

# Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

## Stephen Tanzer and the Art of Wine Tasting

**JR:** I'm speaking with Stephen Tanzer, editor and publisher of the International Wine Cellar. Steve, would you begin by telling us about the International Wine Cellar?

**Stephen Tanzer:** It's a bi-monthly, independent, wine newsletter now in its eighteenth year of publication. It's not highly technical, but it is certainly serious in that a good 90% of each 48- to 64-page issue consists of reviews of mostly currently available wines. It deals with three to five topics every two months in considerable detail, very often from the tastings I do during my visits to top cellars in various wine-producing regions. When I go to Burgundy or California or Rioja, for example, I try to visit as many important producers as possible and provide people with comprehensive tasting notes. The emphasis is on serious wines—wines of place, not mass-produced generic wines, and not necessarily expensive wines. I try to give readers all the specific information they'll need to find the best wines.

**JR:** Let's discuss wine tasting. Let's look at this from the standpoint of a person who is already a fairly serious wine enthusiast, who has perhaps been collecting wine for a decade or two. He—or she—is now ready to host a serious wine tasting event, inviting a number of knowledgeable wine tasters—and he wants to pull it off without a hitch. What are his options in terms of choosing a suitable theme for the event?

**Stephen Tanzer:** For people with experience of

wine, there are two obvious choices: the first would be a horizontal tasting, which is a group of wines from a single category and a single vintage, for example 1985 Bordeaux or 1995 Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape. If you gather together a dozen or so 1985 Bordeaux wines from various appellations, you'll have wines of markedly different character. The best way to see these differences clearly is by tasting them side by side. You'll have eliminated the vintage variable: all these differences will be due to soil and winemaking.

Another advantage of a tasting like this is the opportunity to taste a set of wines with bottle age in depth, and learn how they evolve. This sort of tasting can be very valuable for wine lovers who are in the processing of stocking their own cellars. The best example I can think of is red Burgundy, which also happens to be my favorite wine. Many IWC subscribers who love and buy Pinot Noirs are convinced they can age for 10 or 15 or 20 years, or even longer, in a cold cellar. Yet if they took out a group of, say, 1985 red Burgundies, which are largely mature and in some cases slightly past their prime, what they're going to taste is a style of wine completely different from young Burgundy. The vibrant, fresh fruit and floral elements of the young wines have basically disappeared, and in their place are much more mature aromas, more leather, tobacco, mushroom and underbrush. The wines are smoother and their tannins have been resolved. But a lot of people in this country probably would not like this style of wine as much, and these people would have been better off drinking these wines much earlier for their

youthful fruit. So I think that this kind of a horizontal tasting is incredibly valuable for a collector—hopefully before he or she buys and cellars too much wine of a particular type! What’s the point of aging something for 15 years if you don’t like what it turns into—especially today, when wines are made with riper fruit and less hard tannins and thus are rarely austere or too inaccessible in their youth.

**JR:** Then what makes older wines so prized?

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**Stephen Tanzer:** Historically, the wines that people have paid a premium for are wines that hold up and last well in bottle and become more complex over time. When you pay \$60 or \$100 for a premier or grand cru Burgundy or a top Bordeaux, you’re paying for the fact that it has a long future ahead of it. Great mature wines develop incredibly suave, silky textures and aromas and flavors of ineffable complexity, and this is what connoisseurs pay a premium for.

The second option for a serious tasting is a vertical tasting, a tasting of the same bottling over a series of vintages. It could be as few as 6 or 8 recent vintages, or it could be 50 vintages covering 100 years. The great benefit of a vertical tasting is that you get a really intimate look at how a wine develops over time. The most classic vertical would be to view multiple vintages of the same wine from the same vineyard, but sometimes this is difficult to do. It’s easy to do it in the case of Bordeaux—you can taste multiple vintages of *Lafite Rothschild*, for example, because this wine has been made from essentially the same vineyard holdings for decades, if not centuries. But with a lot of modern-styled wines, such as some cabernets from California with relatively short histories, it’s harder to do because the vineyard sources have changed over time, or the making of the wine itself has changed radically over whatever period you’re looking at.

**JR:** Should our tasters know which wines they are drinking, or should they taste blind?

**Stephen Tanzer:** If they’re doing a horizontal tasting of, say, 2000 Chateaufort-du-Pape or 1985 Bordeaux, I think it’s great fun to taste blind. The reason that people taste blind is that they cannot be prejudiced by the label. When people see swanky labels, they’re extremely reluctant to criticize the wine. Alternatively, they may be afraid to say nice things about a wine that common wisdom says is inferior. If you taste blind, I can practically guarantee that you’ll find interesting surprises.

Take 1985 Bordeaux. Clearly, if you’re trying to cover the vintage adequately, you’ll need to taste both merlot-based right bank wines and cabernet sauvignon-based left bank wines. Here, I would rec-

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ommend separating right bank and left bank, organizing the wine into a series of flights, or groups. If you have 12 wines, you might do 3 groups of 4, or

2 groups of 6. You can begin by bagging the wines (it’s easiest to just roll them in aluminum foil). By the way, if the tasters are told what group of wines they’ll be tasting, we call that a single blind tasting; double blind tasting is when the labels are hidden and the tasters don’t even know what wines they’ll be tasting blind.

**JR:** Now it’s time to open the bottles. Assuming they’re older reds, do they need to be decanted?

**Stephen Tanzer:** The most compelling reason to decant older wines is to pour them off their sediment, rather than pouring them through their sediment, which can give the wine a bitter taste and muddy its color, aromas and flavors. I personally don’t like to do a lot of decanting, because I like to

watch a wine develop in the glass in front of me. For wines up to about 15 years old that don't have a lot of sediment, you probably want to give them an aeration by pouring them into a decanter in advance of the tasting. This allows any bottle stink to dissipate and may slightly soften their tannins. I recently conducted a vertical tasting of *La Mouline*, which may be the most famous Syrah-based wine in the world. We tasted from 1998 back to 1978. The most important vintages of this wine are still extremely young and have years of development ahead of them. In the case of the younger wines, they were decanted an hour before we tasted them. Some of the tasters might have wanted to give them more aeration, but I still felt I wanted to see them develop in front of me in my glass. I'd rather err on the side of less aeration and be able to follow the wine as it is exposed to air.

By the way, prior to decanting a wine, you'll want to let the bottle stand upright for a day or more to let any sediment to settle to the bottom. Otherwise, you'll defeat the purpose of decanting. With older wines, you'll need to decant because there's more sediment, but you can do this just prior to serving the wines. You don't want to let an old wine sit in an open decanter for hours before pouring it because it may rapidly begin to lose its freshness or even oxidize.

**JR:** What about proper stemware—how critical is it?

**Stephen Tanzer:** *Expensive* glassware is hardly critical. The important thing is that the glass be clear, lightweight, and big enough that you can pour a two or three ounce portion that fills barely one-third of the glass. The glass should be an ovoid shape, and be narrower at the rim than it is in the middle, so that you can swirl a wine without splashing it over your neighbor! And of course the top of the glass should be wide enough so that you can get your nose into it. For my all-purpose tasting glass at home, I use the *Ouverture*, Riedel's basic red wine glass, which

can be found in the \$8 or \$10 range. With young wines, I don't like to use huge Burgundy or Bordeaux glasses that can literally hold a bottle of wine. I find that the aromas of young wines are lost in a glass that huge. But with older wines that have really developed bottle bouquet, for example if

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you're doing a tasting of fully mature Burgundies, I think it's great fun to use a larger glass, such as Riedel's large Burgundy goblet. Riedel, as well as some other companies such as *Spiegelau*, have designed glasses specifically to show various types of wines at their best.

**JR:** We want our tasters to be able to distinguish one wine from another. Should they use palate cleansers between wines?

**Stephen Tanzer:** First of all, in terms of setting up a room, it has got to be a room without any strong scents or aromas—tobacco, for example is a disaster, and any perfume will interfere. It's best to taste in the late afternoon or late morning before a meal, when your senses are at their sharpest. I often recommend doing a tasting before dinner, then tasting the same wines alongside food at dinner. For the tasting, I would just have water and some crackers or bread to munch on between wines—something as neutral as possible for cleaning the palate. My secret weapon is often fresh, lightly salted mozzarella, which has an uncanny ability to clear your palate of a range of tastes, including the garlic or citrus taste that may have been in your mouth prior to the tasting.

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**JR:** Can you lead us through the different things that a taster should be looking for in a wine?

**Stephen Tanzer:** First of all, there will be four components to your observation of a wine: its appearance, the aroma of the wine, the flavors and textures of the wine, and its finish, or aftertaste.

The first thing you'll do is look at the color of the wine against a white background. You'll want to supply a white tablecloth so that it's easy to examine the color of each wine. What I usually do at home is place my glasses on white, plastic-coated sheets or butcher paper; that way you can protect your table but also be able to examine the wine against a white background.

If you tilt the wine away from you, you'll be able to see the color of the wine, especially its color toward the rim. A red wine that's browner than other wines in the same group from the same vintage is probably more evolved, and may even be beginning to oxidize. But if a wine has a healthy, bright color, you can't necessarily hold the fact that it's lighter against it. You really need to assess color in the context of the category, as well as the vintage. For example, you're not going to find the same depth of color in red Burgundy as you are in Northern Rhône Syrah. And 1997 Burgundies are not going to be as dark as the '96s, which have much higher acidity levels and fresher colors. And of course a 20-year-old Bordeaux will not have the same ruby tones as a young wine. White wines from warmer regions tend to have darker color, while northerly whites tend to be paler and even green-tinged. I'm thinking of Chablis, for example—classic Chablis is a very pale yellowy-green color. It's a beautiful color, but it's not a color you're going to find from, say, Australian Chardonnay.

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For my own purposes, I tend to take fairly rudimentary notes on the color of a wine, on an exception basis—if something stands out, that's important. Is it extremely dark and saturated? That may tell you something about the strength of the raw materials or about how the wine was vinified and aged. Is it very pale at the rim? That may indicate that the wine is dilute. Most important, is the wine clear or cloudy? Very often, a cloudy wine could be seriously flawed or spoiled; it could even be undergoing refermentation in the bottle. On the other hand, a mature red wine that's too polished and brilliant and has little or no sediment may have been overly filtered. Filtration can often strip a wine of too much of its texture and aromatic interest.

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Now you're going to swirl the glass to release its aromas. You're aerating the wine, you're volatilizing its molecular compounds. Stick your nose in the glass and give the wine a good sniff. If you're taking notes, you can just free-associate—what aromas do you pick up? (Keep in mind that the mouth only identifies salty, sweet, acid and bitter. What we think of as flavors are really aromas that you're getting up through your retro-nasal passage in the back of your throat.)

The first thing to look for is, is the wine clean? Is it musty? That would probably be due to a bad cork or less-than-perfect barrels that the wine was aged in. If it smells like a barnyard, that usually signifies that the wine is dirty in some way. *Brettanomyces*, for example, is a spoilage yeast that is found very often in certain wines. In small dosages it can add to the complexity of a wine, but as a wine ages in bottle, sometimes it can become overwhelming and the wine will smell dirty. Some wines develop gamey, meaty nuances, as well as notes of leather, underbrush and earth as a natu-

ral part of their evolution. It's always a good idea to have at least one experienced taster in your group, someone with a good working knowledge of the category of wine you're tasting. This person can offer an informed opinion on whether the aromas in a given wine are signs of flaws or oxidation, or whether they're a natural part of the evolution of the wine. And of course, your tolerance for certain aromas is to a great degree a matter of personal taste. There are some West Coast tasters, for example, who have been brought up on New World wines which are really about fruit as opposed to soil tones. They might

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be extremely put off by any sign of dirtiness on the nose, to the point where they think a gamey wine is totally flawed.

After you have smelled the wine and written down adjectives that address its aromas, you are going to take a good-sized sip—not excessive—and hold the wine

in your mouth. You can purse your lips and draw air over the wine in your mouth to volatilize the aromatic compounds. You're swishing it around, you're gargling the wine in your mouth, you're chewing the wine. You're getting a feel for the texture of the wine. Is it thin and acidic? Is it lush and velvety and smooth? You're thinking about the weight of the wine. Is it light? Is it full-bodied? Is it rough? Is it smooth? Then there are the tannins. One of the things you can accomplish by swirling the wine in your mouth is get good information about the texture of the tannins. Are they rough and astringent, as they can be in a young wine, or are they smooth and fine? Normally if you're tasting, say, 20 year-old Bordeaux, the tannins have harmonized with the wine and become less jarring to the palate.

What about the flavors of the wine? Are they fresh

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and clear? Are they nicely defined or muddy? Is the wine simple and one-dimensional, or does it have layers of flavor? Do you find yourself jotting down

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numerous flavor descriptors, or can you find only one or two?

The length of the wine, its persistence on the palate, is an important indicator of quality, perhaps ultimately THE most important indicator. A wine that disappears the moment you spit or swallow it probably lacks concentration or was made from underripe grapes. But great wines linger on your palate for 20 or 30 seconds, sometimes longer. In the case of certain extremely rich, sweet wines, like a great vintage of *Chateau d'Yquem*, they can remain on your palate virtually until the next thing you taste, and that may be 10 or 15 minutes later! Length is an indicator of the concentration and ripeness of the fruit, and the quality of the winemaking.

When you taste and feel a wine in your mouth, the single most important thing you're looking at is its overall balance. When you taste a mature wine, it really should show a harmony of components. If a single element completely dominates the wine—too much acidity, an oaky smell like a lumberyard—it's not a balanced wine. It's a little trickier with younger wines, because these wines really haven't yet come into harmony. The wine might still be excessively oaky, the tannins might be very strong or harsh, or the alcohol may be too apparent. Sometimes those young wines are out of balance, but very often they simply need bottle aging to harmonize.

**JR:** Are we spitting or swallowing the wine?

**Stephen Tanzer:** If you're tasting a lot of wine, once you've examined a wine and sniffed it and swirled it and savored it in your mouth, you should spit, because you can basically assess a wine without swallowing it, which a lot of people don't realize. If you want to keep your wits about you, you should be spitting, because otherwise over the course of a tasting you'll be taking in a lot of alcohol and dulling your senses. You'll probably also get a bit silly, and the group will get louder and louder, and pretty soon you won't be able to taste seriously anymore. So I would strongly recommend spitting at the tasting. Everyone should have a kind of spit bucket in front of them as the taste, something that's broad at the top so that it's hard to miss, and bottom-heavy so that it's hard to knock over.

**JR:** Now we're looking to bring more specificity to our experience. We want to move from the purely hedonistic experience of drinking wine to *describing* what we are tasting. To do this, we'll need to use a vocabulary to communicate our experience. How do we go about pairing specific words to specific wines?

**Stephen Tanzer:** Let's say you're tasting in flights. In general, you'd allow the tasters a certain number of minutes to taste through the flight on their own—if you have four wines, maybe no more than about 10 or 15 minutes—and then you discuss the wines together. It's always a good idea to have at least one person in the group who has a good familiarity with the category, because that person will know in a rough way how the wines should taste and how evolved they should be, and will probably have language suitable to that category of wine. But essentially you're free-associating. If somebody says a Bordeaux smells like blackcurrant or tobacco, the odds are that's because that molecular compound is actually in the wine. More than 500 molecular compounds have been identified in wine, and obviously more complex wines have more of these elements. Even inex-

“When you taste a mature wine, it really should show a harmony of components. If a single element completely dominates the wine—too much acidity, an oaky smell like a lumberyard—it's not a balanced wine.”

perienced tasters will find that once they have a rudimentary vocabulary for describing a wine, they will quickly develop a broader palette of adjectives.

I don't think tasting language has to be highly technical. In my own notes in the International Wine Cellar, I try to avoid jargon because I want the notes to be comprehensible to people at all levels of wine knowledge. What I probably get the most credit for in my newsletter is using language

effectively to communicate the aromas, tastes and textures of a wine, which is more difficult than it sounds. I know some extremely talented tasters who know as well as I do the quality of a wine, but if you ask them what it tastes like or what they like about it, they can't quite put it into words. Sometimes I ask a winemaker in a cellar what aromas he finds in his own wine and he is struck dumb.

When tasting with a group of people, each taster can volunteer adjectives and pretty soon you're building a tasting note. Somebody in the group might say, “this wine is too tannic,” but then you might discuss it further as a group and decide it's simply less evolved. In the late 1970s, for example, you might have been tasting a group of 1961 Bordeaux. The *Chateau Latour* was nearly black in color; it was tannic and closed: you couldn't get anything out of the wine except for a feeling of density and superconcentration. A neophyte might well have tasted that wine and said, “this is no good.” But someone with experience of Bordeaux, and the '61 vintage, might have considered this wine the best on the table. Sure it was the most unevolved wine, but it was also the most concentrated and the longest on the finish. And over the course of the tasting, this wine would have opened up, really blossomed in the glass, and showed more texture, more aromatic complexity, more layers of flavor.

It's always interesting to allow people at a blind tast-

ing the chance to take a last sniff and sip of a wine after it's been unveiled, after the tasters know what's in the bottle. I remember a blind tasting I attended several years ago that consisted of many short flights of Bordeaux going back over many, many years, including some of the most famous wines of the 20th century. We weren't given a master list of the wines until the very end of the event, which lasted for seven or eight hours. It was extremely frustrating for me to know that I had tasted, for example, the 1947 *Petrus* and not be able to taste it again, knowing what it was. All I had was my detailed tasting note to savor.

**JR:** Is there inevitably a great deal of subjectivity in using language to describe wines?

**Stephen Tanzer:**

There is subjectivity, to the extent that one person's "blackberry" may be another taster's "boysenberry." But one of the benefits of tasting with others rather than by yourself is that if somebody else throws out a descriptor, you can go back to the wine and look for it yourself. And eventually you'll develop a common language.

**JR:** Do you find that a quantitative scoring system adds an element of rigor and consistency to this process?

**Stephen Tanzer:** I believe that my subscribers appreciate the fact that there's nothing clearer than a number to communicate what I really feel about the quality of a wine. And they understand and enjoy the 100-point scale because, after all, all adult life is a continuation of high school. But this is not rocket science. I would not argue that these numbers are statistically significant, or that I'm going to give the same wine 88 points every time I taste it. I'd like to

think that I'm going to score a wine within a point or two every time I taste it, but there's also bottle variation, and the wines can show differently on different days—after all, they're alive. A score taken by itself does not really describe a wine; I think an effective tasting note is far more important, and it's certainly essential to communicating the style of a wine.

**JR:** The proliferation of numerical rating systems has certainly affected the wine buying public and the wine industry as a whole. Do you think the impact has been good, bad, or neutral?

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**Stephen Tanzer:** The positive aspect is that wines with high scores attract buying interest. When reviewers give wines high scores, they generate enthusiasm, and this is certainly beneficial to wine producers and wine merchants.

**JR:** This also generates higher prices!

**Stephen Tanzer:** That's the downside. Very often wines that get freakishly high scores quickly sell out, or become cult items and start trading on the secondary market at much higher prices. When an influential wine critic gives a 100-point score to a particular wine, trophy hunters who collect points rather than wines will pay anything for these wines under the assumption that they are perfect. But one critic's 100-point wine may be another's 89-pointer. Certainly this kind of thing causes chaos in the market. On the other hand, wine ratings in an independent publication can be extremely helpful to consumers. If you're staring at 7 or 8 Cabernets from Washington State on the shelf at a good retail store, and you have a set of tasting notes in hand—and I don't mean just scores, but notes as well—that should enable you to select a wine that you're more likely to enjoy.

**JR:** What about the wine that gets an 88 instead of a 90—when 90 is often considered some sort of magic threshold for buyer's interest?

**Stephen Tanzer:** It's all about value, about price/quality rapport. In the International Wine Cellar, an 88-point wine is certainly a very good wine with concentration and personality and no obvious flaws. It's probably not a collectible wine that you'll want to bury in your cellar, but if you're looking for something good to drink tonight, you will find lots of good 88-point wines for \$20 or less. These wines may not be best suited for long aging, but they may be more enjoyable right now than a more expensive, higher-rated wine that needs five or more years of aging to approach its plane of peak drinkability. And of course, as a wine for current drinking, it also offers much better value.

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**JR:** Thank you, Steve Tanzer.

*The interview was conducted by Jeffrey Riggs,  
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