the regular tasting. It was a 1975 Cheval Blanc, not the greatest of vintages,

as I would later learn, but more than good enough to make me a wine convert. Now I began to see the light or, rather, to sniff and taste it.

Zeroing in on the question

I am asking a very specific question: what good is knowledge when it comes to enjoying the experience of drinking a wine? Can knowledge, about wine in general or about the specific wine you're drinking, help you enjoy the taste of that wine? Can such knowledge even make the wine taste better? The question is not intended to apply to people completely new to wine and without any experience at tasting it. I am asking it about people who have a basic liking for wine, have a normal sensitivity to aromas and flavors, and know how to expose the qualities of a wine to the responsiveness of their senses. Given that, how, if at all, can knowledge about a particular wine affect your enjoyment of it? Can it enhance your pleasure? Or, rather, does it provide its own kind of pleasure, cognitive or even intellectual pleasure, which accompanies the pleasure of tasting? To put the question differently, is the difference between the pleasure experienced by a connoisseur and a non-expert wine enthusiast purely cognitive or at least partly sensory?

The specific question I'm asking does not concern the many other things that knowledge about wine is good for, such as making wine, selling it, and writing about it, and understanding and appreciating the efforts of those who make, sell, or write about it. Much knowledge about wine is very practical, such as knowing how to grow and select grapes, having effective techniques for making wine, and knowing how to store and how to serve it. Practical knowledge is obviously valuable when it comes to choosing what wines to buy, deciding when to open them, and choosing which one to have with a particular dish. This requires knowing at least roughly what the wine should taste like. Precise knowledge of the taste can be handy if there's a question whether what's in a bottle is really what the label says it is or, if that's not in question, whether the condition of a wine is as it should be. And knowledge about wine, like knowledge about anything else, doesn't have to be

good *for* anything to be good to have. It can be valuable in and of itself, at least if you care about wine. It satisfies curiosity, and it yields intellectual pleasure.

Knowledge about anything you're interested in is good to seek and good to get. No one would argue with that. But even though there's a big difference between the pleasure of pursuing and acquiring knowledge about wine and the pleasure of drinking wine itself, the two can of course go together. When you're drinking a fine wine, it's nice to know what kinds of grapes went into it, where it came from and when, who made it and how. Having such knowledge about a wine while drinking it might add to your understanding and appreciation of the wine, but can it make the wine taste better or otherwise add to the experience? You might be surprised to learn that the wine is 100% Syrah, that it was made in the Santa Ynez Valley, and that it came from an exceptional vintage. Of course, such knowledge may add to your pleasure *while* drinking the wine, but that doesn't mean it adds to your pleasure *in* drinking the wine. Is there any sort of knowledge that can do that? That is my question.

Why ask this question? Many people untutored in wine seem to feel intimidated by it. They think they know nothing about wine and therefore can't appreciate it. In fact, they are intimidated by wine experts — writers, collectors, sommeliers, and snobs. And, I daresay, it is not their ignorance that keeps them from enjoying wine, it's the wine they drink. **The best way to make wines taste better is to taste better wines!** Ignorance can keep you from knowing what wines to drink but it can't keep you from enjoying good ones when they're put in front of you. Knowing how to taste obviously helps — there's no substitute for experience at tasting — but how important is knowing about the wine, or knowing about wine in general?

One obvious answer

Here's a plausible answer to my question. Surely the pleasure in drinking a wine is enhanced by some knowledge of the range of aromas and flavors that similar wines are capable of. And the more familiar you are with other wines, especially similar ones, the more you can appreciate what (if anything) is special about the one you're

drinking. In tasting a particular wine you can ask yourself, how does this wine compare with others from the same varietal, from different vineyards in the same region, from the same producer in different years? It does seem that comparative knowledge, based on tasting experience, can enhance your tasting pleasure.

However, it is also possible that such knowledge can detract from your tasting pleasure. No matter how well you can discern and discriminate various aromas and flavors, overexposure to common combinations of them can decrease your ability to enjoy them. You could be drinking a well-made wine, even an elegant, balanced, and complex one, and be unmoved by it because you are overly familiar with its array of aroma and flavor components. I'll concede, of course, that you're unlikely to have this problem with a truly great wine, but I'll venture to say that there's no wine that anyone could enjoy drinking night after night. Also, certain wines that are a pleasure to drink don't hold up well in comparison to others. Imagine what it would be like if, before having a fine bottle with dinner, you were forced to taste an even better wine first. Having a memory for tastes can have the same effect. That's why it becomes harder and harder to enjoy good wines that you used to enjoy once you've encountered better ones of the same type.

In any case, the primary pleasure in tasting a wine surely does not consist in comparing it to other wines. If even the best wines did not taste good to you, whatever pleasure you gained from discerning the distinctive features of a given wine and comparing it to other, similar wines would be merely a cognitive pleasure, not a sensory one. This purely cognitive pleasure would not be worth pursuing by itself, any more than the pleasure you might perversely hope to gain in the course of comparing the tastes of various liquid medications or insect repellents. To be sure, it's fun to compare wines, especially interestingly similar ones, but this is a kind of cognitive pleasure. Wine connoisseurs, while enjoying the sensory pleasure of drinking a particularly fine wine that they are tasting blind, also enjoy trying to guess what grape(s) it is made from and its age and origin, and even trying to identify the wine itself. Succeeding is really fun. But these are cognitive pleasures distinct from the pleasure had in drinking the wine.

One special sort of comparison really is part and parcel of the sensory pleasure. That's the pleasure of experiencing and noticing how the wine evolves in the glass, or from one glass to the next, as it is exposed to oxygen and as its temperature changes. Sometimes it takes a while for a wine to "open up." There's a chemical explanation for what happens, but I wouldn't go into that even if I understood it. The taste of a wine can change in minutes. And it can appear to change when tasted with different dishes over the course of a meal. There's a physiological explanation for this, but I won't go into that either. So we can't exactly speak of *the* taste of the wine, and part of the pleasure in drinking it consists in discerning its evolving taste and trying it with different dishes.

Now consider the distinction between what a wine tastes like and what we like about the taste. This distinction gives rise to an interesting question in regard to our changing tastes in foods and beverages. What happens when we come to like certain tastes and smells that we didn't used to like or, for that matter, stop liking ones we once did like? Both things happen as we grow up. Many people lose the taste for sweetened breakfast cereals, and many develop a taste for spinach and even for wine. So, does the thing we used to like and now dislike taste different, or does it taste the same except that we no longer like that taste? Similarly, does the thing we used to dislike and now like taste different, or does it taste the same except that we now like that taste? It is not clear how to answer such questions.

Untutored experience and cultivated taste

Some of our responses to the sensory qualities we experience seem perfectly natural, and not the result of experience. We are all familiar with truly foul tastes and the odors that go with them. As children, we were all forced to submit to certain medicines and to certain foods. As adults, we often submit voluntarily, for reasons of health or politeness. Plenty of nasty odors pass before our noses, and sometimes spoiled or otherwise awful food passes our lips. One interesting thing about foul smells and vile tastes is not merely that we can't help how we respond to them but that we react to them viscerally, sometimes to the point of getting sick to our

stomachs (perhaps that is partly because smell and taste are chemical senses). Moderately bad smells and tastes don't produce such effects, but no special expertise is required to respond negatively to them.

On the positive side, it doesn't take any special expertise to enjoy and appreciate the sight of a beautiful sunset or the feel of a nice back rub. You can savor these and many other exquisite things just by taking them in. They are not acquired tastes. But so-called "adult" foods and beverages, including wine, generally are acquired tastes. Does this mean that you have to learn about them in order to enjoy them? Developing a taste for them isn't a matter of learning about them but of getting accustomed to them, as your palate matures. But, it will be objected, simply liking the taste isn't the same as cultivating a taste for them. Cultivating taste in a particular area requires noticing subtle features and detecting subtle differences. In the case of wine, this is a matter of discerning the distinctive features of particular wines and appreciating a variety of different wines (unlike a certain relative of mine, who will drink nothing but Chardonnay and only if it comes from the Carneros region of Sonoma County, California). Tasting wines of diverse types, including ones made from obscure grapes in unheralded regions, obviously helps you appreciate the range of possibilities that wine is capable of.

Does discrimination require cultivation? Take the case of colors. If your color vision is normal, you can, believe it or not, discriminate something on the order of 10 million different colors, and without any special training. You can see the color you're looking at just by looking at it, and you can see that it looks a little different from very similar ones that are presented to you. You don't have to do anything special — you just have to look. It is another thing to be able to name the color, but obviously there are far more colors than color names. You may find the color appealing, boring, or revolting, but you don't have to know why it strikes you in a certain way for it to do so. So why should flavors, wine flavors in particular, be any different? Being able to describe a wine is a nice ability to have, but do you need it to taste the wine? Being able to explain what it is about a wine that you like is nice too, but you don't need to do that to like the wine. These additional abilities are

good to have and enjoyable to exercise, but they seem distinct from the ability to enjoy the wine itself. So, isn't the ability to enjoy some wine flavors and not others just like the untutored ability to enjoy some colors and not others?

Well, it will be objected, I'm relying on a bad analogy. Tasting a wine is not like looking at a uniform color chip. All right, then, here's a better analogy. Consider what it's like to look at a good monochromatic painting. To appreciate it, you need to stare at it for some length of time. You will come to see things you didn't notice at first. Gradually certain subtle variations in the color will appear and perhaps even certain patterns will emerge. But tasting a wine isn't really like that, unless the wine is not quite ready to drink and needs a little more swirling or a little more time in the glass. Here's another analogy, looking at faces. Most people can distinguish the faces of other people (at least of their own ethnic group) and, more to the point, can enjoy looking at them. No special training is needed for doing this. And, unlike looking at monochromatic paintings, no special effort or sustained attention is required. It does take special training or a special talent to describe or to draw faces, but these abilities are not needed to see and distinguish them. But seeing and distinguishing faces involves recognizing different geometrical forms, spatial arrays of features, and doing that is not really like tasting wines. So we need a better analogy (one other analogy, which I am not in a position to pursue, is a blind person's highly developed sense of touch). I think I have one.

Analogy: notes and chords

Compare listening to a great piece of music with drinking a great wine. A great piece of music is a complex, highly organized structure of sounds. Enjoying a fine performance of such a piece involves much more than taking in the sensuous sounds of the individual notes and chords. Just for starters, one needs to hear the melodies and chord progressions in order to sense the patterns they make up. If you are intimately familiar with the piece, you can appreciate the performer's distinctive touches to the sound qualities, voicings, phrasings, and overall shaping of the piece. But that's much more elaborate than tasting a wine. So here's my analogy. Taking a

sip of wine, at least a wine worth talking about, is like hearing the sound of a sustained, musical chord. Over a few seconds, it has a beginning, a middle, and a finish, during which different qualities will reveal themselves, and you will notice them if you pay close attention. Interestingly, wines are often described as displaying “notes” of various kinds, such as notes of leather, lavender, or licorice, maybe a little tar or graphite, along with a few obligatory fruits and perhaps some Asian spices, just to mention a few. And, although the composite taste of a wine is never described as a chord, this doesn’t deter me from insisting on my unflattering analogy of the taste of a wine with a musical chord, the overall experience of a single sip of wine is comparable in duration and complexity to savoring one sustained musical chord.

However, my analogy is not entirely apt. It does not help explain why we should value wines so highly and pay so much for them. No matter how sensuous and complex a chord is, even a sustained one, it is just one momentary episode out of hundreds or thousands in an entire piece. Not much knowledge is required to hear the chord (to be sure, it would take having some knowledge, as well as experience, to identify its harmonic structure), but there is not all that much enjoyment to be had either. Certainly no one would attend a concert just to hear even the greatest orchestra play a beautiful sustained chord every few minutes, even a little differently each time. Yet one is more than content to do the equivalent of that with a glass of wine. The analogy breaks down because the basic unit of pleasure in drinking a wine comes from taking a sip, whereas the basic unit of pleasure in listening to music generally does not consist in hearing merely a chord, some exquisite chords excepted.

What does the analogy miss? What is it about tastes, aromas included, that makes experiences of them so highly valued, even though these experiences are intermittent and each is but a few seconds in length? You could complain that I have neglected the overall experience of a meal and the other pleasures that go with drinking wine, such as good food, friendly company, interesting conversation, pleasant ambiance, not to mention the effect of intoxication. But wine lovers enjoy

wines in themselves. Besides, taking all these factors into account does not help explain why great wines are valued so much more highly than mediocre ones or merely good ones, even though the units of pleasure are so short in duration, as compared to those in listening to music, looking at a painting or a scene in nature, reading a book, seeing a movie, or even having sex. You wouldn't want to do any of those things a few seconds at a time and resume a few minutes later while doing other things in between.

Sensory and cognitive pleasure

People who say that they can't appreciate a great wine generally haven't tasted one. In fact, no special ability is required to enjoy such a wine. All it takes is normal sensitivity to aromas and flavors (unfortunately, some people lack that) and the ability to swirl the wine in the glass, to bring the glass under one's nose to savor the wine's aromatics, and then to pay close and sustained attention as the wine passes one's lips and gets circulated in one's mouth. In my experience, that's enough for typical inexperienced tasters to be blown away by a great Bordeaux, Burgundy, or Barbaresco. When they go "Ooh" and "Ah" or go "Wow!", they're not acting.

Of course, they may not understand why they react in this way. They may be in no position to know anything about the grape(s), the region and the vineyard, the producer, and the vintage, they may have no basis for comparing this great wine with similar but merely very good wines, and they may be unable to articulate what particular aromas and flavors they are experiencing or have any notion of what experienced tasters mean by the balance, structure, and elegance of a great wine. Even so, it is not obvious that this wine does not taste as wonderful to them as it does to the expert. They may not be equipped to enjoy the cognitive pleasures that accompany tasting it, but that's not to say they aren't fully equipped to experience the sensory pleasure inherent in attentively drinking it.

The ability to identify and describe the distinctive features of a given wine does have a definite value, certainly if it is your profession to make, recommend, sell, serve, or write about wine. That much is obvious, but however enjoyable it is to

exercise this ability, the pleasure one derives from that is distinct from the pleasure in simply drinking the wine. The ability to identify and describe the distinctive features of a given wine is also valuable to an amateur, and not just in selecting wines for particular occasions and collecting wines for future occasions. There is a certain pleasure in being able to remember wines one has tasted, especially great ones. Remembering what they are like, like remembering any wonderful experience, is a pleasure in its own right, but this too is a distinct, cognitive pleasure.

Wine tasting is not like bird watching and train spotting. In those other two pursuits, the pleasure is in the recognizing and identifying. With wine, the pleasure of sniffing and tasting comes first. Recognizing and identifying aroma and flavor components is secondary, and provides cognitive pleasure about the source of one's sensory pleasure.

Tracking sensory discrimination

I have been suggesting that anyone with a basic liking for wine, a normal sensitivity to aromas and flavors, and a little practice at tasting can enjoy fine wines and discern and distinguish their distinctive characteristics, and that being able to categorize and compare wines, in order to appreciate their similarities and differences, provides a distinct, cognitive pleasure. I can't prove this, but it seems to me that the burden of proof is on those who insist that expertise is necessary for fully enjoying the experience of tasting fine wines. Yes, expertise puts one in position to have further, cognitive pleasures, but these pleasures are distinct from the sensory pleasure of tasting wines. Now I have been supposing that these sensory pleasures come more or less naturally, that people can be responsive to the distinct characteristics of different wines without being able to compare, much less articulate these differences. And there seems to be good scientific reason to believe that.

Investigators in the field of psychophysics have methods for measuring peoples' powers of sensory discrimination. These are the techniques of psychometrics. It is possible, using the method of multi-dimensional scaling, to construct a quality (or similarity) space for a given individual in a particular sense modality. The idea is to

determine the smallest number of dimensions necessary to model a subject's judgments of relative similarity. There are various methods by which this multi-dimensional scaling can be accomplished. For example, subjects can be presented with one sample followed by two other, somewhat similar samples, and be asked which of the others the first is more similar to: "Is this [item 1] more like this [item 2] ... or like this [item 3]?" Repeating such procedures with different samples eventually provides enough data to suggest the number of respects in which the qualities in a given modality can differ from one another. The overall structure, including the number of dimensions, of a quality space represents degrees and respects of relative similarity and difference between different qualities of the type being modeled. Distance corresponds to degrees of difference and dimension corresponds to respect.

The case of color experience is relatively clear. Just as three dimensions are needed to account for perceived differences in physical space, so three dimensions (and maybe more) are needed to account for perceived differences in color space: hue, saturation, and intensity. Two distinct color samples differ in at least one of these respects. With sounds the two dimensions of pitch and loudness are needed, though one can, of course, hear many sounds at once, sometimes hearing them as chords and sometimes as distinct sounds. And, since hearing is essentially the perception of events rather than objects or substances, the dimension of time is needed too, not only to distinguish otherwise similar sounds as to duration but also to reckon with the essentially temporal features of sounds. This is obvious in the case of music and speech. As to taste, it is common to distinguish the dimensions of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter, and there is also umami to contend with (never mind astringency, effervescence, or the "burning" of "hot" peppers, which are felt not tasted). The sense of smell is a great mystery. Last time I checked — I'm no expert in this field — different theorists had posited anywhere from seven to eighteen different dimensions of smell (never mind the "stinging" sensation of ammonia and other gases, which is not a matter of smell).

The total extent of a quality space represents the range of possibilities available to a given person. So, for example, human beings are visually sensitive only to the visible spectrum, which comprises a very small segment of the entire electromagnetic spectrum, and their sensitivity falls dramatically as illumination diminishes. And, of course, this range varies from person to person, and among different animals. Some people are partially or even completely color blind, and some animals are sensitive to ultraviolet or infrared light. As to sound, dogs hear higher frequencies than people, and women tend to be able to hear higher frequencies than men. Dogs can detect scents that are far below the threshold of human detection. Some people have reduced ability to detect odors (hyposmia) or to taste substances (hypogeusia), and some can detect no odors (anosmia) or no tastes at all (ageusia). To some people a substance that has a pleasant taste and smell to normal people may taste and smell foul. Supertasters (hypergeusics) and supersmellers (hypergeusics) can discern tiny tastes and smells to which most people are oblivious and can distinguish different ones that seem the same to everyone else. Their exceptional abilities are double-edged, depending on whether the qualities are pleasant or unpleasant. For example, some people can detect the presence of TCA (2,4,6-trichloroanisole), the main culprit behind so-called cork taint (the problem is not always with the cork), in concentrations well below most people's ability to detect.

This is not a matter of knowledge or training (of course, training can facilitate remembering and being able to identify, as opposed to merely sensing and noticing, distinct sensory qualities). People with palates and noses more developed than the rest of us don't merely know more — they sense more. In the case of wine, they can discern the presence of particular flavors and aromas, they can notice subtle changes in flavor over the course of a single sip, and they can appreciate what underlies the complexity and structure of an interesting wine. You need experience to notice what is distinctive about a particular wine — this requires comparisons with other wines and that requires having encountered and remembering similar

wines. But you don't need extensive experience or expertise to notice imbalances between fruit and tannin or between sweetness and acidity.

As mentioned earlier, without any special training normal people can discriminate something on the order of 10 million different colors. This number is determined by extrapolating from the number of just noticeable differences that people can detect between tested color samples that differ but slightly as to hue, intensity, or saturation. Measuring taste and smell discrimination using the method of multi-dimensional scaling is much more difficult, because detecting tastes and smells takes longer and because tastes and smells have after-effects. It takes time to clear the palate and the nostrils (and the air). So side-by-side comparisons cannot be made, and there must be a decent interval between tastes or smells compared successively. This makes discriminations harder to make and to measure. Still, given the five dimensions of taste and however many the dimensions of smell, even if we conservatively assume only ten dimensions of taste and smell combined and only 5 just noticeable differences along each dimension, the total number of taste-and-smell combinations is 5^{10} , or almost ten million, comparable to the number of colors that people can normally discriminate.

The point of all this, whatever the numbers may turn out to be, is that, with the help of the techniques of psychometrics, it could be verified that people have a natural capacity to discern and discriminate, as with color, a huge number of aromas and flavors. Of course, only some of these occur in the real world, and only some of those correspond to the aromas and flavors of items we consume (foods and beverages), and wines comprise only a narrow range of these. Even so, the number is still very large, and there is no reason to suppose that people with just a little training in how to taste wine couldn't, under proper conditions, discriminate a great many wines and detect a great many particular flavors and aromas in them. It is not to say that they can remember them over the long term and thereby be able to recognize, much less identify them when they encounter familiar ones again, but that is not what I have been suggesting. My argument is very simple:

People can discriminate huge numbers of aroma-taste combinations.

Their affective responses to these combinations are direct, not cognitive.

So, knowledge isn't needed to enjoy a given aroma-taste combination.

Even so, knowledge can guide us to greater sensory pleasures and it can provide pleasure of its own. Experts and connoisseurs have plenty of it.

Experts and connoisseurs

What's the difference between being an expert and being a connoisseur? To answer that question you might ask a different one: what, if anything, does a connoisseur know that an expert doesn't? But it seems to me that that's the wrong question. Being a connoisseur doesn't require more knowledge — it requires appreciation. And, indeed, we speak of music appreciation, art appreciation and, yes, even wine appreciation. So, what is it to appreciate the music we listen to, the paintings we look at, or the wine we savor? Appreciation has both a cognitive and an aesthetic side, not that these are unrelated, and they correspond to the difference between being an expert and being a connoisseur. On the cognitive side is the ability to recognize the ingredients and how they're put together. In the case of art and music, this is a very complex ability generally requiring at least some formal training and historical knowledge, including familiarity with other works and, in the case of music, other performances, to go along with perceptual acuity. Acquiring such knowledge leads to aesthetic appreciation by enhancing one's ability to notice features and relationships that would otherwise escape one's attention. No such knowledge is required for appreciating a wine. Even the best wines are not works of art. They don't have cognitive or emotional content. Their aesthetic value is provided entirely by the aromas and flavors that they impart. Like a great work of art, a great wine has more to notice and more worth noticing than a run-of-the-mill wine, but with a great wine these are exclusively sensory qualities, and noticing and enjoying them is all that's required for appreciating the wine. It really doesn't go deeper than that. Even so, there are connoisseurs of wine.

Again, I ask, what's the difference between being an expert and being a connoisseur? With wine or anything else, one could have the knowledge required of

an expert without being a connoisseur. So, for example, you could know a great deal about Persian rugs but not have a good eye for them. A connoisseur is not just knowledgeable but discerning and discriminating. That raises a further question.

What is it to be discerning and discriminating? Interestingly, the terms “discerning” and “discriminating,” like the word “taste” itself, have both sensory and aesthetic meanings. In the sensory sense, being discerning is a matter of being able to notice hard to detect features, and being discriminating a matter of being able to distinguish similar qualities. These can be detected by, as the case may be, looking, smelling, or tasting, perhaps with the help of knowledge derived from experience. But a connoisseur is discerning and discriminating in an aesthetic sense. One can be a connoisseur of any of the arts or of more purely sensory things, such as cheese, chocolate, ice cream, coffee, Scotch, perfume — or wine. (Today, it is both gratifying and daunting to know that there are far more wines than ever to discern and discriminate and, more than ever before, more worth being discerning and discriminating about.)

There is more to having good taste than being able to tell differences. To see why that’s not enough, imagine a beverage made from swill, called “swine.” It is hard to imagine anyone wanting to experience, learn about, and comment on the different nuances from one bottle of swine to the next. Well, you could imagine tasting notes on them written by a gustatory Marquis de Sade or by the swine critic of Dickens’s village Eton Swill. Or imagine there being a supertasting medical diagnostician who could use his sense of taste to perform blood tests and urinalyses directly, just by tasting samples (pretend that all the substances that a lab tests for are detectable by taste). He could do exactly what a medical testing lab does, with equal accuracy: he could sip samples of urine and blood and detect each medically relevant substance that is present and judge its concentration. This would be quite a valuable ability to have, one that would take a lot of training to develop, but despite the fact that he’d be an expert taster, we wouldn’t regard him as a connoisseur of blood and urine.

Comparative pleasures

Wine lovers like to compare wines, especially different vintages of the same wine and different wines from the same vintage and the same region or even the same producer.. This is done at so-called vertical and horizontal tastings, and it requires a good short-term memory for tastes. When, as at dinner, we open one particular bottle of a certain wine, it is interesting to compare it with previous bottles of that very wine or similar wines we've had from the same vintage. This requires good long-term memory for tastes. And that's a kind of knowledge, the kind of knowledge that connoisseurs have in spades. The more of it one has, the more pleasure one can derive from exercising it. But is the pleasure of comparing part of the pleasure *in* tasting the wine?

There is pleasure to be had in comparing the wine one is drinking with other, similar wines and in knowing what makes one better than another or what distinguishes it from others. Comparative pleasure can certainly accompany the sensuous pleasure of drinking a fine wine, and it may be the only pleasure connected with drinking a mediocre wine, if only to appreciate its mediocrity. Memory for tastes is clearly necessary for this, and no doubt being able to categorize the distinctive qualities of wines one tastes facilitates one's memory for them. Familiarity with other wines great and not so great enhances one's appreciation, positive or negative, for the wine one is drinking. Even so, I suggest, this comparative pleasure is not, strictly speaking, part of the pleasure *in* drinking the wine, although it is intimately connected with that pleasure. It's really an intellectual pleasure, indeed an genuinely aesthetic pleasure, but it is not a pleasure in tasting but a pleasure in remembering. If one has a memory for tastes, one can just well enjoy such pleasures while not drinking but just talking or thinking about wine — well almost just as well. I am not pooh-poohing these comparative pleasures; I am merely distinguishing them from the intrinsic sensuous pleasure in tasting itself.

Comparative knowledge is good to have, for both aesthetic and practical reasons. The practical reasons are obvious. It is useful to know which vintages of a particular wine or which wines from a particular place and year are worth trying

again and which are better avoided. Aesthetically, there is something a bit perverse about letting comparative judgments dictate how much one enjoys a wine. To me at least, it is much more enjoyable to look at paintings and listen to musical performances without comparing them with similar paintings or with other performances of the same piece. I used to be much more judgmental, but I came to appreciate the value of assessing what I look at or listen to on its own merits. Of course, experience helps, and that's what a connoisseur has.

I have conceded that experience is required for appreciating a fine wine, as opposed to just enjoying its taste. Compare what is involved in enjoying and appreciating a fine wine with enjoying and appreciating works of fine art, literature, music, or cinema (of course, it is dangerous to generalize here). Certainly less sustained effort and attention is required, if only because tasting a wine does not take long periods of time. One doesn't have to discern complex formal or structural features and relationships, for which sustained and repeated encounters are likely to be required. No interpretation or understanding is needed, and there is no iconography, allusion, plot, or psychological or moral import to uncover. Each taste adds to one's pleasure and, indeed, may enhance it, but the pleasure of drinking a fine wine is a momentary pleasure. When wine lovers speak of length, they're speaking of seconds, not minutes or hours, as with other pleasures. This doesn't mean the pleasure of drinking wine is any less. Quite the contrary, the great thing about the pleasure of drinking a wine, even though it consists of intermittent tastes, is that it can be so short and yet so good. That's why my earlier analogy with hearing musical chords, though somewhat apt, is inadequate.

Words and flavors

It is an interesting linguistic fact that whereas we have numerous words for very specific shades of color, our vocabulary is sorely lacking when it comes to tastes, smells, and feels. Whereas we can describe particular shades of red as crimson, scarlet, vermilion, and so on, we speak of the smell of roses, the taste of honey, and the feel of sandpaper. For tactile qualities words like "smooth" and "rough" and

“hard” and “soft” get us only so far, and then we resort to describing what something feels like, that is, what it feels similar to, like sandpaper or velvet. We can describe tastes in general terms as sweet, sour, salty, and bitter, but when we need to get specific it is more feasible to describe a particular taste by specifying what it is the taste of: the taste of chocolate, the taste of honey, or the taste of cod liver oil. We may describe substances with complex tastes as containing hints of particular tastes characterized in this way. This raises the question of whether hints and notes of particular flavors are really present in a wine or whether tasting the wine merely reminds us of particular flavors.

Being analytical about wine requires not merely discerning and discriminating the various elements in the taste of a wine but being able to talk about them. Does that ability enhance the enjoyment of wine? It certainly enhances the enjoyment of conversation about wine (it can also detract from general conversation), but does being able to verbalize what one tastes enhance one’s ability to taste it, to discern and discriminate what’s in it, and to enjoy it? Or does this merely facilitate one’s ability later to remember and identify it and thereby compare it with other wines?

Now it might seem that being able to verbalize the qualities of a wine enhances one’s ability to taste it. After all, it might be argued, attending a tutored tasting, in which a skilled wine taster provides on the spot tasting notes, enables one to taste qualities that one hadn’t previously noticed. But consider what actually happens. When the expert points out distinctive qualities of the wine, is he revealing qualities you hadn’t noticed or, rather, merely calling them to your attention under certain apt descriptions? Vivid verbal description can create the illusion of revealing an unnoticed quality without actually doing so. Perhaps all it does is put into words what you had already sensed but weren’t able to articulate. The question boils down to this: does the wine taste different now that its qualities are singled out and labeled, or does the description ring true because it captures the experience one was already having? I’m inclined to opt for the latter answer: the description rings true not because it reveals something new but because one’s experience already fits it. However, I don’t think there’s any way to argue conclusively for this. The difficulty

is that insofar as one can sense qualities without specifically noticing them (much less describing them), it is unclear how to determine whether a newly noticed quality is newly sensed or was already sensed but not yet noticed.

It seems to me that people can be discerning and discriminating without being able to describe what they discern and discriminate. As we have seen, it is possible to test people for how extensively they can detect sensory differences, whether of color and sound or of smell and taste (the technique of multi-dimensional scaling can be used to construct a multi-dimensional quality spaces for a particular individual and for making interpersonal comparisons among different people). Once that is done, people could then be trained, as Prof. Ann Noble has done at UC Davis, to describe what they smell and taste. They could then be re-tested to determine if this verbal learning has any effect on their quality space. Maybe this would make a difference, maybe not. I'm inclined to think not, but I can't prove this. I'm inclined to think that memory for aromas and flavors is not like memory for the sorts of cues and clues that highly trained radiologists, archaeologists, or paleontologists can discern and discriminate. For it is only within their specialized scientific frameworks that the distinctive features (visual markings and patterns) they detect by perception are meaningful. Gourmets and wine connoisseurs discern and discriminate features (aromas and flavors) not for what they indicate but for what they are.

One important consideration is that, since learning to describe aromas and flavors requires paying close attention to them, attending to them can surely enhance one's wine-tasting experience. The more one notices and the more one can go from noticing one element of taste to noticing another, the more there is to savor. If one can also remember similar wines, one can appreciate any distinctive features of the wine one is tasting (or, for that matter, realize that there is nothing distinctive about it). But perhaps one can do this all this noticing in a purely nonverbal way, by remembering what other wines were like. We shouldn't confuse the pleasure of being articulate about wine, of being able to describe the distinctive features of a

wine, with the nonverbal ability of remembering what they are like, or of appreciating them without being able to say why.

Can knowledge detract?

Can knowledge detract from enjoying a wine? Familiarity may breed contempt, even for wines, but not for a great wine. Even so, there is something about the first time with a great wine. As nice as it is to remember, the first time is impossible to reproduce. The better your memory for a wine, the harder it is to be surprised by its taste — unless it has changed or you have. In fact, one of the wonderful things about great wines is that they do change, generally for the better before they change for the worse (here I am speaking of bottle to bottle over time, not of sip to sip or glass to glass, though savoring these short-term changes is part of the pleasure of drinking a great wine). But it is hard to reproduce the thrill of tasting a great wine in its prime other than by forgetting how good it was and what was so good about it. So there is a disadvantage to knowledge. It can reduce the thrill and eliminate the surprise in drinking a great wine. Although it can generate anticipation prior to actually tasting the wine, it can also result in disappointment — a perfectly good wine can fall short of your expectations. Secondhand knowledge of the alleged greatness of an unfamiliar wine can also generate anticipation, but it too can lead to disappointment, if the wine doesn't do for you what it did for someone else or because it doesn't live up to its name — or its price.

There are other disadvantages. If you are very good at discerning and discriminating the various elements in the taste of a wine, you're in a position to be overly analytical about it and miss the combined effect of these elements. Here I am echoing the old adage that to dissect is to destroy, to which there is some truth. Also, you might fail to notice elements that don't fall neatly into familiar categories, such as those represented on Ann Noble's Wine Aroma Wheel. It is not obvious that all the aromas that can surround a glass of wine fit into familiar categories, such as (for white wines) honeysuckle, jasmine, lychee, apricot, pineapple, pear, apple, lemon, grapefruit, fig, bell pepper, asparagus, green olive, cut green grass, dried herbs,

anise, clove, nuts, honey, butter, vanilla, smoke, and wood and (for red wines) violets, roses, cherry, strawberry, blackberry, berry jam, cassis, fruit candy, bell pepper, asparagus, green bean, black olive, mint, eucalyptus, tobacco, mushroom, earth, anise, black pepper, clove, butter, soy, molasses, chocolate, cedar, vanilla, smoke, and pine. We don't need to fit faces, sunsets, or bird calls into set categories to perceive, enjoy, and appreciate them, and it seems constrictive to do so. Why should the enjoyment and appreciation of wine be any different? Surely some of the aromas and flavors of some wines fall between the categorial cracks.

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As I said when I began, I drink a lot of wine but don't talk about it a lot. This paper is an exception. Its main point has been very simple: most wine knowledge does not directly enhance the pleasures to be had in drinking wine. but, rather, enhances one's ability to discover such pleasures. I hope it hasn't seemed as though I have been denouncing knowledge about wine. To the contrary, such knowledge is a pleasure to acquire and to apply. But the pleasures it gives you are not sensory but cognitive. These include the pleasures in learning something new, recognizing something familiar, satisfying curiosity about the unfamiliar, and being surprised. At least I can say this: although wine is wine and knowledge is knowledge, they mix exceptionally well.