



Christian Sparkman offers tasting advice.

Palate Pleasing

By Julie H. Case

“Nice legs,” a friend says, and for once, nobody shoots him a dirty look. ■ That’s because Jeff is holding a glass of red wine. It’s tilted to the side, just barely, and broad ribbons of wine—the “legs”—are slowly rolling down the inside of the glass. ■ Once upon a time wine drinkers thought that thick, slowly forming legs—

which typically reflect alcohol content or the presence of sugar—indicated a wine’s quality, and that thin, watery legs meant a weak wine. Today, winemakers would rather you assess the quality of wine on the palate, rather than in the glass. Actually, checking out your wine’s legs probably tells more about your personality than it does the wine.

“I’m not a fan of pretentious wine peo-

ple. I think it’s ridiculous,” says Christian Sparkman, general manager of Seattle’s Waterfront Seafood Grill, a sommelier, and owner of Washington-based Sparkman Cellars. “These are grapes; they come off a farm.”

Luckily, the days when being able to enjoy or talk about wine seemed to require

a vocabulary swollen with terms such as “brix” and “bouquet” have gone the way of jugged wine. These days, much like merlot, wine culture is approachable.

Still, there’s a good deal of myth—and mystique—surrounding wine. What does one do with the cork? Are screwtops gauche, or vogue? Why does that man keep putting his nose in his wineglass (and should I be doing that, too)?

Which is why six of us—some novices, others with years of wine-tasting experience—are gathered around a table laden with stemware: to demystify wine and wine tasting, with a little help from Sparkman.

AFTER A QUICK LESSON ON how to open a bottle of Champagne or sparkling wine (point it away from your face—the cork comes out at about 70 miles per hour:

open it slowly and listen for that sigh), Sparkman pours each of us a little bubbly into a tall glass.

It's an Oregon sparkling wine—a 2002 Argyle Brut—we're drinking, and it's made with chardonnay and pinot noir, though you wouldn't know that by looking at the glass. Since the skins—which are the part of the grape that possess the most color—are removed before fermentation, all that's left is the fruit. Which gives the table its first “aha” moment: While you may not be able to call a sparkling wine “Champagne” unless it comes from Champagne, France, you can make bubbly with a blend of red and white grapes.

The wine is crisp and delightful, but what really intrigues us is what Sparkman is telling us about the glass. Champagne and sparkling wine are served in one of two glass styles: the flute, such as the ones we're using, or the more saucer-shaped “coupe,” which is often alleged to have been designed from the mold of various women's breasts—including the breasts of Marie Antoinette, Madame de Pompadour and Empress Joséphine.

Leave it to the French.

With all of us staring at our glasses, one of our group pipes up. “If I want to have friends over for a wine tasting, and I don't have the right glasses, does it matter?”

Actually, Sparkman tells us, it does. Why? Because different-shape glasses have different effects on wine.

To demonstrate, he pours a Washington wine, the 2006 Ross Andrew Pinot Gris, into two glasses: a “viognier” glass and a Bordeaux-style glass. The first is tall and narrow, the second fat and curvy. Because of its shape, the viognier glass has more structure: It funnels the aromatics to a central point and intensifies them. In this case, the Bordeaux glass's rounder, more open bowl—which pulls apart dense, dark wines and extracts their flavors—muffles the complexity of the pinot gris. The difference is evident on the palate: In the bigger glass we taste the residual sugar; in the

smaller glass the wine has more aroma, more complexity.

THEN COMES THE SECOND “aha” moment of the night. Sparkman sets the tall, narrow glass in front of the bottle; the shapes reflect each other. It turns out that you can pair your wine—your white wines, at least—to your glasses. If the bottle is tall and narrow, the glass should be too. If the bottle has more of a trumpet shape, it's best served in a glass that is wider in the bowl and narrower at the rim.

Once we have our stemware figured out, we move on to how to taste. (Swirl, sniff, sip—or swish.)

Stems in hand, glass foot resting on a crisp, white tablecloth, we begin to swirl our wine.

Swirling aerates the wine; think of it as decanting wine in the glass. By running the wine up along the sides of the glass, you increase the surface area of wine that is in contact with the air, and it releases more aromas.

Those aromas are exactly what you're seeking when you sniff the wine. It may not look sophisticated, but wine tastes best after you've put your nose in the glass. After all, 80 percent of what we taste is actually due to smell.

When it comes to wine, engaging the nose primes the pump: Olfactory perceptions seem to season the taste buds for the optimal gustatory experience.

To test whether your sense of smell matters when it comes to wine, pour a glass; pinch your nostrils with two fingers; and take a sip.

After considering the wine, let go of your nose and swirl. Then, put your nose right into the glass and sniff. There, you might catch the scent of any of hundreds of aromas—eucalyptus, for example, or oak, tobacco or dill.

After your nose has done its job, it's time to give your taste buds a chance. By tasting the wine after smelling it, you'll experience more of the wine's depth and layers.

THE LAST TIP FOR DISCOVERING the most layers in your wine is to sip and swish. Again, perhaps not what you'd do on a first date, unless your date is also an oenophile, but moving the wine around—across the inside of your cheeks, along the sour receptors on the outside of the tongue, and over the sweet receptors at the tip—seasons your mouth so you can taste more of the wine. And it draws in oxygen. “It just really opens it up,” says Sparkman.

It also helps provide the wine's mouthfeel at midpalate. Big wines have a lot of mouthfeel and depth; they seem to fill the mouth.

As to sniffing the cork? It's mostly protocol, Sparkman tells us. On the other hand, using your eyes has value. If your cork is mangled in some way—if, for example, the outside of the cork bears a grape-colored stain—then the wine could



Swirling a white wine.

be oxidized. Sure, wines like to breathe, but only after they've been opened up, not while they're still in the bottle. Similarly, if your bottle has a lot of ullage—that space between the top of the wine and the

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VINO INFO

WINE TERMS WORTH KNOWING

VINTAGE: The year the grapes used in the wine were grown.

VERTICAL TASTING: Tasting the same wine, but from different vintages.

HORIZONTAL TASTING: Tasting wine from one vintage, but from different producers in a region.

TANNINS: Compounds that come from the skins, the seeds and the barrels, and that give wine its structure; without at least some tannins, the wine will be flabby, won't age well, and won't pair well with foods. Tannins are most often associated with a red wine being dry.

BRIX: Measuring system for determining the amount of sugar in grapes or wine.

MERITAGE (pronounced like heritage): A wine blend of classic Bordeaux varieties, such as a red made with cabernet franc, cab sauvignon and merlot, or a white with sauvignon blanc and semillion.

BALANCE: In wine, it means sweetness matched well with acidity; neither dominates. The fruit matches well with tannins; the alcohol is balanced by flavor.

APPELLATION: A term used to identify where the grapes for a wine were grown.

BOUQUET: The smell a wine develops after it has been bottled and aged. Most appropriate for mature wines that have developed complex flavors and aromas.

CORKED: A term for a flawed wine, as a result of a faulty cork.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

THE WINE PODCAST "Wine for Newbies" is a free online wine course that offers everything from an introduction to wine in general and wine terminology to lessons on the different varietals and a course on how wines are made. Most episodes are less than 25 minutes long. www.winefornewbies.net/audio.html.

WINE-SMART WEBSITES such as those of "The Wine Doctor" and Robert Parker offer wine terminology, tasting notes and reviews. www.thewinedoctor.com; www.robortparker.com.

bottom of the cork—some of the wine may have evaporated, and any air that entered may have had an unsavory effect.

The protocol at Waterfront, Sparkman says, as a stray drop of chardonnay lands in front of me, is to pour the wine on the table. He's kidding, but it's good to see that even the experts sometimes have a slip between the bottle and the glass.

What he really means to say is that protocol, at Waterfront, is to decant almost every bottle of red 20 minutes before serving it. The idea is to rough it up, letting it splash across the inside of the decanter.

Decanting aerates the wine. It softens young reds and encourages quick development of aromas that often develop over years in the bottle. If you have a really young red that you just can't wait to open—perhaps something bought at auction in Napa or at Sonoma County Showcase, or during barrel tasting in Walla Walla—Sparkman encourages double decanting: pouring it from vessel to vessel.

For old red wines, decanting serves to remove sediment. And regardless of a wine's vintage, as the wine runs through the air while being decanted, it picks up the room temperature, which is especially good if your red has just come out of a cool cellar.

But we haven't even opened up a red yet. That wine Sparkman just poured on the table is his very own 2006 Lumière Chardonnay, which was just named one of the 100 best Washington wines for 2007 by Paul Gregutt, wine critic and author of *Washington Wines and Wineries: The Essential Guide*.

WE'VE HELD OFF ON THE reds—other than exchanging tasting tips and discussing decanting—for good reason: we still want to be able to taste the whites.

"The thinking is that the power of the richer and heavier wines begins to condition the palate, so that the lighter and more elegant wines are less discernible, with the various components," Sparkman says.

Sparkman's chardonnay has just that perfect balance of fruit and acid with a bit of creamier texture due to malolactic fermentation. All wine has malic acid after

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primary fermentation—after the conversion of sugar to alcohol—and most wines experience a secondary fermentation that converts malic acid to lactic acid. Wines that have undergone a full malolactic fermentation (ML) typically have a creamier, frequently buttery mouthfeel. Whites that haven't undergone so extensive an ML are often perceived to be crisper or drier.

We're still relishing notes of nutmeg and, deep in the glass, crème brûlée in the chardonnay when chef Steve Cain delivers a plate of braised Dungeness crab legs, which bring out the essence of the food and the wine. It is a perfect pairing.

Don't try this at home? Actually, do try this at home. Food loves wine, and wine loves food. Just know that when it comes to pairing, some foods respond better to some wines. When in doubt about which white to serve, go for one of the aromatic varieties—Gewürztraminer, pinot gris and Riesling. For example, if you're set on serving a bright-green salad topped with salted capers and a black-pepper-crust ahi steak, followed by a lemon tart, go for the pinot gris. While a pinot is likely to make it past flavors such as lemon, pepper, lettuce and salt, a chardonnay is typically less flexible. It tends to get lost behind the salt; turn the lettuce flavor bitter in the mouth; and hold on to the tart and hot elements of lemon and pepper.

WITH WINE SALES IN 2006 soaring 22 percent among the nation's 75 million NASCAR fans, according to the ACNielsen research group, it's clear that wine goes anywhere. It pairs as well with a burger as a steak; a halibut filet or Friday-night fish fry.

Plus, with 530 wineries in Washington state, Oregon pinot noir selling more than 800,000 cases in 2006, a prospering desert- and ice-wine industry in British Columbia, and the continued influence of California on the American palate, knowing you can drink wine just about any time, anywhere, is almost as important as knowing what you like to drink. ▲

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