

101 Things to Know About Wine

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Editor's Note: Russian River Wine Road, an association of wineries and lodging in Northwest Sonoma County, provided much of the content included here. Visit www.wineroad.com for more information. Nick Frey, president of the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission, also provided input. His group's website is www.sonomawinegrape.org.

California's renowned wine industry traces its roots to Sonoma County where the state's very first wine grapes were planted. Today, Sonoma County, Mendocino County and Humboldt County are among the best regions in the world for growing, producing, touring and tasting wine.

Things to keep in mind...

1. Plan ahead. Many wineries have limited hours. Appointments to taste and tour wineries are very easy to setup and in many cases can be quite impromptu, so don't hesitate to call ahead even if it's last minute.
2. Ask questions. Wine tasting is an opportunity to not only educate your palate but also to learn more about the wine making process.
3. Designate a driver. For a carefree day of tasting, this is the best way to go. Local tour services are also available that are fun and especially affordable. It is illegal for a tasting room to serve wine to anyone that appears intoxicated, even if they have a designated driver – so taste responsibly.
4. Feel free to use the dump buckets set out on the tasting bar for excess wine.
5. Limit yourself to no more than four wine tastes per winery.
6. Ask before you picnic at a winery, and never bring other alcoholic beverages to drink at a winery.
7. Children are welcome during non-event weekends, but please keep an eye on them. Most wineries operate heavy equipment and therefore it is not safe for unsupervised children. Remember, no one under the age of 21 may sample wine – not even your children.
8. Always taste from whites to reds. If you've already entered the red list and want to try a particular white again, try another day. If you're on the cusp of whether or not to buy it, take your best guess or come back for another try later.
9. Try vertical/horizontal tasting. Vertical tasting involves sampling the same wine from different years. Horizontal tasting involves sampling the same vintage year and wine from different wineries.
10. Step away from the wine. If you're in a winery that's very busy at the tasting bar, back away from the bar after receiving a tasting.
11. Don't wear perfume, cologne, or lotions. The aromas of the wine mingle with strong scented cosmetics, which alter perception in taste and can ruin the experience for others.

12. Follow the wineries advice on tasting order. Winemaker's styles differ, so trust the order provided by each winery's experts.

Learn the Lingo: A - Z

13. Acidity: Because acid is present in all grapes, it's also present in all wines. It is extremely important in determining structure, shape and lifespan. Good acid levels can make a wine crisp and refreshing, supporting the aftertaste. Acidity also helps preserve a wine for longer aging.

14. Appellation: A grape-growing area. In the United States , an appellation is defined strictly by a geographic area. If a wine label cites an appellation of origin, e.g. Sonoma County , 75 percent of the grapes must be grown in that appellation. If from an American Viticultural Area (AVA) within the county, e.g. Alexander Valley , then 85% of the grapes must be from that AVA. (For a more detailed explanation of Appellation, see Things to Know 57, 58 & 59 in the right hand column).

15. Aroma: Refers to fragrances in the wine that are characteristic of the grapes. For instance, Chardonnay might be described as citrusy. Its aromas of lemon, lime or grapefruit come from the grapes; they are not added. Also see Bouquet or Nose.

16. Balance: An integration of the major components of wine—fruit, acidity, tannins, alcohol, oak—so none outweighs the other. A balanced wine fills the mouth with flavors.

17. Barrel Fermented: Wine is usually fermented in 55-gallon oak barrels. Barrel fermentation requires careful cellar attention but contributes to increased complexity and flavor. The interaction of wine and the wood adds suggestions of spice and vanilla to wines.

18. Body: The feeling of a wine's weight in the mouth, such as full-bodied, medium-bodied or light-bodied.

19. Bouquet: The fragrances in the wine that are introduced by the winemaking process, including the smell of the oak (vanilla) or the yeast in the wine.

20. Chewy: Describes full-bodied, sometimes tannic wines—rich enough to chew on.

21. Complexity: When a wine is at once rich and deep, yet balanced and showing finesse.

22. Corked: Corked wine will smell moldy and disagreeable, which is the result of a bad cork that has been tainted with a bacteria called TCA (trichloroanisole).

23. Dry: A wine with no perceptible sweetness.

24. Earthy: Wine that has the smell or slight taste of fresh earth. Pinot Noirs are often described as earthy.

25. Enology: The science of winemaking, also spelled oenology.

26. Estate Bottled: Term used to show the winery owns or controls the grapes that produced the wine in the bottle, such as a long-term lease for the grapes.

27. Fermentation: The process in which yeast converts sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide, turning grape juice into wine.

28. Field Blend: A common practice among the early grape growers in Sonoma County , where complementary grape varieties were interplanted in a vineyard. These grapes were harvested

and fermented together,
creating a field-blend wine.

29. Finish: The taste that remains in the mouth after the wine is swallowed. A long, lingering finish is considered desirable in a wine.

30. Fortified: Wine with a higher alcohol content due to the addition of brandy or spirits. Port, Sherry and Madeira are three examples of fortified wines.

31. Grassy: An aroma or taste of grass or newly mown hay. Usually attributed to Sauvignon Blanc.

32. Lees: Sediment and yeast found in a barrel or tank during and after fermentation. More and more winemakers are using the old technique of aging wine on the lees to increase complexities in aromas and flavors.

33. Legs: The drops of wine that slide down the sides of the glass when it is swirled. These drops generally indicate the alcohol content in the wine.

34. Length: The amount of time a wine's taste and aroma are evident after swallowing.

35. Made and Bottled By: The legal phrase used if a winery crushed, fermented and bottled at the same location at least 10% of the wine in the bottle.

36. Nose: Refers to how the wine smells – the aroma and bouquet – as in, “This wine has a great nose.”

37. Oaky: Describes the aroma or taste character of a wine that has interacted with the oak of a wood barrel. Most of the world's greatest red wines (and many of the world's greatest whites) are aged in wood before bottling and show some vanilla-spice-toast character contributed by oak.

38. Oxidized: A loss of freshness from exposure to air. If a wine has been open for several days, it will become oxidized.

39. Produced and Bottled By: A legal phrase that indicates the winery crushed, fermented and bottled a minimum of 75% of the wine in the bottle.

40. Racking: A term for the traditional winemaking practice of moving wine from one container to another. This is essentially decanting on a grand scale by moving wine from barrel to barrel to rid the wine of sediment, by leaving it behind in the first barrel.

41. Residual Sugar: A measurement, usually by weight or volume, of the amount of unfermented grape sugar remaining in a wine. Dessert wine will have a high level of residual sugar, whereas a dry table wine will have little to no residual sugar.

42. Split : The term used for a six-ounce bottle of wine.

43. Sulfites: A natural bi-product of fermentation. Sulfites are naturally found in wine. Sulfites (in small quantities) may be added to wine to guard against spoilage.

44. Sur Lie: A term used for wines aged on the lees. Also see Lees #32.

45. Table Wine: The legal term for wine that is less than 14% alcohol. Wines under 14% alcohol can be labeled “Table Wine,” and the winery does not have to state the actual alcohol content on the label. Any wine over 14% alcohol must state the alcohol content on the front label and may not use the term “table wine” on the label.

46. Tannin: Chemicals found in the skins of many fruits, including grapes, that impart astringency. Tannin naturally preserves wine from oxidation and is a primary component in determining the wine's structure and aging potential.

47. Tartrates: Natural, purely harmless crystals that often form in used casks, in wine sediment and on used corks. These deposits come from the tartaric acids present in wines; though they look like cut glass, they are completely safe. In fact, they are a positive indication to experienced tasters that a wine has not been overly processed.

48. Unfiltered: Some winemakers believe filtering wine strips aromas and flavors from the wine. Thus they may choose to not filter their wine; however, these wines can be clarified using a fining process.

49. Unfined: Wine that was not treated with any fining process; however, it can be clarified using filtering. Some winemakers believe fining wine strips essential aromas and flavors from the wine.

50. Varietal: Term used to describe a wine produced from a particular type (variety) of grape. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Zinfandel, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Sauvignon Blanc and hundreds of others are examples of varietal wines.

51. Varietal Character: The aromas and flavors typical for a particular grape variety.

52. Variety: Term used to describe a type of grape. A wine made from a particular grape variety (e.g., Zinfandel) is referred to as a varietal.

53. Vintage: Refers to the year the grapes were grown and harvested.

54. Viticulture: The science of grape growing. When including the production of wine, the proper term is viniculture.

55. Wine Thief: A sampling tube made of either glass or plastic with a narrow opening at each end. The tube is used to get a sample of wine from a barrel or other container by lowering the tube into the wine. By covering the top end of the tube with a thumb and removing it from the container, the sample of wine will remain inside the tube. When the tube is placed over a glass or beaker, the top end is exposed and the wine flows out, allowing a sample of the wine to be easily extracted from a barrel.

56. Yeast: Important microorganisms that cause fermentation by converting sugar to alcohol.

How is an Appellation Defined?

57. **Appellations** are combinations of soil, slope and sunshine. In order to produce wines distinctive in personality, soils must be loose enough so that water does not accumulate in the ground, thus retarding clear flavor development in the fruit. The lay of the land must be such that vine leaves are exposed to enough sunlight to create a healthy plant. Within the framework of "sunshine" all weather related factors are included. Besides adequate sunlight there must be sufficient rainfall or irrigation to promote natural sugar development and to the temperature moderating effects of some body of water – ocean, bay or river – so that flavor-boosting grape acidity is not lost in ripening. Because Sonoma County is blessed with a bevy of the best of those factors, presented in such a variety of combinations, nearly every type of wine grape can be grown.

58. Many appellation boundaries are easy to understand. In the case of California or Sonoma County, legal boundaries or borders are used. These are called Appellations of Origin. When it

comes to American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) other factors are considered, i.e. a geographic boundary based upon attributes important to grape production in that area plus some historical significance. AVAs are often referred to by the French term, appellation.

59. Sub-appellation boundaries are defined by similar climatic conditions, soil types and weather patterns, or what the French call terroir. Variations in terroir contribute to different flavors in the same grape variety grown in different regions. Zinfandel grown in Dry Creek Valley typically has a different aroma and flavor profile than a Zinfandel grown in Russian River Valley or Alexander Valley.

Some of the varieties grown:

60. **Alicante Bouschet:** A cross between Petit Bouschet and Grenache, Alicante Bouschet is one of the few red-fleshed grapes. Most red grape varieties have white flesh under their skins. Because of the red flesh and dark skins of this grape, the wine produced will be a deeper, more intense color.

61. **Barbera:** Originating in Italy, Barbera found its way to California in the 1880s. Along with Sangiovese, Barbera was a favorite of Italian immigrants who settled throughout Sonoma County. Known for its rich color, low tannins and high acid, Barbera was used as a blending grape. Today, it is part of the "Cal-Italia" varietal trend produced by several Sonoma County wineries.

62. **Cabernet Franc:** Wine produced from Cabernet Franc grapes can have the intensity of flavors of a Cabernet Sauvignon without the overpowering tannins, allowing it to be enjoyed without waiting years for the tannins to soften. The lighter body with less tannin and acid than Cabernet Sauvignons has helped to increase its popularity as a single varietal. Cabernet Franc continues to be blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot or Malbec to produce Meritage or Bordeaux varietal blends.

63. **Cabernet Sauvignon:** Noble, Aristocratic and the King of Red Wines are just a few phrases used to describe this small grape that produces some of the most magnificent and sought after wines in the world. Through DNA fingerprinting, Cabernet Sauvignon was found to be a cross between Cabernet Franc (red grape) and Sauvignon Blanc (white grape). Made in a variety of styles and often blended with other Bordeaux varietal grapes, Cabernet Sauvignon can be enjoyed when it is young, or in some cases, cellared for years. Proper aging of a classically produced Cabernet Sauvignon will result in a smooth, delicious wine where once a tough tannic monster existed.

64. **Carignane (Carignan):** Popular in France and Spain as a blending varietal, Carignane was grown and produced by early California wine pioneers. It is a vigorous grape that produces fruit-driven, easy-to-drink wines. Carignane continues to be used as a blending wine but is also produced as a single varietal wine.

65. **Champagne:** Term for sparkling wine made in the Champagne region of France.

66. **Charbono:** Thought to be a relative of Barbera or Dolcetto or both varieties, Charbono is not produced as a single varietal in Italy. It dates back to the 1880s in California and has found a small resurgence in popularity with the current "Cal-Italia" movement in the wine industry.

67. **Chardonnay:** The Queen to Cabernet Sauvignon's King, Chardonnay is grown and produced throughout the world. This white grape variety produces the famous Champagne, Chablis, White Burgundy and Maconnais wines from France. As a varietal wine, Chardonnay can range from rich, oaky and buttery to fresh, crisp and fruity. Chardonnay continues to reign as the most popular white wine in the world.

68. **Chenin Blanc:** Once a popular wine ranging in style from dry to semi-dry to sweet, Chenin

Blanc is primarily used for blending. Today acres of Chenin Blanc grapes have been replaced by higher demand varieties like Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel. This fruity, well-balanced wine is more challenging to find as a single varietal, but for white wine lovers it can be worth the hunt.

69. **Cinsaut (Cinsault):** A Rhône varietal used to blend grapes or to produce an aromatic rosé. Cinsaut produces a softer, lighter bodied red wine with perfume aromas and fruit forward flavors.

70. **Dolcetto:** From the Piedmont region of Italy . Dolcetto, which means little sweet one, is produced in two distinctly different styles: a soft, slightly sweet aperitif styled wine or a robust, hearty rich wine. A classic Dolcetto exhibits flavors of citrus peel, almonds, blueberries and even licorice.

71. **French Colombard:** Also known as Colombard, this white grape variety originated in the Charente district of France. Once the second most planted grape in California , today French Colombard is rarely found as a varietal wine. With its fruit forward flavors, it is generally used as a blending grape.

72. **Fumé Blanc:** A fanciful name for Sauvignon Blanc.

73. **Gewürztraminer:** Originally from the Alsace region of France , Gewürztraminer quietly gained fans throughout the U.S. Noted for its strong floral aromas and classic lychee-nut and spicy flavors, this versatile, fruity white wine can be made semi-dry to bone dry as a late harvest dessert wine.

74. **Grenache:** Known primarily as one of the French varieties used in the classic Châteauneuf-du-Pape from the Rhône region. In California , it is not often found as a single varietal, but it is often used in delicious Rhône varietal blends or in Rosé.

75. **Malbec:** In the Bordeaux region of France , small amounts of this grape are often used to blend with Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. In California , Malbec is used in Meritage blends, but it is also occasionally found as a single varietal wine.

76. **Marsanne:** A white grape originating in the Rhône region of France , which is often blended with other Rhône varietals such as Roussane and Viognier. In California , the Rhône Rangers have helped to spur appreciation for these once lesser-known Rhône grapes. Rhône blends have increased in popularity and so have the number vineyard acres dedicated to them.

77. **Meritage™:** A trademark name developed by the Meritage Association to identify blends made from specific Bordeaux varietals. Wineries must be a member of the Meritage Association and their Bordeaux must be produced from a blend of two or more of the following varieties in order to be called a Meritage: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, St. Macaire, Gros Verdot, and Carmeneré. No single variety can be more than 90% of the blend. For a white wine Meritage, the wine must have two or more of the following varieties and no single variety can be more than 90% of the blend: Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, and Sauvignon Vert.

78. **Merlot:** One of the classic Bordeaux region grapes from France , Merlot was traditionally used for blending. In the early 1970s Merlot gained popularity with wine drinkers seeking a softer, fruitier red wine. Merlot can be enjoyed sooner, meaning less aging time, than Cabernet Sauvignon due to its softer tannins, yet it has similar rich flavors.

79. **Mourvèdre:** With plantings in the Mediterranean regions of Spain and France , Mourvèdre is thought to have arrived in Northern California in the 1870s where it was called Mataro . Needing

warm summer days to fully ripen, it found a perfect home in Sonoma County . This grape is often used in blending with varietals such as Grenache or to create a fruity, crisp Rosé.

80. **Muscat:** A versatile grape with ancient roots dating back to early civilizations. There are several Muscat grapes including Muscat Blanc, Muscat of Alexandria, Muscat Hamburg (Black Muscat), Orange Muscat and more. Because of its perfumey aromas and fruit-forward flavors, Muscat is produced in a variety of styles from sparkling wine to low alcohol table wine to sweet, high alcohol dessert wine.

81. **Peloursin:** An almost extinct Rhône region (France) variety. Through DNA testing, it has been identified as having ties to Petite Sirah.

82. **Petit Verdot:** Used to blend with Cabernet Sauvignon or with other Bordeaux varietals, this wine is rarely found as a single varietal. It is usually blended to add color, a spicy quality and additional structure or backbone to a wine.

83. **Petite Sirah:** DNA studies show Petite Sirah is the Rhône grape Durif, which is a cross between Peloursin and Syrah. Although called “petite” the wine is anything but—it offers robust flavors and plenty of tannins.

84. **Pinot Gris:** Pinot Grigio is the Italian name for this French variety that is a natural mutation of Pinot Noir. This grape yields a soft, perfumey white wine. The grapes can vary in color from ashen-yellow to bluish-silver to mauve-pink. This variation in the grapes results in subtle variations in the wine's color from winery to winery.

85. **Pinot Noir:** Grown in the cooler regions of Mendocino and Sonoma County, this fog-loving grape has skyrocketed in popularity in the past ten years. Renown in the Burgundian region of France, Pinot Noir is also an essential component in the production of some French Champagnes. Pinot Noir is both demanding to grow and to produce as a fine wine. Tasting notes for Pinot Noir encompass the widest vocabulary of any varietal in order to capture the sensual and elusive qualities that attract so many wine lovers to this varietal.

86. **Port:** This term is used to describe the famous fortified sweet wine made in Portugal . Port is a blend made from up to five red grape varieties — Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, Tinto Cão, Touriga Francesa, and Touriga Nacional. There are numerous styles of Port, the best known styles are Tawny Port and Vintage Port. Port-style wines are also made in the United States from a variety of grapes including Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Petite Sirah.

87. **Riesling:** Also known as Johannesburg Riesling or White Riesling, this classic German varietal was once produced by many California wineries. Now it is rarely found on a winery's tasting list. Generally a flowery, fruity dry wine with high acid and low alcohol, it can be also be made in a semi-dry and late harvest style.

88. **Rosé:** A pink or salmon colored wine produced from red grapes. As red grapes are crushed and the juice separates from the skin and seeds, they pick up some of the pigmentation from the skins. This gives the juice a rose or salmon color. Because the juice has limited contact with the skins and seeds, which give the wine structure and tannin, Rosé is a soft, easy-to-drink wine best served chilled.

89. **Rousanne:** A Rhône variety that got its name because of the rust-colored tinge to the green grapes. Frequently blended with Marsanne, Rousanne contributes good acidity and aromas of herbal tea and floral notes to the blend. Occasionally small amounts of Rousanne are blended with Syrah to soften the tannins and intensity and to add a touch of elegance to an overpowering Syrah.

90. **Sangiovese:** Brought to Sonoma County by Italian immigrants, Sangiovese is the most

widely planted grape in Italy . Once known as the backbone of Chianti-blends, Sangiovese took a new direction in the late 1980s when winemakers in California and Italy began blending in small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon or other Bordeaux grapes to create super-Tuscan Sangioveses. In California , Sangiovese is rarely used as a blending wine today. Rather it is produced as a varietal wine with possibly small amounts of other wines blended in to add a layer of dimension or additional flavor components.

91. **Sauvignon Blanc:** Also referred to as Fumé Blanc, a name coined by Robert Mondavi for his barrel fermented Sauvignon Blanc wine, Sauvignon Blanc is a classic grape variety from the Bordeaux and Loire regions of France . Wine styles can vary from grassy and herbaceous to citrus qualities of lime and grapefruit to flint and mineral qualities with gooseberry flavors. Sauvignon Blanc continues to grow in popularity with wine drinkers as an alternative to Chardonnay.

92. **Semillon:** Traditionally blended with Sauvignon Blanc to produce dry table wine or a sweet dessert wine, including the renowned dessert wines from Sauternes , France . When produced as a single varietal, Semillon displays aromas and flavors of figs and honey.

93. **Shiraz:** The Australian and South African name for the Syrah grape. See Syrah for additional information.

94. **Sparkling Wine:** A wine that bubbles when poured into a glass due to carbonation. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier are the most commonly used grape varieties in making sparkling wine. The grapes are harvested early to capture the tangy flavors and high acids. To produce the carbonation, a second fermentation, which takes place in individual bottles, starts with the addition of a small amount of sugar. Carbon dioxide, a natural by-product of fermentation, is trapped in the bottles and creates tiny bubbles when the sparkling wine is uncorked.

This method of producing sparkling wine is called methode champenoise.

95. **Syrah:** Grown throughout the world, Syrah experienced a surge in popularity in the U.S. in the early 1990s. In order to fully ripen, Syrah demands a warm climate, which describes many of the growing regions along the Russian River Wine Road . Californians only recently distinguished between Syrah and Petite Sirah (a cross between Peloursin and Syrah), partly due to the Syrah clone called Petite Syrah that is grown in the Rhône region of France . Typical Syrah wine characteristics include white pepper, leather, wild gamey and intense dark berry flavors.

96. **Tempranillo:** The renowned red grape of Spain 's Rioja region, Tempranillo has many names including Tinto Fino, Tinta Roriz, Tinta del Pais, Aragonez and Valdepañas. Some believe that Tempranillo originated in southern France as a natural hybrid of Cabernet Franc and Pinot Noir. Considered the Cabernet Sauvignon of Spain, Tempranillo is generally blended with other varietals, similarly to the use of Cabernet Sauvignon in Bordeaux .

97. **Valdiguè:** For years it was known as Napa Gamay or Gamay until DNA fingerprinting properly identified this variety as Valdiguè. This original French variety has all but disappeared as a varietal in France just as it has gained in popularity in California.

98. **Viognier:** From southern France , in the Rhône region, Viognier is now planted worldwide. Wines produced from Viognier have a distinctive fragrance, a combination of floral and fruity aroma and flavors. Sometimes small amounts are blended with Syrah to tame and add elegance to the wine.

99. **White Zinfandel (also see Rosé):** Produced in a similar style to a Rosé, White Zinfandel is produced from Zinfandel grapes. The grapes are crushed, and as the juice separates from the skin and seeds, it picks up some of the pigmentation from the skins. This gives the juice a rose or pink color. Because the juice has limited contact with the skins and seeds, which give the wine

structure and tannin, White Zinfandel is a soft, easy-to-drink wine.

100. **Zinfandel:** Although it remains a mystery how the first Zinfandel vines arrived in the United States, DNA testing has linked it to both the Italian variety Primitivo and the Croatian variety Crljenak Kasteljanski. Zinfandel was a standard variety found in field-blend wines produced by the Sonoma County wine pioneers. This robust wine has an enormous following among wine lovers and an organization (ZAP - Zinfandel Advocates and Producers) devoted entirely to its promotion.

101. **Late Harvest:** A term used to describe wine made from grapes picked after the normal harvest time, generally late fall. Such grapes have a much higher sugar content, or Brix. A high Brix measurement can translate to a sweet wine and one higher in alcohol, making them a perfect complement for after dinner. These are often referred to as dessert wines. Late Harvest wines can be made from a wide variety of grapes.