



This article by *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews and comprehensive international auction results. For further information, and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.finewinemag.com or call +44 (0)1795 414681

VALUES IN WINE

AN ATTEMPT TO CODIFY

by Terry Theise

Have you ever

tried to field the question, “What kind of wine do you like?” Hard to answer, isn’t it? At the very least, it’s hard to answer briefly, because often the kinds of wines you like need lots of words to describe them. I recently answered, “I like moderate wine,” and I knew what I meant by it, though I’m sure my questioner found me a tough interview.



Part of the business of deepening both your palate and your acquaintance *with* your palate is to pay heed to what it responds to. Eventually you organize that information as patterns discern themselves. These patterns are almost never random. They tell you not only what you like and dislike, but also what you believe in, what you cherish, and what you disdain.

I want to suggest a kind of charter of values by which wine is enjoyed, understood, appreciated, and placed in a matrix of principle and judgment. I'm hardly qualified to do this for, ahem, "humanity," but I feel the need to do it for myself, to locate where I am at this point in my wine-drinking life. It is not only an exercise in accumulating thoughts already determined; if I do it right, it will reveal things of which I've barely been aware.

I encourage you to consider these ideas against your own experience. Use what works, discard what doesn't, and create your own charter. In short, consider wine as something ineluctably attached to life, not merely a diversion or entertainment.

Let's begin with how wines actually taste. It's the only reason to drink the stuff. It only seems categorical to our lives, but it isn't food, and we can live without it. When we begin, we drink wine because its taste is pleasurable, as indeed it remains, and it is only later (if at all) that we begin to realize we've formed a set of principles by which we've organized our wine experiences and learned to appreciate the many forms of pleasure.

Consider the following an attempt to ponder first principles of wine, starting with the way it tastes.

Aspects of flavor: the ones that matter most

Clarity	Complexity
Distinctiveness	Modesty
Grace	Persistence
Balance	Paradox
Deliciousness	

Do not confuse this point: These aren't the only aspects of flavor that matter. But when I consider the relative values of the things that make up flavor, I delineate their relative importance. These are the ones that matter most.

Clarity

Without clear flavors, none of the others aspects can be easily discerned. Clarity can connote brilliance—but not always. I think of the soft-lighted gleam of Loire Chenins or

dry Furmint, or of the smoky, evening-light depths of Barolo. But we should be able to see into a wine's flavor, even when it shows what we cannot see. Clarity also suggests the work of an attentive vintner with a desire for candor and nothing to hide. For me it is the first of first principles. Flavor should be clear. The question of what the flavor *is* comes after. This is so obvious that no one considers it, but it is not self-evident. There are, distressingly, loads of blurry, fuzzy wines. I'm driven half-crazy if I'm riding in someone's car and he hasn't cleaned his windshield. Clarity!

Distinctiveness

Call it what you will—taste of place, "somewhereness," terroir—but whatever you call it, it's the thing that says your glass contains *this* wine and no other,

from *this* place and no other. Distinctiveness can include idiosyncrasies and angularities as long as these are spontaneous and not merely affectations. But it needn't imply these things if it is a wine's innate nature to be classical and symmetrical.

Distinctiveness confers validity. As David Schildknecht has written: "Wines of distinction are wines of distinctiveness." The reason some of us are cool toward the "international consultant" school of winemaking is that we feel these wines, despite their origins, are stamped with a certain recipe, regardless of the ingredients in the various pantries, so that we encounter big, oak-aged, ripe-fruited wine from this grape here and that place there—all much of a muchness. Look at it this way: You or I might wish we looked like Jake Gyllenhaal, but would we want *every* man to look like Jake Gyllenhaal? How would we tell them apart? I don't believe it is even possible to consider the question of "greatness" in wine until its uniqueness is established. It's not enough for wine to have a passport; it needs a birth certificate. I'd rather drink something that tastes like *something* and not like *everything*. Anything can taste like everything—and too often it does, and it bores the crap out of me.

Grace

This can apply to wines of various degrees of strength, body, or ripeness, and it can be found in both polished and "rustic" wines. It allies to modesty, but not all modest wines are graceful. Grace is rather a form of tact, a kindness, a rejection of coarseness and power for its own sake.

Balance... and its siblings harmony and proportion

Balance is not to be confused with symmetry, since there are

Clarity can connote brilliance—but not always. I think of the soft-lighted gleam of Loire Chenins or dry Furmint, or of the smoky, evening-light depths of Barolo. But we should be able to see into a wine's flavor, even when it shows what we cannot see

asymmetrical yet balanced wines. Balance is nothing more or less than a palpable sense that no single component appears garish or inappropriate. It is a quality of flavor that draws you away from the parts and toward the whole. It is a chord of flavor in which no single note is out of tune. It can be a pastoral chord, a simple or a complex one; it can be eerie or polychromatic; but it is one whole thing. If you hear any one of its component notes, it's probably for the wrong reason.

In a balanced wine the flavors seem preordained to exist in precisely *that* configuration. You sit by the stream. The water is clean and cold. The mountain peaks are clear. There are no beer cans or cigarette butts in sight. You've been hiking for a few hours and you feel loose and warm and hungry. You unpack your lunch and take the first bite, and then you see your sweetheart come up the path, smiling. The air is soft and cool under a gentle sun. Things are exactly perfect. Happens—what?—once in a lifetime? In a balanced wine, it happens with every sip.

Deliciousness

It is strange to have to mention this, but it is hardly ever spoken or written about. A wine can meet every other criterion by which we judge it successful yet not *taste* good. Then what? Do we outgrow appreciating deliciousness? Do we cultivate more auspicious tastes? Well, poo on us if so. Deliciousness ignites something in us that delights at the scent of pleasure. I don't think it's wise to quash this thing. What else dies with it?

Complexity... and its siblings ambiguity and evanescence

There is explicit complexity wherein all components of a wine can be discerned and we are delighted by how many there are and how they interact. There is also implicit complexity in which we sense there is something present but oblique to our view. Finally, in some wines—not very many—there is a haunting sense of something being shown to you that has nothing to do with discrete “flavor.”

This is the noblest of all wine's attributes, but the one most impossible to bring about by design. It seems to me to be a by-product of certain vintners' mentalities, as well as of the practices they engender, but neither formula nor recipe exists. This aspect is found when it is found—and often when you're not looking for it. Some wines are complex in themselves, and it stops there. Some wines seem to embody *life's* complexity, and this is when we see the view from the sky.

Complexity is found when it is found—and often when you're not looking for it. Some wines are complex in themselves, and it stops there. Some wines seem to embody *life's* complexity, and this is when we see the view from the sky

Modesty

This denotes a wine that seeks to be a companion—to your food, your state of mind, or social occasion—as opposed to a wine that needs to dominate your entire field of attention. Some wines deserve your entire field of attention, but these are almost never the ones that scream in order to get it. Modest wines are endangered in these times, when power is overvalued. Just because your text is written in **bold**, it doesn't mean you have anything to say. Modest wines are tasty and helpful, and they don't show off.

Persistence... And its siblings depth and intensity

These attributes properly come after those cited above, since a persistent, unpleasant wine is no one's idea of fun. A good wine is elevated by persistence; a bad wine, diminished. Nor does persistence have to do with volume. Indeed, the best wines are the ones that whisper persistently. Soft-sell is how you know a wine has the goods, because it doesn't need to hard-sell. We misunderstand the idea of intensity because we conflate it with volume. Bellowing flavor isn't intense—it is adolescent and irritating. Intensity arises not from a will to express but from the thing that is being expressed.

Paradox

Again, this component is in the hands of the angels and doesn't appear susceptible to human contrivance. But when it is found, it conveys a lovely sense of “How can these things coexist in a single wine?” Paradox also seems to be a reliable harbinger of greatness, in which seemingly disparate elements not only coexist but spur each other on: power with grace, depth with brilliance...

Aspects of flavor: the ones that matter least

Power
Sweetness
Ripeness
Concentration

Again, it's not that these aspects don't matter at all; it's that too many think they matter too much. They appear near the bottom of my scale of values, but they do appear.

Power

This only matters when you're planning a menu and are selecting the wines. Power in itself is an aspect neither desirable nor undesirable; it needs only to justify its existence by combining with grace, distinctiveness, and deliciousness. Too often it stops at mere incoherent assertiveness. “I'm putting my fist through this wall because I can!”

Sweetness

In the wine world where I've spent most of my time, no single component of flavor is subject to more obsessiveness, dogma, and doctrine. It matters too much to too many people on too many occasions. In itself, sweetness only matters in terms of menu planning and forecasting the way a wine might age.

The prevailing (and I'd say pathological) aversion to sweetness has diminished many wines. Sweetness is sometimes helpful. Sweetness, like acidity, tannin, or any other single facet of flavor, only matters when there is too much or too little of it. Yet we focus on it singularly, insisting that it be reduced or removed at all cost, unaware we are misguided and have taken balance, length, and charm away from our wines. Sweetness should be present when it is called for and absent when it is not. And these questions are determined by the flavors of individual wines and not by any theory we have promulgated a priori.

Ripeness

The singular pursuit of ripeness—and especially physiological ripeness—as an absolute has wrecked many wines by damning them to a power they can't support, and it has removed the nuance possible when wines are made from grapes of variegated ripeness. When ripeness is sufficient, why do we assume overripeness will be preferable?

The singular pursuit of
physiological ripeness
has wrecked many wines
by damning them to a power
they can't support, and it has
removed the nuance possible
when wines are made from
grapes of variegated ripeness

Concentration

Concentration only matters after this question is answered: What are we concentrating? In itself, "concentrated" is merely an adjective, not a virtue.

Taking a stand: what is *not* important

You might expect the wine world to be a gentle and civilized place, but you'd be wrong. You'd think regular wine drinkers would be less querulous than other folks, and you'd be wrong again. Then you'd get tired of always being wrong, and see wine as a lightning rod for many other debates (or arguments) that are conducted with humanity's usual standards of skill, intellect, civility, and tolerance. In other words, it's flame city on the Internet, Mailer vs Vidal but minus the erudition.

When I see a particularly fierce argument, I look for the shadow side and the meta-messages. Wine people get combative when they fear a threat to the existence of the kinds of wines they like. But combativeness becomes a habit, a default position for people unwilling to make the effort entailed in being reasonable. And suddenly every little non-issue is absurdly exacerbated by people staking

their claims on categorical positions. If we don't, we look—what?—weak? We are often wrong but never uncertain! Some of the worst offenders are the very powerful elders of the wine world, who ought to know better—or *be* better.

Don't mistake my meaning: There are many places where values belong, and when you're in one of those places you're a coward if you don't assert yours. But when you're asserting value judgments over work that you yourself don't actually do, you risk sounding fatuous. And the need to see wine merely as a warren of opportunities to decide rights and wrongs is a blind alley and hinders both knowledge and appreciation. I thus assert the value of knowing when asserting values is called for!

Here are a few of the prominent issues around which opinions orbit. I'll begin with the silly ones.

Yields

Our obtuse insistence that low yields will always give better wines has given rise to a community of clumsy, opaque, and joyless wines. The simplistic syllogism of "low yields equals superior wine" is only true if concentration is the sole criterion of quality. But any good restaurant line cook knows how to reduce a sauce to just the right point, and he also knows what happens when you go too far: You get an opaque substance that's like a black hole from which no flavor can emerge. The entire matter of yields needs to be seen as a mosaic that we evaluate according to the kind of wine we wish to make. Sadly, when you dare suggest this, you'll be mocked by the lovers of forceful wine, as if their own bellicosity were validated by the wines they prefer.

Our obtuse insistence on measuring yields in terms of hectoliters per hectare (or tons per acre) is laughed at by all serious vintners, who know how those numbers can be manipulated. Yield per vine and vines per hectare get us closer to the truth.

Seeing the question as an interface of economic sustainability for a vintner, along with an *appropriate* degree of concentration in his wines, is more flexible and realistic. For proof that "high" yields can give lovely wines, see the Mosel Valley, as well as the Champagnes of Pierre Gimonnet.

Yeasts

I have personally witnessed fairly new wine lovers eager to make value judgments on this subject. They don't see the vintner snickering behind their back. The question is interesting and worth discussing, but it is almost never decisive. I know of only a few so-called aroma yeasts—

which hack growers use to endow their wines with a spurious and short-lived perfume—and it can certainly be argued that these are inherently objectionable. But the argument that only ambient vineyard yeasts can convey terroir is otiose. Each choice a producer makes to start the fermentation has advantages and disadvantages—and with very few exceptions, none is “morally” preferable to another.

Vinification methods

These are, of course, significant in descriptive terms, but rarely in absolute judgments. Oxidative or reductive—which is “better?” Steel or cask—which is “better?” Whole-cluster or conventional crush and press—which is “better?” The answer, always, is: *It depends*. The risk we always run is that, when we fall in love with an estate and learn how it makes its wine, we conclude, “This must be the way to make great wine.” And we memorize the formula (if there is one) and think we’ve learned something. We’re about to get a wet towel snapped on our smug ass, because I guarantee you that very soon you’re gonna fall in love with another wine estate that makes wine completely differently from the first. Each of them can defend its preferences with great conviction, even though the two methods are mutually exclusive. And you—poor you!—are trying to suss out who’s right. Well, sorry, but they’re both right. It’s you who’s wrong. You don’t have to choose. You do have to listen, consider, and understand what prods different vintners to make wines in different ways. It says something about them: what they like to drink, perhaps, or what they learned from their father. The value lies there, in human terms.

Taking a stand: what is important

I’ll outline here, and elaborate at length presently.

Artisanality

If for no other reason than to create a beachhead against the seductions of industrial, product-driven winemaking. This leads to...

Attentions and connections

By connections I mean, first, the connection of the vintner to his land (and the connection of flavor to land that follows ineluctably from it); then the connection of the worker to the work; then the connection of the family to the culture of family estates; and finally our own connection as drinkers to something we know is true, important, and worth defending and preserving.

When we insist on these things as preconditions for attending to wine, we will know when they are absent and the thing will lose its savor and its claim on our attention. (See industrial wine, world of)

Soil treatments

This one’s a sticky wicket. How vineyards are treated is manifestly important. But it doesn’t invariably follow that a continuum exists against which each vintner can be measured according to his “purity.” And who are we

who presume to do the measuring? I take a dubious view of anyone who never had to support a family by growing grapes and making wine preaching to those who do about living up to his purity standards.

Between the total hack, who works with any and all chemicals, and the biodynamic grower, there lives a complex world of values and possibilities. We need to attend as concerned and reasonable beings, but we do not need to assign points on some green-o-meter. What we really need to do is look and listen—to each grower’s ambient conditions (dry vs humid, flat vs steep, among others) and to the values by which he works. Absolute judgments on our parts are liable to be fatuous. We’ll know a grower’s conscience when we see it, and persons of conscience may make decisions different from those we think we’d make from our position of remove.

True flavor

This comes from the land, not from the cellar or from any of its gazillion possible treatments. The Mosel grower Carl Loewen says, “In the modern world, there are hitherto unimagined possibilities to form the tastes of wines. In my region, there are people using barriques, using the most current techniques to concentrate natural musts, special cultured yeasts to form the characters of wine, and special enzymes to form bouquets. Is this the brave new wine world? I have a different philosophy.”

Bearing in mind that all viniculture is “manipulation,” it follows that we’d be better served attending to agitation, or to anything that diminishes a wine’s inherent vitality, and to any and all practices that add flavor not inherently there.

To the extent a wine culture exists where it should and as it should, these things tend to apportion themselves appropriately. A simple example is Mosel Riesling. The vine clearly belongs in the land; the wines are holistically appropriate. If, in order to make potable wine, it must be subject to manipulations bordering on falsifications—or indeed crossing that border—then something is askew.

Say I like Golden Retrievers, and say I live in a very hot climate, and say this breed of dog is extremely uncomfortable in very hot climates. Obviously, I should get a different breed of dog. What I shouldn’t do is shave the poor bastard bald or give him drugs designed to make his coat fall out. (See Zinfandel, California...)

If you have to diddle your wine to remove the undesirable facets with which it was born (or that you brought about by insisting, among other things, on “physiological ripeness”), then you’re not hearing what nature is saying: You’re growing the wrong grapes in the wrong place. For the drinker, to take a stand against such manipulated wines is to assert the value of the right thing grown where it belongs, and the distinctiveness and honesty of the results in the glass. Little enough to ask, it would seem. Yet it is everything. ■

This article will appear in an adapted form in the forthcoming book Reading Between the Wines to be published in 2010 by the University of California Press.