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Why talk about wine?

KENT BACH

There is a problem when these people list all these flavours and aromas they think they have detected. It then gets on to the label of the bottle and what you are looking at appears to be a recipe for fruit salad. – *Hugh Johnson*¹

I much prefer drinking wine to writing about it. I was prompted to write about it by an experience I often have when I offer a good wine to a novice. They will say something like, “Don’t waste that on me. I don’t know anything about wine,” implying that they will not be able to enjoy the wine. This raises the obvious question of whether and, if so, to what extent, knowing about wine is necessary for enjoying and appreciating it. I take it as obvious that there are all sorts of practical benefits to knowing a lot about wine, even if you are not a winemaker, wine seller, sommelier, wine writer, or wine critic. Knowledge and experience help you decide which wines to try, which wines to buy, and which wines to serve with which foods, as well as to recognize tainted, oxidized, or otherwise flawed wines. But none of this knowledge, I claim, is essential to actually enjoying wine. Much of this knowledge provides pleasure of its own, thanks to the fact that there is so much to learn about wine and that so much about it is interesting, but this pleasure is mainly intellectual, not sensory.

That, in a nutshell, was how I answered the question, “What good is knowledge in enjoying wine?”, in an article called “Knowledge, Wine, and Taste.”² Now I want to ask a different but closely related question: what good is being able to talk about wine for enjoying it? Here, I do not mean the practical value of wine talk. For example, being able to describe with precision what sort of wine you would like might enable a restaurant sommelier to suggest a wine that fits the bill – assuming he takes your description in the way you intended. Conversely, being able to decipher the tasting notes of wine critics

¹ <http://www.bibendum-wine.co.uk/news.asp?id=60&Archived=1>

² That article was based on a talk given at the first-ever conference on wine and philosophy, held in London on December 10, 2004. It appears in *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*, edited by Barry C. Smith (Oxford: Signal Books Ltd, 2006).

may help you narrow down what wines to buy and drink. And being able to talk about wine has one indisputable benefit: it enables people to engage in and enjoy talking about wine! Wine lovers love to do that. But that is not the sort of enjoyment that I am talking about. Rather, I am talking about the pleasure in drinking wine.

Why ask this question? We would not ask it about fruit juices or soft drinks. Some people might ask it about coffee or single-malt scotches, about cheeses or chocolates. Professional tasters, concerned with maintaining styles or standards, have to be able to recognize and identify deviations so that they can be corrected, but only the most compulsive connoisseur seeks to find just the right words for the tastes for these things. Why should it be any different with wine? Here is a plausible answer, at least regarding wines of high quality. Not only do they taste really good to a good many experienced tasters and therefore seem worth learning and talking about, they are very complex and diverse, right down to the chemical level. They contain hundreds of compounds to which normal tasters are responsive, and they vary considerably from one another in precisely which compounds they contain and in what concentrations. So the possibilities are virtually endless. Someone who raves that the 2003 Lafite-Rothschild is a modern day version of the 1959 is making a very specific claim, considering the subtle ways in which even wines from the same producer and place can differ from one another.

It is not obvious that learning how to describe the different elements one smells or tastes (or, for that matter, sees or feels) in a wine makes a difference in how one experiences it or what one experiences in it. It may facilitate the process of analytic tasting (i.e., methodically focusing on specific qualities) as engaged in by wine professionals and many wine lovers, but is having a rich vocabulary at one's disposal really necessary for isolating those qualities in one's experience? A great winemaker requires sensory acuity to blend a wine to his satisfaction, but it's not obvious that he needs words in order to do it. Why can't his tasting experience do the trick? And why can't ours enable us to appreciate the results?

What comes with experience?

Being able to talk about wine requires experience at drinking wine as well as learning a specialized vocabulary. But why isn't experience enough for just enjoying and

appreciating different wines? It is clear you can't enjoy wines to the fullest without the benefits of experience. Initially, you might be able to do little better than tell wines you like from those you do not. If they are drinkable, that's enough for you. The ones you most like are likely to be ones whose flavors are readily accessible – you will not yet be into subtleties. Your taste in wine might be no more sophisticated than most people's taste in soft drinks, pancakes, or bananas. You may have heard that wines made from different grapes and in different places taste different, but you will not yet have any idea what these differences are, much less how much they matter, never mind differences in vintages, vinification, and maturity. You have no idea what to look for in a wine, how that wine tastes against its peers, or what standards there might be for wines of that type and from that place, much less what people mean by the “sense of place” that a wine “communicates.” You have no conception of the variety and subtlety of flavors that wines can display or of how they can differ in complexity, structure, balance, and elegance.

With experience at tasting fine wines from specific regions, made from particular grapes and in particular styles, you can develop a sense of the possibilities wines are capable of and come to recognize similarities and differences. Learning the names of important places and producers will help you impose a certain order on this ever-growing range of experience. Rather than fall into the trap of attaching mystical significance to the names of these places and producers, you can treat these names as helpful means for remembering what the wines are like and which ones you like. Then you can return to those wines and be better prepared to recall how they were as compared to how they are. You will be able to tell if a particular bottle is not up to snuff. Different vintages of the same wine will become meaningfully comparable, and so will different wines from the same region and vintage. You will be able to recognize wines that are atypical for their type and region. During the course of this learning process your tastes will change. These changes will generally be gradual, but every so often a particular wine will blow you away or, to put it more reverently, give you an epiphany. Taste a number of these and your excitement about wine will intensify, even as you lose interest in many wines you previously loved.

Once you have gained experience in tasting diverse wines and have developed the habits and skills enabling you to expose your senses to what a wine has to offer, it should be enough to sense a wine attentively to enjoy it to the fullest. That requires knowing-how, of course, but not knowing-that (i.e., factual knowledge). You do not have to be able to label the wine's aromas and flavors in order to discern and appreciate them. That ability is needed for discussing wines, inquiring about them, writing about them, and selling them, and it may be conducive to remembering them, but it is not essential to enjoying and appreciating them.

What about assessing a wine? Perhaps having a rich wine vocabulary is needed for that. But is there anything you have to know beyond knowing how to carefully and attentively expose it to your senses? (For the moment I am concerned only about assessing the wine you are tasting, not applying standards for comparing it to other wines of the same type.) You look at the wine in your glass for its shade, depth, and density of color and, as you swirl it, for its viscosity. Then you sniff it to check for its intensity and cleanliness of smell, hoping not to detect any unpleasant musty or even foul odors, and you notice its aroma. After that you taste the wine for its level of sweetness, acidity, bitterness, and astringency. In fact, astringency is partly tactile, since it produces drying and puckering sensations. Also tactual is the high alcohol level or "hotness" of some wines. Tactual in a different way is the wine's weight or body, which can be thought of as on the scale of wateriness to creaminess. Finally, there is the finish, the perhaps lingering aftertaste. It might be short and thin or long and rich. You may notice subtle changes in the residual taste as it subsides.

Tasting a wine is a complex process, involving a series of actions that yield a multifaceted, temporally structured experience. Doing it well takes time and practice. Tasting a wine not as easy it the novice might think, but talking about it is harder still. What does that add to the experience?

What might be wine talk good for?

There is pleasure to be had in comparing the wine one is drinking with others one has tried; obviously that requires more than just being able to savor the wine of the moment. As we will see later, it is difficult to test people for consistency and reliability in using

wine descriptors. For now let us pretend that it has been established that you, the people you talk about wine with, and the professionals you read and listen to have all been certified as consistent and reliable wine talkers. That is supposing a lot, for people who talk profusely about wine are generally not put to the test. They, like many wines, can make a good impression without being all that good. We should not rule out the possibility that we can be easily fooled into thinking that our talk about wine is far more consistent and reliable than it is. Who is going to tell us that we are wrong? Wine talkers are generally too polite to criticize each other's claims, and where there is disagreement it tends to be written off as the result of differences in sensory reactions or personal preferences rather than in our understanding of wine terms. But let us suppose that we are consistent and reliable wine talkers. The question is this: what does being able to talk, consistently and reliably, about wines add to our ability to enjoy and appreciate them?

Comparative pleasure

Wine lovers enjoy comparing different but similar wines. For example, they like to compare different wines of the same varietal, place, and vintage, and to compare different vintages of the same wine. Indeed, they like to discern how, on a particular occasion, wine from the same bottle or even in the same glassful "opens up" over a few minutes. They like to revisit a wine periodically to see how it has developed over the years. Wine lovers also like to compare how different wines go with a particular food and to compare how a particular wine goes with different foods.

Obviously, wine language is needed for talking about these things, for sharing and comparing experiences, but is it really needed for having the experiences? Suppose we had elaborate vocabularies for delineating the details of sunsets, faces, foot massages, or roller coaster rides. Would words somehow enhance our ability to experience any of these to their fullest? Probably not, but being able to describe these experiences would surely enhance our ability to compare them and obviously would be necessary for discussing them. Comparative pleasure and the ability to articulate it seems to be much more widely cultivated and highly valued in the case of wine. There is no comparable culture, so far as I know anyway, with categorizing the looks of sunsets or the feels of foot massages. In principle, they could be classified, based on some devisable taxonomy, but who would bother, other than perhaps a poet. Lacking the ability to describe sunsets

and foot massages does not seem to detract from experiences of them, and it is doubtful that having it would enhance their quality or be needed for comparing them (except in conversation). So why should the case of wine be any different?

Wines change over time, even short periods of time, and there is pleasure in noticing these changes from one glass to the next. This goes beyond enjoying the distinctive character of the wine at each moment during the course of its change. It involves discerning particular ways in which the wine has changed. For example, its fruitiness and freshness may be evident only after it “opens up.” Obviously, words are needed to communicate these changes, but are they needed to help one discern or remember those changes over the short term? Why can’t this ability be based on purely sensory memory – a memory for flavors and aromas – without having to be supported by a rich vocabulary that purportedly puts these flavors and aromas into words?

Perhaps more is required for long-term memory, the kind needed for comparing wines has tasted at different times. There is pleasure, not just aesthetic but even sensory, in being able to compare a wine with relevantly similar wines, such as previous vintages of the same wine, other wines from the same vineyard and/or vintage, and other wines that may be interestingly similar. Without being able to remember the specific wines by name and vintage, one could have only vague recollections. Part of the pleasure one has in savoring a wine is comparing it with wines that one has tasted previously, especially similar ones. That requires remembering what the other ones tasted like, and that in turn requires identifying those wines by producer, region (or even appellation or vineyard), varietal (or name), and vintage.

Recognition and novelty

Memory is also required for the pleasure of recognition. Tasting a wine you are fond of for the first time in a long time is like seeing an old friend. However, familiarity can breed contempt, or at least boredom. Drink even a great wine too often and you will eventually lose interest in it. If your wine collection consisted entirely in case after case of one spectacular wine, you would be better off not being able to remember what it tastes like. Then, instead of growing sick and tired of it, you would be able to replicate the otherwise unrepeatable experience of tasting it for the first time.

Fortunately, there is no end to the variety of fine wines currently available, including ones from unheralded regions. Although we enjoy the pleasure of recognition, familiarity goes only so far. We value novelty too. Appreciating novelty (and distinctiveness) requires memory, since it is in comparison to other, particularly similar wines, that the one being tasted now can be judged as novel, that is, interestingly distinctive. But again, words are not necessary for enjoying and appreciating novelty or distinctiveness in a wine. Rather, it is lack of familiarity, experienced against a background of a wide range of wines one has previously encountered.

Applying standards

I have been pretending that all that matters when you open a bottle, pour some into a glass, and put the glass to your lips are the wine's sensory qualities. The focus has been on how a wine *does* taste, not on how it *ought* to taste. But wine people have ideas about that, especially about how specific wines ought to taste. For example, Champagne producers aim to maintain a particular "house style," a certain specific character year after year, especially in their non-vintage wines. Many producers of vintage wines, while adjusting to the variable effects of weather from one harvest to the next, also try to maintain a certain style, so that, for example, a Château l'Effete will always recognizably be a Château l'Effete. Then there is typicity. This can be specific to a certain region, even a specific appellation. The idea is that a wine should taste the way wines from that place are supposed to taste. It follows that a wine that lacks typicity could nevertheless taste great, however misleading its label. The same point applies to varietal typicity. An atypical pinot noir might taste more like a syrah, a heavily oaked sauvignon blanc more like a chardonnay. Many wine lovers would be disappointed rather than delighted to be fooled in this way, and would judge the wine deficient for not tasting the way it is "supposed to".

Words and experience: questions, questions

I have conceded that having labels for wines, consisting pretty much in the information that is on their labels, is needed for the pleasure of comparing wines, but now let us return to the main question, about the value of wine words for enjoying and appreciating

a particular wine. As we have seen, it is clear that experience, learning, and memory enhance one's ability to enjoy, appreciate, and assess a wine and expand one's idea of what wines can taste like. But what does having and using a vocabulary for describing the qualities in a wine add to all this?

Being able to find words to describe the qualities you sense in a wine might seem to be a good skill to develop. Presumably it enables you to understand what other people say about wine as well as to delineate in detail what it is that you like and dislike in a given wine and to explain your preferences in general. Presumably, I say, because I can think of a range of pertinent (and impertinent) questions that might not have encouraging answers:

- Does being given an accurate and perceptive description of a wine's qualities add to our enjoyment of them?
- Can apt descriptions even enable us to detect aspects of a wine's character that we otherwise wouldn't have noticed?
- Does a wine taste different after someone singles out and aptly describes its qualities, or does the description ring true only because it captures the experience one is already having?
- Can a wine taste better just because we can describe what it tastes like?
- Can describing a wine's aroma and flavor detract from our experience of it?
- Can we become *too* analytical in tasting wine, too concerned about discriminating and labeling the various flavor components of a wine?
- Does having wine descriptors at our disposal enhance our memory for wines?

Just raising such questions takes something for granted that we might not be entitled to assume. Asking about the importance of being able to describe the qualities assumes that one can learn to do so consistently and reliably. Ideally, this means that on different occasions one would describe the same wine in pretty much the same way and that different people trained in the same way and with the same vocabulary would tend to agree with one another about the qualities of particular wines. All this is testable, but not easily.

Testing tasting talk

Addressing these questions experimentally would not be easy (never mind the cost of the wines). The chemical senses (i.e., taste and smell) are markedly different from the other

senses. They are naturally hedonic, they are much slower to react, and their reactions are much slower to subside. This makes side-by-side comparisons more difficult. Relatively long time intervals between samples must be imposed because of adaptation, the tendency taste and smell to lose their responsiveness with repeated stimulation (hence the value of “palate cleansers” in multi-course meals). The conditions of tasting – for example, the temperature of the wine, not to mention condition of the taster – have to be controlled for. How a wine is experienced and evaluated is subject to variations in conditions of tasting (e.g., wines already tasted, temperature of wine, ambient temperature, glass, bottle variation, etc.). And, of course, wines change over time, and there can be variation in taste of the same wine from one bottle to the next. Finally, people differ in their wine-tasting experience and, indeed, in their sensitivity to different aromas and flavors, both in kind and in degree. For example, some people find red wine, coffee, and black tea almost painfully bitter.

Suppose all these obstacles could be overcome. What could we test for? One obvious thing to test for is test whether having a rich wine vocabulary enhances one’s ability to taste and recognize wines. We would have to compare two groups, people who have been trained in wine talk and people who have not been, but whose experience at tasting wine is otherwise comparable. If having a rich wine vocabulary enhances one’s tasting ability, then one should be able to distinguish wines that someone lacking such a vocabulary cannot distinguish. So the way to test for this would be to find wines that the wordless taster can’t discriminate but the verbal one can. Also, we could present people with a wine and then, a few minutes later, present them with the original wine along with four or five similar wines. Perhaps there would be many instances where people without a wine vocabulary could not recognize the wine they tasted previously whereas those with the words for what they previously tasted could recognize the original wine. Applying methods like these would provide evidence for whether or not having a rich wine vocabulary really enhances people’s ability to discern the wine aromas and flavors and to recognize them.

Ideally, what could we hope to learn from careful scientific testing of people’s abilities to taste wines and to talk about them? The most optimistic outcome would be that people can in fact be trained to use wine talk consistently and reliably, to apply much

the same terms to the same wines and able to convey to one another the aromas and flavors they detect in a given wine. Adequately trained and experienced people would demonstrably be able to match wines with descriptions and descriptions with wines. Give them a wine and they could tell which of a number of descriptions describes it. Give them a description and they could tell which of a number of wines it describes. But why should we be so optimistic?

Let us get specific. Here's a description of a particular wine:

Fabulous purity of crushed fruit – strawberries and raspberries, with hints of fresh roses. Full-bodied, with an amazing concentration and a palate that goes on and on and on. Ultraripe tannins. Terrific balance and richness.³

Obviously, this wine critic thinks very highly of this wine. But even if his description tells you what the wine is like, does it tell you enough to distinguish this wine from others, much less indicate what is so great about it? I don't think so. Now ask yourself the same questions about this description:

Medium red with a hint of amber. Ethereal aromas of red currant, dried rose, violet, tobacco, marzipan and white truffle. A wine of great penetration and thrust, with fruit of steel and powerful structure. Wonderfully floral in the mouth and on the gripping aftertaste.⁴

This description gives more detail than the previous one, but it too does not tell you enough to distinguish this wine from others, much less to indicate what is so great about it this wine. Oh, in case you wondering, these two tasting notes describe the same wine, the 2000 Bruno Giacosa Barolo Le Rocche del Falletto Riserva. Interestingly, the aromatic of fresh roses to one critic is redolent of dried roses to the other.

A study could be made of different wine critics' tasting notes on the same wines to determine the extent to which they agree on each one's aromas and flavors. My bet is that some wines would be described in unrecognizably different ways, as the example above illustrates. There might even be instances of differently tasting wines described in the same way. In another kind of study, people trained in descriptive vocabulary could be directly tested. Tasters could be presented with a number of broadly similar wines and with a number of descriptions and asked to match wines with descriptions and descriptions with wines. No doubt there would be plenty of points of agreement, but there

³ *Wine Spectator*, July 31, 2004.

⁴ *Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar*, Nov/Dec 2004.

would undoubtedly be many other points of disagreement too. This would be especially likely if the test were set up so that some the wines were intended not to fit any of the descriptions, and some of the descriptions were intended not to apply to any of the wines. If people were given multiple-choice questions that included “none of the above” as an option, then, for each item, they would not be forced to assume that one of the options is the “right” one. They would only choose a description that rings true of the given wine and only a wine that snugly fits the given description.

To be optimistic, suppose it turned out that people trained in the use of wine descriptors largely agreed in their descriptions of particular wines, we could still ask what the descriptors signify. Do they really describe qualities of a given wine? It is an interesting fact that tastes and smells are generally described in terms of what they are the tastes and smells of, such as asparagus, asphalt, black cherries, freshly-mowed lawn, jasmine, licorice, and roses. So, we might wonder, do terms tasters use genuinely describe the wine or merely identify salient similarities or even just vague associations between the wine and familiar items with characteristic tastes or smells? The distinguished wine writer Hugh Johnson is skeptical: “A wine is not apply or black-curranty. People don't sniff a rose and say, ‘Oh yes, pineapple, cucumber’. It smells like a rose – and a bottle of wine smells like wine. Too much of this borrowing of terms to describe wines really doesn't help.”⁵ So, we might well ask, does a wine described as showing notes of cigar box or saddle leather really smell like a cigar box or saddle leather? (And why should we care what other things a wine smells or tastes like?)

Tastes and words

What difference does it make to one’s experience and enjoyment of a wine to be able to describe what it tastes like? In fact, that’s an ambiguous question. “What it tastes like” can mean either how it tastes or what it tastes similar to. Let us discuss each in turn.

Does knowing how to describe the taste of a wine matter to what it tastes like in the sense of how it tastes? Obviously, being able to articulate how it tastes is necessary for conveying this to others, but that is another matter. Less obviously, it may facilitate remembering how the wine tastes. But does it enhance one’s tasting of the wine? Does

having words for the different elements and qualities in the aroma or flavor make them easier to experience, and perhaps even make some of them possible to experience? I do not see why. To the contrary, it would seem that experiencing them is necessary for describing them. Having words for the sensory qualities of the wine may enhance one's powers of recognition, but even that may be an exaggeration. Perhaps it is enough to have nonverbal recognitional concepts of the different qualities. Why should the ability to recognize this quality or that quality require having names for them? That is not necessary for recognizing familiar places or faces.

Does being able to verbally compare the wine one is tasting with wines one has previously tasted enhance one's ability to taste the wine? If one tastes a series of wines, does being able to compare them verbally enhance one's experience of each? Obviously it enhances one's ability to talk about them. Less obviously, it enhances one's ability to structure one's knowledge of what each of them tastes like. But, and this is a big "but," it seems that one must first be able to attend to the various elements and qualities in the aroma and flavor of the wine, to be able to taste the wine in all its complexity, in order to talk about these elements and qualities.

However, and this is a big "however," someone else's words, perhaps the words of an astute taster and articulate describer, can call one's attention to qualities one may not have noticed, to describe relationships between different elements that one may have overlooked, and perhaps even to draw comparisons to the aromas and flavors of other wines or even other substances and thereby enhance one's experience of the wine itself.

Do common wine descriptors – words such as *cherry*, *anise*, *grassy*, and *petrol* – really capture elements in the flavors of different wines? Or do they merely identify substances that some aspect of the wine bears a certain similarity to, or even just something that one associates with that aspect? Is there literally a cherry, anise, grassy, or petrol flavor or aroma in a particular wine, or just something somewhat like that? I venture to say that even a detailed description of a wine in such terms doesn't give a faithful account of how the wine smells and tastes. It might help distinguish a wine from most other wines, it might give one some idea if one will like the wine, but it is unlikely to give one a clear sense of how the wine would actually taste, so that one could say,

⁵ <http://www.bibendum-wine.co.uk/news.asp?id=60&Archived=1>

upon tasting the wine, that indeed it was this wine that the description described. Such a description could just as well apply to many other wines, each distinguishable from the others. Try reading a description of a fine wine that you're about to try. Read all the descriptions you want. Then taste the wine. Do these descriptors really capture what the wine is like and convey what it is that you – and the wine writers – loved about it? I doubt it. Indeed, we should not rule out the possibility that descriptions can detract from one's experience of the wine.

Verbal tricks

It is a platitude that your memory plays tricks on you. In the case of wine, you can think you remember what a certain wine tastes like and be wrong. You taste a wine that you have tasted before and it seems “different.” That could be because it *is* different – perhaps the wine has dramatically changed since the last time you tasted it, or perhaps this bottle came from a different lot than the last one. But maybe you are just wrong about how it tasted before and now have a false expectation of what this bottle should taste like.

Words can play similar tricks and aid and abet the tricks of memory. You can take the fact that a certain descriptor, say *cigar box*, occurs to you when you taste a wine as evidence that it describes some aspect of the wine's aroma (presumably you do not chew on cigar boxes). Yes, that is some evidence, but it might be misleading. Perhaps thinking of that descriptor gives you the (false) impression that the aroma you are detecting is cigar box. This may seem unlikely, but consider how easily we are subject to suggestion, especially by so-called experts, about what we smell and taste in a wine. We defer to experts on the theory that they know more, have sensitive palates, and are merely reporting on what they taste and smell, not using their imagination. And there are many other well-known sources of suggestibility, such as the identity of the producer, the type of grape(s), the place of origin and, most notoriously, the wine's price and the label. Even whether the wine is red or white can affect how a wine seems to taste and smell.

For an extreme example of suggestibility, though not one involving wine, consider the observation that Parmesan cheese smells like vomit. Fortunately, few people realize this (sorry I mentioned it). That is because they are rarely put in the position of detecting the smell without having some idea what it is they are smelling. As you can well imagine,

whether you think it is Parmesan or vomit determines whether you find the smell attractive or repulsive.

It might seem that we ought to be able to distinguish purely descriptive words and phrases from the more evaluative or even figuratively used expressions to talk about wines. So, you might think, there's a big difference between using expressions like *rose jasmine, cedar, caramel, and cherry* and using ones like *polished, focused, firm, and flamboyant*. Terms in the first group seem clearly descriptive, whereas those in the second group seem clearly evaluative. But does a wine literally smell like a flower or herb, much less taste like any fruit or vegetable? Well, at least it might give off a note of jasmine or contain something that contained in cherries. In some cases, the wine might contain a compound (or combination of compounds) that is present in the stuff in question (strawberry, jasmine, or whatever) and accounts for its characteristic taste or aroma. In other cases, the compound might be different but trigger a response from the same olfactory receptors. Consider that we have hundreds of different kinds of olfactory receptors, each responsive to just a few volatile compounds. The same compound may trigger more than one receptor. So smell is not just a matter of reacting to compounds that enter one's nasal cavity. There is a lot of complex processing going on. Perceived similarities in smell may or may not be the result of the same compounds impinging on one's olfactory receptors. Different combinations of compounds can produce somewhat resembling effects. And substances containing some of the same compounds can smell very differently because of the interactive effects with different other compounds in those substances, especially when those substances are as complex as wines.

Bottom Line

It sounds plausible to think that being able to describe how wines smell and taste (and look and feel) enhances one's pleasure in smelling and tasting them. Yet, as I have suggested, that remains to be shown. No doubt this ability enhances one's pleasure *while* smelling and tasting wines, but does it really enhance one's pleasure *in* smelling and tasting them? Being able to verbally identify the qualities in a wine is not really needed to be able to sense, notice, and recognize its qualities. Discriminating and recognitional capacities can be based on sensory concepts, built up out of specific taste, smell, and

tactile elements. They do not have to be put into words. Verbal commentary can make mediocre wines seem more interesting than they are, but great wines speak for themselves.

Indeed, it is doubtful that words, even when employed by trained, experienced, and sensitive wine tasters, can really do justice to really great wines. Words might be useful for pinning down particular aromatic and flavor elements, but they do not seem adequate to the task of capturing what is distinctive about a distinctive wine, much less what makes a great wine great. They are just not precise and specific enough, even in combination.

Wine is a very interesting subject. Naturally, it is most interesting to people who love wine. Much of the pleasure that wine talk provides, leaving aside the obvious pleasure in showing off and perhaps being admired, is in learning and understanding and in teaching and explaining. This reflects the spirit of conviviality and generosity that wine evokes. There is much to understand and appreciate about the wines you drink, even ones you would rather not. It is fun to try to identify a wine's distinctive qualities (if it has any), it is fun to try to figure out why it has the particular qualities it has, and it is fun to compare a wine, for better or worse, with interestingly similar ones. Wine talk aids in tracking and organizing one's experience with wine and, obviously, in sharing it. But great wines speak for themselves!