

Tasting Wine

Now comes the best part. You can be mesmerized by wine's flashing colors and hypnotized into dreamy reverie by its evocative aromas, but actually drinking the wine is what loosens the tongue, opens the arms and consummates the liquid's true purpose.

You might think it's the easiest part, too. After all, you learned to drink from a cup when you were 2 years old and have been practicing diligently ever since. But there's a huge distinction between swallowing and tasting, the same gulf that yawns between simply hearing and truly listening. Once again, correct technique is essential to full appreciation.

With the aromas still reverberating through your senses, put the glass to your lips and take some liquid in. How much? That depends on the size of your mouth. But too little is as ineffective as too much. I find that one-third to one-half an ounce is just about right. You need to have enough volume to work it all around your tasting apparatus, but not so much that you're forced to swallow right away.

Because you don't want to swallow, not just yet. It takes time and effort to force the wine to divulge its secrets. I keep a pleasant wine in my mouth for 10 to 15 seconds, sometimes more.

Roll the wine all around your mouth, bringing it into contact with every part, because each decodes a different aspect of the liquid. Wine provokes sensations, too: The astringency of tannins is most perceptible on the inner cheeks; the heat of the alcohol burns in the back of the throat.

The strength of these taste sensations can be amplified through specialized techniques that, frankly, are more appropriate to the tasting lab than the dining room. But if the wine is seductive enough, you may not be able to resist. First, as you hold the wine in your mouth, purse your lips and inhale gently through them. This creates a bubbling noise children find immensely amusing. It also accelerates vaporization, intensifying the aromas. Second, chew the wine vigorously, sloshing it around in your mouth, to draw every last nuance of flavor from the wine.

Don't forget the finish. After you swallow, exhale gently and slowly through both your nose and mouth. The retronasal passage, which connects the throat and the nose, is another avenue for aromas, which can linger long after the wine is finally swallowed. You'll find that the better the wine, the more complex, profound and long-lasting these residual aromas can be. With great wines, sensitive tasters and minimal distractions, the finish can last a minute or more. It's a moment of meditation and communion that no other beverage can create.