

Slow wine tasting: Part 1

By [Peter Brits](#)

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A lot of current wine journalism is of very limited worth to the consumer. Very often, it consists of little more than a press release with some of the grammatical errors removed. Pages are wasted on who designed the label and other irrelevant trivia. Who cares? I don't! I want to know what the wine tastes like. If the main selling point is a designer label or a fancy bottle, I know to avoid the product.



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According to Wikipedia, "Slow Food is an international movement founded by Carlo Petrini in 1986. Promoted as an alternative to fast food, it strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine and encourages farming of plants, seeds and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem. It was the first established part of the broader Slow Movement. The movement has since expanded globally to over 100,000 members in 150 countries. Its goals of sustainable foods and promotion of local small businesses are paralleled by a political agenda directed against globalization of agricultural products."

I suggest it is time for a similar movement amongst wine drinkers in South Africa (the process has apparently already started in Italy); for wine consumers to speak up about what we expect from wine writers. Now is the time for the slow-tasted wine review.

Basic information

To start I need some basic information:

- i. The grape varieties and proportions - eg. Grenache 60%, Syrah 40%.
- ii. Origin - eg. Elgin. The more I will be expected to pay, the more precise I expect the origin to be. Something like "Western Cape" has almost no meaning, so that when the price goes over R50 per bottle, my wallet starts whispering that it would like to go back into my pocket. Conversely, if Egon Müller Scharzhofberger Riesling Auslese is offered, €200+ per bottle seems reasonable, depending on vintage, provenance etc.
- iii. Vintage - eg. 2009. Where a wine has no vintage, an approximate age should be provided.
- iv. Retail price (usually per 750ml bottle) and retail supplier(s). If the wine review is part of a restaurant review, the restaurant price should be quoted together with an assessment of the sommelier service of the restaurant. If the wine was chosen and laid down 30 years ago in an air-conditioned cellar, then selected on the recommendation of a sommelier with 20 years training and top-end experience after consideration of our menu choices and served at an ideal temperature in appropriate thin crystal, I would not mind a 300% mark-up. However, if the wine list was slapped together from what the most convenient wholesaler always has in stock, with the wine delivered last week, stored on a shelf beneath the espresso machine and served at Southern African summer temperature by a person who has some personal quarrel with corkscrews and who thinks a full Paris goblet is best, I resent even a 30% mark-up.
- v. Basic style - eg. red, white, rose, sparkling, sweet, dry, table wine, fortified, light, full-bodied etc. Here it would be useful to know the percentage alcohol by volume - personally, I avoid table wines above 13.5% ABV.

Additional information

For more specialist publications:

1. The age of the vineyard and the yield obtained. The reason Orange River wines are usually less interesting than South African vodka and diet lemonade is that the yields are achieved by irrigation. Chateau D'Yquem justifies its high prices for precisely the opposite reason.
2. Details of the soil type(s) and the contributions these make to the sense of place expressed by the wine. I enjoy the distinctive pot still brandies of the Klein Karoo and buy them for their unique Klein Karoo quality, but they will never taste like Grande Champagne Cognac. This is not a flaw, merely a fact. The one is grown on alluvial sand, the other on chalk.
3. Farming methods. Sustainable organic farming, provided it is not pursued too dogmatically, usually produces good results in the longer term.
4. The wine making methods and especially the use of oak. There is nothing wrong with wines made in stainless steel. Such wines are infinitely preferable to barrels smelling of the farmyard. However, if oak is used - was this chips, staves or barrels? If barrels - were these new, second or third fill, what size barrels, where did the oak come from, etc?
5. I like oak in moderation and I am consequently obliged to be tolerant of other people choosing to drink their wine with other additives including ice, sparkling water, fruit juice, glühwein spices, ginseng and even cola. However, I do expect to be told what additives are in the bottle. If the wine producer thinks his wine tastes better with green peppers, sugar and antifreeze, I expect to be told to enable me to make an informed decision before drinking the concoction.

Coming up in part 2 - wine appreciation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Brits has been a collector and appreciator of wines for 30 years.

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