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TASTINGS

10 Ways to Enhance Your Wine Experience

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We tasted about 2,000 wines this year. Of those, 15 earned our highest accolade, a rating of Delicious or Delicious! You should make a New Year's resolution to find your own delicious wines next year. We'll help you do that, in 10 easy steps.

Last week, we discussed the general trends we saw in the wine world in 2006. This week, we're asking a question you can take forward into 2007: What makes a wine delicious? We want a wine to taste like fruit, have a sense of place and offer a passionate, singular vision. These days, too many wines taste like component parts -- oak, vanilla, alcohol and such. One of the great things about wine is the way it picks up its surroundings -- the soil, the sun, the slope of the hill. We fell in love with wine more than 30 years ago because every good bottle took us somewhere, often places we'd never been, because of the strong sense of place the wines offered. And, of course, the grape-grower and winemaker also are critical to a great bottle of wine. Some wines are lusty and some are buttoned-down, for instance, and if you get to know some winemakers, you'd be amazed how often the wines reflect their creators. That, too, is something we love about wine.

We buy all of the wines for this column off retail shelves for many reasons, but one of them is symbolic. We think it's important to make the point that there are wonderful wines sitting on shelves everywhere, all the time. How can you find them? Here are some tips.

1) Find a good merchant. There are more good wine merchants than ever, all over the country. There is no reason anymore to feel like you're on your own or to put up with pushy or snooty sales clerks. Don't let prices alone determine your choice. A good merchant who will guide you toward good stuff and away from bad stuff might charge a bit more, but the advice is worth it.

2) Don't be a slave to ratings. Too many people these days buy wine based on someone else's ratings, but only you know what tastes good to you. Not only that, but if you do happen to find a wine that we rated Delicious or someone else scored a 99, think about the weight on the shoulders of that poor wine. When you open it, won't you bring an awful lot of expectation to it? Our guess is that you will be more likely to have a delicious experience when you discover a wine on your own and it's a surprise as opposed to a wine that you open and then say, "OK, I hear you're delicious. Prove it."

3) Be adventurous. Whenever you see a type of wine you've never tried before, buy it. You might not naturally gravitate toward Austrian Riesling, for instance, but that might be your life-changing wine.

4) Be willing to spend more. A high price is no guarantee of quality and there are more good wines at low prices on shelves right now than ever before. But if you set some arbitrary limit, you may be skipping a wine that, for a few dollars more, could be your soul mate. If you don't want to spend more than \$20 on a bottle of wine, compromise: Buy one bottle for \$7 (think Chile or Argentina, for instance) and go to \$30 for the next.

5) Play with temperature. Most reds are served too warm and most whites are served too cold. One of our eureka moments in wine came when a merchant sold us a big, buttery California Chardonnay more than 20 years ago and told us to drink it not chilled but at cool room temperature. We can still describe every sip of that wine.

6) Go to the source. Our guess is that half the people reading this are thinking, "The best wine I had all year was at that winery (or on vacation in that country)." Wines always taste better at the source. That doesn't mean you have to travel to Tuscany. There are wineries all over the U.S. now, including, we'd guess, one near you.

7) Keep an open mind. Even if you taste a wine and you don't immediately like it, stay with it. The most memorable wines might well be those that, at first, don't taste comfortable and familiar. Give them a chance to show their stuff; hang in there.

8) Try something older. Our tastings usually focus on young wines because we generally write about the wines that you are likely to see on shelves. But there is something very special about a good wine with age. Years add depth and complexity to good wine -- not just good reds, but fine whites, too -- and you'll never really know what all the fuss is about until you taste some well-aged wine.

9) Keep notes or labels or both. You don't need to be a wine geek and create an extensive computer program to remember every wine you ever had. But if you have a wine you like, make a little note of it somewhere or save the label, so you can begin to focus on what you like about certain wines and therefore work with a good merchant to keep that going. You might discover a penchant for, say, Loire Valley whites. There's no reason you should have to start from scratch with each bottle.

10) Find a good merchant. We know this was also No. 1, but we can't emphasize this enough. Establishing a relationship with a passionate, knowledgeable merchant is an essential step toward great wine experiences. We understand that passion and knowledge don't always make for a user-friendly merchant, but it has been our experience that when merchants are truly passionate about wine, they live to spread that passion.

May 2007 be delicious for you in every way. Happy New Year.