

# IN WINE COUNTRY

## Wine Word-Play

by Von Hurson

Words, words, words – wine is beset by some of the most picturesque, poetic, outlandish and downright audacious words. But what do they convey? Images and suggestions, of course, but probably most importantly – emotions. This last has not been lost on wine marketers. It sells wine.

There are words that convey the very picture of affluence: rich, elegant, opulent, lush, refined, unctuous. Pretty words, yes – a lovely image. You see those words used to describe wines often enough to make you wonder – what would that wine taste like? Any ideas out there?

You constantly read or hear about how a wine “tastes” – followed by descriptors of some of the most obscure fruit (black raspberry, quince, boysenberry, kumquat) or spice. And when is the last time you chewed on a cigar box, or a piece of sandalwood? Or would you buy a wine that tastes like tar or tobacco?

Well, not to be persnickety, but the only things your taste buds can pick up, or

differentiate, are 5 “tastes” – salt (NIMW – Not In My Wine!), sweet, acid, bitter, and the ubiquitous Umami (more on this in a future column). The other fancy-sounding descriptors are what you smell – no, really! Try tasting a wine when you're all stuffed up with a cold and, like food, you can “taste”... well...nothing.

Differentiated from taste, however, there are mouth, or palate, sensations. For these I find “texture” words work well when searching for descriptors – words like velvety, silky, satiny, or rough and rustic. This I get. These words generally refer to “mouthfeel” or (dare I actually say it) the way the wine feels in your mouth! Try taking a decent sip, then feel the way the wine glides across your tongue. In some cases, you might say it caresses it or feels like rich satin. Then, occasionally, it feels like licking tweed. Mouthfeel is similar to, but not the same as, “body” – where the sensation you get feels either “light” (more like water), “medium” (like whole milk), or “full” (like heavy cream). That's the viscosity – or thickness – of the wine.

Of course you should never underestimate the power of suggestion. Don't believe me? Just try standing next to someone who's tasting a wine and flippantly tossing out descriptors – things like pear, lemon, cinnamon and vanilla. See how often you surreptitiously take another sniff and find yourself searching hard to find those aromas, or thinking “Oh yes, he / she's right!”

Better yet, read some of the the back labels or ask for a “tech sheet” on the wine you're tasting. I'm particularly amused at descriptions written up as “Winemaker's notes.” Do you really believe that most winemakers – focused on fermentation yeasts, types of barrels, acids and tannins – would describe their wine as “Succulent and exotic, offering floral, ripe fig, melon, green almond, lime zest and spicy oak flavors that have a delicate edge?” What kind of self-respecting, down-to-earth winemaker, as most of them are, would ever say something so airily esoteric and clearly marketing-driven? With few exceptions, the winemaker makes the wine, and someone else promotes and sells it.

After 16 years in the wine industry, Von Hurson continues to write her monthly wine column for *The Petaluma Post*, has co-authored a book and evaluates wines for the online tasting panel, *Swirls of Wisdom*. She serves as a competition wine judge, has taught numerous wine courses, has worked in vineyards, and has made wine. Have a question or comment? Email: [wynelady@sonic.net](mailto:wynelady@sonic.net)



### Talkin' the Talk

Now we get to words that describe one of the most desirable elements in wine – acidity. Hence the question: How many words can you use to say that a given wine has a goodly amount of acidity? It's one of the most important elements that makes a wine enjoyable with food and is also an important element in aging wines.

Let me count the ways (words), often followed with the word “acidity:” crisp, racy, zesty, tangy, lively, bright, fresh, juicy, vibrant, and food-loving. And how about: “lovely citrus notes,” or a recent twist on the theme: “A beam of acidity runs through this wine.” When you come across these words, it's like breaking the code of wine numminess. Next month we'll talk tannins.

### A dilemma

I'm in a terrible predicament. I live and write in California – and I should be

able to find more California wines I can get excited about, really enjoy and heartily recommend. But alas, I find myself buying wines from Italy or Spain or France. They tend to be more affordable for the quality and pleasure they provide and they're rarely the massively fruity, high alcohol style of California wines.

In all fairness, there are some good California wines, but they have to be searched out. Some lower alcohol wines are starting to be seen, but many of these are fairly light and simple wines and I know it doesn't have to be that way! I have older vintages of Cabernets, Merlots and Pinots that are flat-out delicious! Alcohol levels of 12.5 – 13.0. They're still big, flavorful and balanced. They were yummy when I bought them in the mid to late '90s, and they're heavenly now.

### On the wine road

There it was – the first week in January and as I drove through rolling hills of vineyards I caught sight of a flash of yellow. Then another. Mustard, among the unpruned, wild and unruly vi sighting confirmed. It's like a rite of Spring – one of wine country's most beautiful times of year.

### There's hope!

How I wish all wine descriptions were like this one: “A beautiful white, with lemon, green apple and pear aromas and flavors. Medium-to full-bodied, with fresh acidity and a clean, fruity finish. Delicious.” I'd buy this one just for the clarity of the description alone!



## Swirls of Wisdom

wine panel of the Petaluma Post

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Thanks to Riverfront Gallery for hosting our panel.