

Wine Notes Background Information

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You do not need to know all of this right away, but as you learn more these basic notes will help you make sense of some of the terms you will hear during our wine tastings in lineup.

Noble Grapes:

Noble grapes are grapes that are widely planted in most of the major wine regions of the world, and these grapes are generally recognized as producing high-quality wines.

Chardonnay (white)

Sauvignon Blanc (white)

Pinot Noir (red)

Merlot (red)

Cabernet (red)

- Note that these are the main types of wine we carry as wines by the glass. Also note that some people include more grapes in this list, but these are the first five.

Basic Winemaking Process

Almost all wine is made from grapes of the *Vitis Vinifera* species. Wine is made through a process called fermentation. During fermentation, yeast (either wild yeast found in the air or yeast added by winemakers) convert sugar from the grapes into alcohol. The result is alcohol, carbon dioxide, flavors and aromas, and heat.

Vessels for fermentation and aging

Wines can be fermented and aged in various vessels.

- Stainless Steel – used to highlight the freshness of a wine and its natural characteristics because stainless does not impart additional flavors to the wine.
 - White wines that often use stainless
 - Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Pinot Grigio, and Albarino
 - Other wines that might use stainless
 - Rose wines and light pinot noirs
- Concrete and Clay Egg – good for preserving the natural characteristics of the wine and the shape keeps the wine circulating throughout the fermentation process

- Used in the Concrete & Clay chardonnay (our only unoaked chardonnay)
- Oak Barrels - Aging in oak gives wine certain characteristics. If the oak is old/used, it will add body to the wine without imparting as many tasting notes. If the oak is newer, it will add to the taste and body of the wine. The more toasted a barrel is, the more vanilla, spice, and toast notes you will get in the wine. The bigger the barrel, the fewer oak notes will be imparted to the wine because less wine will be in contact with the barrel.
 - French oak is more subtle and tends to impart notes of vanilla, toast, and subtle baking spices like cinnamon and clove.
 - American oak tends to impart bolder and sweeter notes like vanilla extract, coconut, dill, caramel, or chocolate.

Chardonnay from California tends to be more heavily oaked, whereas French Chardonnays will generally not have as much oak influence. The only unoaked Chardonnay we have is the Concrete and Clay. So if a guest wants a Chardonnay with no oak, give them the Concrete and Clay. If they want a more crisp Chardonnay with minimal oak, give them the Lamblin & Fils. If they want something with more oak, then you are looking at the California Chardonnays.

Malolactic Fermentation

During winemaking, wine can be put through this process. It is when tart malic acid is converted to soft, creamy, and buttery lactic acid. This is common in California Chardonnays, and it is what we call a buttery chardonnay (ie Robert Mondavi).

Aging on the Lees

After yeast convert sugar into alcohol, they die and sink to the bottom of the wine. Leaving the dead yeast cells in the wine for a time is called aging on the lees. This gives the wine more complexity. It can impart a creamy mouthfeel and aromas of brioche, baked bread, yeast, beer, or cheese rind. This is common in Champagne, Chardonnay, and Albarino.

Tannins

Phenolic compounds from the stems, seeds, and skins of grapes that make your mouth dry out. These are more prominent in red wines.

In order from least to most tannic:

Pinot Noir, Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon

- remember that out of the noble grapes you have pinot with the least, merlot in the middle, and cabernet at the top. You can also think, Cab is king, merlot is in the middle, and pinot is at the bottom. Syrah is just a little more serious than a merlot.

Acid

Acid in wine is the thing that makes your mouth pucker and water (like a lemon). High acid wines tend to come from cooler climates. As grapes ripen, the acid is converted to sugar. Think of a fruit grown in the summer that is fully ripe because of the warmer weather. It will taste more sweet and less acidic.

Chardonnay tends to be less acidic than Sauvignon Blanc. If someone wants a crisp white wine, then they are probably thinking of a Sauvignon Blanc.

Sweetness

During winemaking, sugar is converted to alcohol. When we talk about sweetness in wine, we mean residual sugars in the wine (or sugar left behind that was not converted to alcohol). Wines that tend to have more residual sugar are sweeter and wines that do not are more dry.

White wines that we have by the glass with some sweetness will be the Moscato and the Riesling (both white). We also have the Eiswein that is a very sweet white dessert wine.

For red wines, we only have dessert wines that are going to taste noticeably sweet (think ports and the sweeter madeira wines such as Boston Bual or the New York Malmsey).

Notes that sweet and fruit forward are two different things.

Fruit Forward

Sometimes when people ask for sweet, what they really mean is fruit forward. This means that the wine can still be dry but will have more fruit versus dried, vegetal, mineral, savory, or nutty notes on the palate. For more fruit forward reds, some options are the Post & Beam Cabernet, the Goldschmidt Merlot, or a light and bright Pinot Noir.

For white wines, look at warmer climates (i.e. California wines). In general, Sauvignon Blanc will be more acidic, crisp, tart fruit and citrus forward. Chardonnay will be more fleshy and stone fruit forward with less acidity, and the California Chardonnays tend to have a more buttery and/or richer texture than Chardonnays from Burgundy.

For white wines, you can also suggest Pinot Grigio and Moscato (note the Moscato does have some sweetness to it).

Climate

As grapes ripen, acid in the grape is converted to sugar. This is why an underripe grape tastes sour and a ripe grape tastes sweet and an overripe grape/raisin is even sweeter.

In cool climates, the grapes do not ripen as much, so cool climates usually mean higher acid and less sugar. Less sugar also means less alcohol, since yeast need sugar to make alcohol.

Body of the Wine

This is the weight of the wine on the palate. A wine is light, medium, or full-bodied. Think of it like the difference in texture and weight on the palate of skim (light) versus whole milk (full body).

- alcohol, tannins, and residual sugar make a wine feel more full-bodied
- acid makes a wine feel lighter in body
- winemaking techniques like oak aging, lees aging, and MLF also increase body
- Whites: Chardonnay is typically heavier and fuller bodied than Sauvignon Blanc
- Reds: generally Pinot Noir is lightest in body, Merlot is in the middle, and cabernet sauvignon is the most full-bodied and most tannin forward of these three

Old World versus New World

Europe is considered the old world, and generally speaking Old World Wines will have different characteristics from New World Wines. This is not always the case, but it is a term you will hear a lot so it is good to know what it means (the list below is from my wine test prep book).

- Old World
 - dominance of earth and/or mineral character
 - dominance of non-fruit aromas and flavors
 - fruit is more restrained
 - fruit becomes tart on the palate
 - non-fruit aromas and flavors become more apparent on the finish
- New World
 - No dominant earth or mineral character
 - Fruit aromas and flavors lead and dominate the non-fruit elements
 - Fruit smells and ripe on the nose and dominates the nose
 - Fruit stays ripe or gets riper on the palate
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Tips on Pairing

When pairing food and wine, consider the entire dish including main ingredients, cooking method and textures, sauces, sides, and condiments. Match the intensity of the wine to the food. Delicate foods pair with delicate wines that won't overwhelm them.

- Salt
 - Reduces perception of acidity
 - Intensifies tannins
- Animal fats
 - Reduces perception of tannins
 - Tannins make meats and cheeses feel less rich and fatty on the palate
- Sugar
 - Can make dry wines seem even drier
- Spicy heat
 - Makes alcohol in wine seem more apparent
 - Can be mitigated with sweeter wines or off-dry wines

Chardonnay is fuller bodied and less acidic than Sauvignon Blanc. California chardonnays with malolactic fermentation will have a creamy or buttery texture that will complement creamy sauces nicely (ie fettucine or mac and cheese poppers).

Unoaked Chardonnay (the Concrete and Clay) is good for someone who traditionally likes more crisp, bright, and mineral driven wines but wants a chardonnay. It is our only unoaked chardonnay.

Sauvignon Blanc has citrus and green vegetal notes and is crisp and bright. It will pair well with fish, crab, lobster, salads (and salads with vinaigrette dressings), and goat cheese.

Cabernet Sauvignon tends to pair well with fattier meats because the tannins and acidity in the wine cuts through the richness of the meats.

Pinot Noir can pair with a wide range of dishes from salads to pastas and light meats. It can also pair with salmon because it is light to medium in body and has soft tannins so will not overwhelm the fish. In general, you pair white with fish because tannins and fish do not play nicely and can create a metallic taste. Pinot Noir and salmon is an exception, and they like to ask this question in mocks and pre-mocks.

Merlot pairs nicely with leaner meats such as pork, chicken, and lean beef because it has softer tannins and a more fruit forward style. It would pair very well with the mushroom pasta as well which would bring out more of the earthy notes in the wine but would not overpower the dish.

Bubbles can pretty much pair with anything. They are especially good at cleansing and refreshing the palate, so they pair well with fried foods. A classic pairing is fried chicken and champagne.

Rose can pair with pretty much anything that is light and will pair exceptionally well with foods like the strawberry salad because it has light red fruit notes.

Albarino is from the coast and has a minerality and salinity reminiscent of salty ocean air, so this naturally pairs well with oysters and seafood.

Red blends (like the Stolpman or Super Tuscan) are a good option for a table that wants a bottle, but some guests at the table prefer heavier wines and others like lighter wines.

Merlot can be a good compromise for those torn between a pinot noir or a cabernet.

When pairing wines, consider the sauces and sides and how things are prepared. Some examples...

- Spicy Food – Typically, you would not pair spicy foods or sauces with high alcohol wines or wines with heavy tannins. Spicy foods can make tannins feel even harsher and more bitter and astringent. High alcohol wines will exacerbate the spice and heat in foods.
- Both Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc pair well with lobster. I would recommend a more buttery Chardonnay (i.e. Robert Mondavi) with the fried lobster tails to match the richness of the fried lobster and creaminess of the bacon mash potatoes. For Sauvignon Blanc, the higher acidity of the wine balances the richness of the dish and adds a crisp and bright juxtaposition to the fried lobster.
- The St. Clair Sauvignon Blanc has a lot of green vegetal notes, so it pairs nicely with things like green salads, the fried green tomatoes, gazpacho, the cucumber dill on the salmon, and the green goddess dressing on the fried oysters.
- Merlot has dark berry notes that would complement the pork tenderloin without overwhelming it, and a merlot would also highlight the blackberry in the sauce nicely.
- Sauvignon Blanc pairs very well with the stuffed grouper because the lemon in the sauce makes the acid in the wine seem more subtle and brings out the juicy fruit notes in the wine.