

## Smelling Wine

When you stop swirling, and the tears are falling, it's time to take the next step: smelling. Agitating the wine vaporizes it, and the thin sheet of liquid on the sides of the glass evaporates rapidly; the result is an intensification of the aromas. If the glass narrows at the top, the aromas are further concentrated. Stick your nose right into the bowl and inhale.

There's no consensus about the proper sniffing technique. Some advocate two or three quick inhalations; others prefer one deep, sharp sniff. I've seen tasters close one nostril, sniff, then close the other and sniff again. The goal is to draw the aromas deep into the nose, to bring them into contact with the olfactory mucosa and thence to the olfactory bulb, where the sensations are registered and deciphered. It's a remote and protected place, and a head cold or allergies will effectively block it off from even the strongest aromas. But with practice, and keen attention, you'll learn how to maximize your perception of aromas, and then how to decipher them.

The world of smell is vast and bewildering. First of all, our olfactory equipment is incredibly sensitive; we can distinguish aromas in quantities so small that laboratory equipment can scarcely measure them. Second, our analytic capacity is extraordinary; estimates of the number of different smells humans can identify range up to 10,000! Finally, wine has a staggering number of smellable elements. In their exhaustive study *Wines: Their Sensory Evaluation*, Maynard Amerine and Edward Roessler, both professors at the University of California, write that "Identified in wine aromas are at least 181 esters, 52 alcohols, 75 aldehydes and ketones, 22 acetals, 18 lactones, six secondary acetamides, 29 nitrogen-containing compounds, 18 sulfur-containing compounds, two ethers, 11 furans and 18 epoxides, as well as 30 miscellaneous compounds. Many of these are modified in various ways by aging and cellar treatment, and they can and do react with each other or have additive, masking or synergistic properties."

Serious wine tasters love to identify smells. "Chocolate!" cries one. "Burnt matches!" insists another. "Tea, tobacco, mushrooms and a bit of the old barnyard," intones a third. Are they just playing word games?

Let's face it: Contemporary American culture turns up its nose at strong smells. We deodorize our bodies, our homes and our cars; everything from hand lotion to dishwashing detergent comes "lemony fresh," to give the impression of cleanliness and neutrality. It's no wonder we lack the language to describe the complex, fleeting sensations that evanesce from a half-filled glass of wine.

But in fact, wine does smell of more than grapes. Analysis of its volatile components has identified the same molecules that give many familiar objects their distinctive scents. Here are just a few: rose, iris, cherry, peach, honey and vanilla. Who's to say that some of the more imaginative descriptors -from road tar

to cat's pee, sweaty socks to smoked bacon--aren't grounded in some basic chemical affinity?

As with color, wine's aromas offer insights into character, origin and history. Because our actual sense of taste is limited to four simple categories (the well-known sweet, sour, bitter and salt), aroma is the most revealing aspect of our examination. But don't simply sniff for clues. Revel in the sensation. Scientists say smells have direct access to the brain, connecting immediately to memory and emotion. Like a lover's perfume, or the scent of cookies from childhood, wine's aromas can evoke a specific place and time with uncanny power.