



What You're Tasting When You Taste Wine

Some wine connoisseurs (not me) can taste or sniff a wine and detect, say, the scent of a Meyer lemon that was picked at 7:43 a.m. on a dewy morning by a left-hander.

That's nice, but who cares?

Having said that, it is good to know a little bit about what's in the glass beyond, say, "It's a red wine!" or "Oooh! Champagne!" A wine's character is created by a complex interplay between natural and human influences. There are ways to gather intel on these variations and figure out what's going on in the glass. And, bonus! With this information, you can reverse-engineer things, taking a few facts from a wine label or a menu to make an educated guess about what the wine will probably taste like. Here are some clues to look for:

New or Old? (And I Don't Mean Vintage!)

Old World and New World are two of the most common descriptors for wines. But a lot of folks don't know what those terms really mean. At its most basic, this distinction refers to the origin of the wine. As you might expect, Old World wines come from traditional winegrowing areas, such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. (In other words, Europe!) New World wines are from newer regions, where winemaking goes back a few hundred years or less. The best known of these are California and Australia, though the category also includes Chile, Argentina, Washington, Oregon, and New Zealand. (Basically, everywhere else!)

Each region produces wines with different characteristics. Overall, New World wines are higher in alcohol and have fruitier flavors than their Old World counterparts, which are typically more austere and reserved. But beware: thanks to winemaker manipulation (or factors like a warm vintage in a cool climate), an Old World wine can be crafted in a New World style, and vice versa.



Workers at the Hastings Ranch Vineyards in Pasadena, California, in the late 19th century. Courtesy of the Archives, Pasadena Museum of History.

Is It Hot in Here?

Climate plays an important role in viticulture, with a combination of sun, fog, temperature, and weather strongly influencing the outcome of a harvest. Warm climates have consistent temperatures throughout the growing season, allowing grapes to ripen fully but with less acidity. Cooler regions may be hot during the summer but then become cool around harvest time in the fall, preserving acidity but slowing the ripening process.

Perhaps coincidentally, New and Old World wines divide neatly across climate. Old World areas are cooler overall. If you remember your facts about Brix, you know that wine from these regions has less sugar and alcohol. As a result, these wines tend to be more mineral-based (think stones) in flavor and have a lean quality to them. In contrast, New World regions are generally warm, so wines are fuller and richer on the palate, with lots of fruit flavors.

Of course, it's not quite as simple as that. (You knew this was coming!) Factors such as elevation or proximity to water can impact a region, creating microclimates that might be significantly warmer or cooler than the surrounding areas. For example, the Chiles Valley District in Napa sees relatively hot days, with temperatures hovering around eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit. However, the vines are planted at eight hundred to 1,300 feet, which causes nighttime temperatures to plummet to slightly above freezing. As a result, grapes develop notable acidity compared to fruit from nearby Oakville, which is planted between seventy-five and five hundred feet in elevation.