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- **Are women better tasters than men?**
- **Brett, the bad boy of the barnyard**
- **No Grapevine next week**
- **Is “Jug” wine bad?**

### **Are Women Better at Wine Tasting?**

One of the biases I have carried with me for years is that women are better tasters than men. I know women have a more sensitive olfactory sense and since 70% of taste is in the nose, I just did the math and presumed that women would be better tasters. Anecdotally, I also have been in tastings with Tiffany, Laurel, my wife Jeanie or Boston are wine critic and gourmand Judith Placek and found that they are able to pick out subtleties in wines that I miss. I assumed there was something on that extra X chromosome that boosted their talent.

Then there is that argument from evolution that assumes that women as the gatherers of the hunter-gatherer hominids, self-sharpen the senses of smell and taste. Our prehistoric matriarchs only picked ripe fruit, benign mushrooms, and most nutritious roots. These evolutionary traits have found their way into the grocery store where visual and olfactory clues can find the ripest strawberries, the juiciest apple, the freshest bread, and the most robust coffee.

Imagine my surprise when I read Karen MacNeil’s wine blog and she answered the question, “Are women better at wine tasting than men?” Her reply was “Part of me wishes I could say yes, but I actually don’t think women are better at tasting. I’ve had thousands of wine students over my career as a wine teacher, and I’ve never once observed women being categorically better than men at tasting”.

She went on to explain by presenting a hypothesis proposed by Dr. Ann Noble from UC-Davis. Dr. Nobel suggests something fascinating: she doesn’t think women have any extra tasting talent either. She says women *may* have better sensory language skills. Dr. Noble thinks that whoever spends more time in the kitchen and at the food market are always practicing. It’s often a woman, but of course it could be a man. They’re always deciding: *Is this a ripe cantaloupe or is this? Which peach should I choose?* Women, she says, have “larger aroma libraries in their brains in general” and may therefore be more adept at describing what they taste. As long as I am professing my gender biased opinions, I think that assertion is correct. Women are much more verbal, expressive, and in touch with thoughts and feelings than men. I have often said that the best wine tasters are the ones who can verbalize what they smell and taste so it

is no wonder that women's verbal capabilities would make them apparently better tasters.

So here's one more reason to join your spouse and friends as they do the grocery shopping and chopping (if you're *not* that one). It just might improve your wine language skills.

### **Brett, the bad boy of the barnyard**

In freshly crushed grape pulp there are many different yeast species present, including those normally found on grapes. Most of these rapidly disappear as fermentation starts and alcohol content rises. The environment becomes more and more inhospitable, and after a while the only significant yeast species present is *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (brewer's yeast). As alcoholic fermentation finishes, the *S. cerevisiae* population decreases significantly. If by this stage the sugar and nutrient supplies are exhausted, that's the end of things and the wine is stable. But if they aren't, this leaves the way open for spoilage bugs to develop; *Brettanomyces* or 'brett' is one of the worst culprits.

Wines contaminated with "brett" can give off a range of smells from a mild aroma of what smells like a Band-Aid to an earthy mushroom odor or in its worst expression, a barnyard smell. Some wines can gain character from a little "brett", but to me, too much "brett" is a defect. Because *Brettanomyces* yeast digests nitrogen-containing compounds, the smell can be quite revolting.

Although "brett" can and does occur with whites, it is predominantly a red wine problem. This is because red wines are far higher in polyphenol content, and generally have a higher pH, (i.e. less acidic), both factors which encourage "brett" development for reasons which I have outlined below.

With rising standards of winemaking worldwide, I was a little surprised to hear that "brett" is on the increase. There seem to be two contributing factors to this rise. First, there is the current trend for "natural" wines. Minimalist winemaking is a perfect recipe for "bretty" wine. It's probable that the increase in "brett" in the 1990s can be traced back to the winemaking fad to stop adding sulfites at crush. Indeed, the most effective way of preventing "brett" is to maintain an adequate concentration of free sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) by adding a small amount of sulfites.

Second, there is the move towards "international" styles of red wine, made in an extracted style from super-ripe grapes. These grapes are lower in acid than less ripe grapes and this mellower environment is favorable for the secondary "brett" fermentation. Further, as grapes reach that super-ripe stage, the polyphenols in the skins become more concentrated. (The outward manifestation is that the grape skins are darker.) Winemakers make fuller "international" style wines by extracting the dark color in extended maceration and fermentation. More polyphenols are contributed to the wine with this method so there is still plenty of food for "brett" to devour and change to the stinky by-products that divulge their presence.

Brett is different than cork taint or “corked” wine. A wine afflicted by cork taint—a “corked” or “corky” wine—is suffering from a compound called 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, or TCA, which results in musty, dank or moldy notes. It reminds many folks of wet cardboard, damp cement or the smell of old books. TCA is created by an interaction of mold, chlorine and phenols (which are organic compounds found in all plants). The compound can develop in corks themselves, which is why they are often linked to TCA. But it can be difficult to pinpoint a source of TCA, since it can also originate in cardboard cases or wooden pallets. Indeed, entire wineries have been contaminated with it.

For good quality wine every time, “brett” and cork taint must be addressed at the winery. Cork taint is haphazard and may be addressed by quality control measures at the cork factory or at the winery. Brett is another story. Sterile filtration which physically removes the yeast and/or judicious use of sulfites are the most efficacious methods to reduce or eliminate Brettanomyces contamination. Either one is a bad thing only if it gets to the consumer.

### **No Grapevine next week**

Jeanie and I left this morning for Bellingham, Washington to attend the 2018 Badenoch Family Reunion. This is a fun time catching up with our large and extended family. We make good food, drink good wine, tell stories, update our grandkid pictures, play games and have a lot of smiling and laughing. This year we be hosting and toasting my mother who turns 100 years old in December.

We will probably be too late coming back to get a Grapevine edition out to you next week but we will publish our next edition on July 31.

### **Is “Jug” wine bad?**

I am not very sure I want to start down the road of a discussion of esthetics and how it relates to wine. However, at the risk of sounding like a wine snob I believe, “if I like it, it’s a good wine” is a rationalization for marching in place. Don’t get me wrong: there is no disputing taste. I can literally and figuratively relish a good hot dog. Macaroni and cheese makes a pretty tasty meal for kids and more than a few parents. There are jug wines which are very quaffable and can be purchased at low cost for everyday table wine.

The quaffable jug wine is the reason you never hear many wine professionals bad-mouthing Gallo-type producers. Low-cost quaffers introduce wine to consumers and make them less afraid to try more up-scale wines.

The parallel between hot dogs and jug wine is very similar. Hot dogs are good but they aren’t like the real meat from which they are made. Pork, beef and turkey hotdogs taste a lot alike and none of them tastes like the original meat.

The same is true of most jug wines. It may say Merlot or Chardonnay on the label but there is little in the taste that would lead you to believe there is anything resembling either grape in the bottle. Hot dogs can be a tasty food, but I'd be hard pressed to find anyone over age 12 that would prefer a hotdog to a grilled steak or a turkey leg. Jug wines can be tasty, but they are hardly a match in depth or character to a well-made varietal.

I suppose the point I am trying to make is that there is a maturity that goes along with wine appreciation. In our youth or inexperience with wine, jug wines are pretty good. As we learn more about wine, the appreciation for varietal characteristics grows and we learn to discern really good wine from wine that is merely drinkable. If we just stuck with hot dogs and jug wine, we'd be nourished and have a certain level of gustatory satisfaction but we'd never appreciate duck breast, lamb shanks or ratatouille. We'd never taste the fine grained tannins in a well-made Chilean Cabernet or appreciate the throaty velvet of Willamette Pinot Noir. Hot dogs taste good but if our search ends there, we miss curry from India, French cuisine, eggplant parmesan, and the really good stuff like red beans and rice. If we only drink White Zinfandel, we miss the spice of Gewurztraminer, the gamy richness of Syrah, the silky feel of Malbec and the *terroir* of Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

Our world is rich with variety so I won't keep going on. It's always good to keep a low-cost easy drinking table wine as your "house wine". Keep sampling and tasting. You will find other wines that suit your palate and your pocketbook if you keep exploring.