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June 27, 2006

Wine Perceptions and Misperceptions

Some 1,500 winemakers, grape growers and other members of the nation's wine trade are congregating in and about the Sacramento Convention Center this week for the 57th annual meeting of the American Society for Enology and Viticulture.



By and large, these are people whose approach to wine may be more cerebral than hedonistic, though during lunch or over dinner they no doubt will be savoring a glass or two of their favorite mealtime beverage. The studies that have drawn them to Sacramento are being presented by university professors and bear such heady titles as "Implementation of Calibrated Near-Infrared Spectroscopy in Precision Viticulture and Selective Harvesting of Winegrapes."

For someone who is very thankful he got out of high school before any kind of exit exam involving the periodic table of elements was conceived, these sessions can be humbling.

Nonetheless, presentations this morning dealing with the perception of aroma and flavor in wine yielded several bits of enlightenment, including:

- You sniff the wine in your glass. The person you're dining with sniffs the same wine in her glass. She detects bell pepper, blackberries and coconut in the wine, but all you find is coconut. You're anosmic. She probably is, too. Most of us are, to one degree or another. Anosmia simply is the inability to smell certain chemicals, and there's about 750 of them in wine. Some we'll never be able to detect. But you can learn to identify many others. It just takes practice. Keep tasting, urged Dr. Terry Acree, a professor of biochemistry at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

- Check the wine primer you have been relying on to learn about wine. If it has a map of the tongue showing that sweetness is detected by tastebuds on the tip, sourness on the sides and so forth, throw it out. The "tongue map" is a myth, said Dr. Jeannine Delwiche, associate

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professor with the Sensory Science Group at Ohio State University in Columbus. "You can taste everything everywhere on your tongue," she said. Unless, of course, for those tastebuds affected by asnomia.

- You can find a style of glass for virtually any style of wine nowadays, but changes in shape and size don't make a darn bit of difference in the intensity or nature of a wine's smell, suggested Delwiche. She was referring to studies in which subjects were blindfolded and asked to describe the smell of the wine in the glass in front of them. They weren't told that different types of glasses were used each time they were asked about the wine. The switches made no difference in their perceptions of the wine, in contrast to conclusions reached by tasters when they weren't blindfolded. "If you change glasses and don't tell the subjects, that effect disappears," she said. "You don't have to have a special glass (to appreciate wine), but if it makes you feel better, go for it."

Posted by mdunne at June 27, 2006 02:37 PM

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