



**WSET**

*'creating the trade professional'*

WSET<sup>®</sup> Level 4 Diploma  
in Wines and Spirits

## Candidate Assessment Guide

# Part 2: Tasting

Wine & Spirit Education Trust  
39-45 Bermondsey Street, London, SE1 3XF  
e-mail: [wset@wset.co.uk](mailto:wset@wset.co.uk)  
[wsetglobal.com](http://wsetglobal.com)

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# How should I approach my tasting studies? 1

Developing the ability to taste wines and spirits as a professional is a key learning outcome of the WSET® Level 4 Diploma in Wines and Spirits (here referred to as the '**Diploma**'). This skill is taught and assessed using the WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Wines® (the '**Wine SAT**') and the WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Spirits® (the '**Spirits SAT**'). The SATs are supported by the WSET Level 4 Wine-Lexicon (the '**Wine-Lexicon**') and the WSET Level 4 Spirits-Lexicon (the '**Spirits-Lexicon**'), respectively. These resources are explained in detail in this document.

## THE TASTING EXAMINATIONS

The Diploma tasting examinations are designed to test your ability to describe a wine or spirit accurately 'blind' using the SAT methodology and then apply this information to evaluate its key features.

Tasting is assessed for Units 3, 4, 5 and 6, with samples presented in flights of three.

### Unit 3

In the Unit 3 tasting examination you will taste and evaluate 12 wines in total. These are divided into four flights, with two flights on Tasting Paper 1 and two flights on Tasting Paper 2. Each flight has a mark allocation of 100 marks. You have one hour to complete each six-wine paper and there is a short break between the two.

The wines used in the examination can be any of the wines listed in the Specification for Unit 3 and are not limited to the Recommended Tasting Samples. Any combination of white, red, or rosé wines is possible.

For each wine you will be expected to write a comprehensive tasting note in accordance with the Wine SAT and then give conclusions about the sample and/or samples in that flight. The format of the Unit 3 tasting papers is shown in the table below.

Unit 3 – Light Wines of the World		
Tasting Paper 1 (1 hour)	Question 1	Three wines from the same or predominantly the same grape variety.
	Question 2	Three wines from the same region or country or which otherwise share a common link (e.g. maturation technique).
Tasting Paper 2 (1 hour)	Question 3	Three wines from the same region/country but different quality levels.
	Question 4	A 'mixed bag' of three wines which are unrelated. Candidates are typically asked to identify the grape variety/(ies) for each sample and/or origin.

Your grade for the Unit 3 tasting examination is based on your aggregate score across the 12 wines. The tasting examination and the theory examination are treated as separate components of the Unit 3 assessment. This means that you need to pass the tasting examination and the theory examination to achieve an overall pass for Unit 3. If you pass one examination but not the other you will only need to retake the examination you have failed.

## **Units 4, 5, and 6**

The examinations for these units comprise a tasting question and a theory question on the same paper. Unlike Unit 3, your final grade for each examination is based on your aggregate mark for the tasting question and the theory question. This means that a good score on one question can make up for a marginal fail on the other, resulting in an overall pass for the Unit.

In each examination you will taste and evaluate three samples. Each sample has a mark allocation of 25 marks. They can be any of the wines or spirits listed in the Specification for Units 4, 5 or 6 as the case may be, and are not limited to the Recommended Tasting Samples. The wines for the Unit 5 and Unit 6 examinations can be any combination of white, red or rosé and the spirits for the Unit 4 examination can be any combination of spirits.

For each wine or spirit you will be expected to write a comprehensive tasting note in accordance with the Wine SAT or the Spirits SAT (as the case may be) and then give conclusions about the sample and/or samples in that flight. The most common format for the Unit 4, 5 and 6 tasting questions is a mixed bag of unrelated samples but the examiners may present you with a trio of wines or spirits with a stated or unstated common link, or which are from the same origin but differ in style and/or quality.

## **HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE TASTING EXAMINATIONS**

Tasting wines and spirits accurately blind is challenging and requires a broad base of tasting experience built up over an extended period of time. All students join the Diploma with some tasting ability, whether from previous WSET qualifications or their professional background in the wine and spirits industry. Some will feel more confident about tasting than others. It is important to remember that tasting ability is a skill that can be learned and perfected like any other, so careful preparation over the course of your Diploma studies is essential.

The first step to success is to understand what is required. By the time you sit your first tasting examination you must be able to:

- 1. Identify the key features of wines and spirits accurately, using the appropriate SAT terminology.**

The examiners recognise that different tasters have different levels of sensitivity to a wine's structural components such as sugar, acidity, tannin and alcohol, or a spirit's intensity or body. However, they expect that through a combination of practice and coaching you will have calibrated your palate against those of your educators. This should mean that you are able to classify the levels of a wine or spirit's structural components using the applicable SAT terms (e.g. 'high', 'medium' or 'low', etc.), relative to the world of wines and spirits generally.

The words used to describe the aromas and flavours of a wine or spirit are more subjective and there is more flexibility with how marks are awarded for these sections in the examinations.

- 2. Apply your knowledge of the key features of a given wine to reach conclusions** about its quality, readiness for drinking and potential for ageing, origin, grape variety/(ies), style within the category and/or method of production.

- 3. Apply your knowledge of the key features of a given spirit to reach conclusions** about its quality, origin, raw material, style within the category and/or method of production.

## STUDY SKILLS

In this section we make some suggestions as to how to approach your tasting studies.

### Learn the SATs

As you will be expected to describe and evaluate wines and spirits in accordance with the SATs both in the classroom and in the Diploma tasting examinations, it is essential that you get into the habit of describing wines and spirits using these resources as soon as possible. You will not be allowed to take the SATs into the examinations with you so must be able to recall every heading of the SATs for which marks are available. The more often you taste wines and spirits using the SATs the easier this will be.

Many of you will be familiar with the concept of the systematic approach to tasting from your studies at Level 3 but the SATs used at Diploma level are more detailed. The SATs have been designed to prompt you to consider all of the relevant aspects of a wine or spirit in turn, and so can help maximise your mark-scoring potential in an examination situation (where marks are allocated to different SAT headings).

Candidates that tend to perform poorly in the tasting examinations often fail to follow the SAT methodically, omitting to mention certain key components. Full guidance on how to use the SATs follows in Chapter 2 *The Wine SAT and Wine-Lexicon* and Chapter 6 *The Spirits SAT and Spirits-Lexicon*.

### Taste as widely as possible

The starting point when tasting wines and spirits for the Diploma should be the Recommended Tasting Samples listed in the Specification. You should aim to taste sufficient examples of the Recommended Tasting Samples to understand the range of wines and spirits represented.

When tasting we recommend that you use ISO glassware and pour a 5cl (50ml) measure of each sample of wine and a 2.5cl (25ml) measure of each spirit. You should aim to write your notes with the applicable SAT to hand for reference. Copies of a blank tasting template similar to that which you will be required to complete in the tasting examinations are available online in the Diploma student area of the Global Campus. By filling in these templates for different wines and spirits you can compile a bank of tasting notes which you can return to when revising your tasting technique in preparation for the examinations.

When you are tasting a wine or spirit in an ‘open label’ setting (i.e. not blind), you should think carefully about how its aromas, flavours and structural components relate to your theory studies. Your theory knowledge of relevant grape growing and winemaking factors should help you understand why a wine tastes as it does. Likewise your knowledge of the raw material and production process for different spirits. Tasting a particular style of wine or spirit repeatedly when you know how it is made can create positive associations which reinforce your understanding and improve your ability to identify key characteristics.

### Exam technique

Many of the principles of good exam technique discussed in Part 1 of the Candidate Assessment Guide (Theory) are equally applicable to the tasting assessments. In the tasting examinations you need to:

- **Manage** your time;
- **Answer** the question as set;
- **Plan** your answer; and
- **Write** clearly.

Exam technique is especially important for the tasting papers because blind tasting is challenging even without the pressure of an exam environment. It is easy to become distracted by the samples, or panic when you do not recognise a wine or spirit (even though you can easily pass without correctly identifying any wine or spirit you are required to identify). Practising writing answers in timed conditions is essential and you should read the most recent Examiners’ Report (available online in the Diploma student area of the Global Campus). This document contains useful examples of candidates’ answers to previous exam questions and tips on how to avoid common mistakes.

You should allocate a fixed amount of time to tasting and writing your answers for each sample based on the total time available for the examination. You should aim to spend no more than ten minutes on each sample. Note that different headings in the Conclusions section of the question paper for each wine will carry different marks, and that these vary from flight to flight and paper to paper. For each sample you should prioritise those headings which carry the most marks.

You must read the question carefully. The question paper will introduce the three samples in a flight and may contain important information about the wines or spirits which can help you evaluate them correctly. You should aim to write your answers in full sentences rather than bullet points.

You should try to gain as much experience of tasting using the SATs in exam conditions as possible. Many students find it helpful for friends or colleagues to set them flights of wines ‘blind’ in exam conditions. It can also be constructive to taste wines and spirits in an open label environment, discussing them with other Diploma students. Explaining to someone else why you think a wine or spirit is or is not a good example can reinforce your understanding of the key structural elements, aromas and flavours that make a wine or spirit what it is.

# The Wine SAT and the Wine-Lexicon 2

The Wine SAT is designed to help you write a complete description of a wine and then use this information to evaluate it. It provides a structured approach to assessing the appearance, nose and palate which ensures that you consider all the elements of the sample methodically.

## Describing the wine

The first part of the Wine SAT consists of three sections entitled Appearance, Nose and Palate. Each section has its own headings which appear in the left-hand column, e.g. ‘Colour’ under Appearance and ‘Acidity’ under Palate. The right-hand column lists the terms that you can select to describe the category heading on that line. For example, to describe the Appearance of a white wine you might select ‘pale’ for ‘Intensity’ and ‘lemon’ for ‘Colour’.

This part of the Wine SAT is used in the examinations to test your ability to:

- describe the structural components of the sample accurately using the correct headings and entries on the corresponding line; and
- describe the aromas and flavours of the sample in detail, communicating what the sample smells and tastes like.

## Evaluating the wine

The second part of the Wine SAT consists of one section entitled Conclusions. This is split into three subsections: ‘Quality’, ‘Readiness for Drinking and Potential for Ageing’ and ‘The Wine in Context’.

This part of the SAT is designed to prompt you to use the observations you have made regarding Appearance, Nose and Palate to draw conclusions about the wine.

In the tasting examinations, the Conclusions section of the Wine SAT will be used to test your ability to do any of the following, giving reasons when required:

- assess the **quality of the wine**;
- assess the wine’s **readiness for drinking and potential for ageing**;
- identify the wine’s **country and/or region of origin**;
- identify the wine’s **grape variety/(ies)**;
- identify the wine’s **style within its category** (for sparkling or fortified wines only); and/or
- identify the wine’s **method of production** (for sparkling or fortified wines only).

## WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Wine®

<b>APPEARANCE</b>								
<b>Clarity</b>	clear – hazy (faulty?)							
<b>Intensity</b>	pale – medium – deep							
<b>Colour</b>	white lemon-green – lemon – gold – amber – brown rosé pink – salmon – orange – onion skin red purple – ruby – garnet – tawny – brown							
<b>Other observations</b>	e.g. legs/tears, deposit, pétillance, bubbles							
<b>NOSE</b>								
<b>Condition</b>	clean – unclean (faulty?)							
<b>Intensity</b>	light – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – pronounced							
<b>Aroma characteristics</b>	e.g. primary, secondary, tertiary							
<b>PALATE</b>								
<b>Sweetness</b>	dry – off-dry – medium-dry – medium-sweet – sweet – luscious							
<b>Acidity</b>	low – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – high							
<b>Tannin</b>	<i>level/nature</i> low – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – high e.g. ripe/soft vs unripe/green/stalky, coarse vs fine-grained							
<b>Alcohol</b>		low – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – high						
	<b>fortified wines:</b> low – medium – high							
<b>Body</b>	light – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – full							
<b>Flavour intensity</b>	light – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – pronounced							
<b>Flavour characteristics</b>	e.g. primary, secondary, tertiary							
<b>Other observations</b>	texture (e.g. steely, oily, creamy, mouthcoating), pétillance ( <i>still wines only</i> )							
<b>Finish</b>	short – medium(-) – medium – medium(+) – long							
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> <i>(see Candidate Assessment Guide for further information)</i>								
<b>QUALITY</b>								
<b>Assessment of quality</b>	faulty – poor – acceptable – good – very good – outstanding <i>then give reasons, assessing e.g. balance/integration, intensity, finish, complexity, mousse, varietal definition, potential for ageing, etc.</i>							
<b>READINESS FOR DRINKING AND POTENTIAL FOR AGEING</b>								
<b>Assessment of readiness for drinking and potential for ageing</b>	too young	–	can drink now, but has potential for ageing	–	drink now: not suitable for ageing or further ageing	–	too old	
	<i>then give reasons, assessing e.g. concentration, acidity, tannin, development of aroma and flavour characteristics, etc.</i>							
<b>THE WINE IN CONTEXT</b>								
<b>Country and/or region of origin</b>	<i>state the country and/or region of origin, giving reasons when required</i>							
<b>Grape variety/(ies)</b>	<i>state the grape variety/(ies), giving reasons when required</i>							
<b>Style within the category</b>	<i>state the style within the category (for sparkling and fortified wines), giving reasons when required</i>							
<b>Method of production</b>	<i>state the method of production (for sparkling and fortified wines), giving reasons when required</i>							

- For headings where entries are separated by a hyphen, you should select only **ONE** of the entries to describe the wine. Remember, you are restricted to the entries given; alternative words will not score marks. **Do not give a range** – you must be specific and choose one entry from the scale only.
- For headings where entries are separated by commas, the entries are points to consider. You may not need to comment on each entry for every wine and any descriptors are indicative only. However, you are encouraged to use the descriptors in the Wine-Lexicon for ‘Aroma characteristics’ and ‘Flavour characteristics’ and the terms suggested for ‘Tannin - nature’ and ‘Other observations’.
- The Wine SAT relies on **three- or five-point scales** to describe the structural components of a wine. These allow you to quantify the component on a scale ranging from low (or pale, light, dry, short) through medium to high (or deep, full, luscious, pronounced, long).
- ‘Medium’ is divided into three equal parts to encourage you to be as precise as possible when using these scales. For example, medium(+) can be thought of as ‘towards the upper end of the medium band but not sufficient for high’. Remember, try not to overuse the medium band. Wines in the Diploma examinations will often have high and/or low levels of certain components. Be confident to use the ends of the scales; they should not be reserved solely for wines that are at the extremes.

## The Wine-Lexicon

The Wine-Lexicon appears on the reverse side of the laminated Wine SAT card and contains a list of suggested descriptors for the aroma and flavour compounds you may identify in a wine. It is not exhaustive but is intended to help you compose your tasting notes by giving examples of appropriate vocabulary. You do not need to learn these terms by heart but the more you practise describing wines with the Wine-Lexicon terms, the quicker these will come to mind in the tasting examinations.

### WSET Level 4 Wine-Lexicon: supporting the WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Wine®

#### DESCRIBING AROMA AND FLAVOUR

*Think in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary*

##### Primary Aromas and Flavours

*The aromas and flavours of the grape and alcoholic fermentation*

Key questions	Clusters	Descriptors
Are the aromas and flavours delicate or intense?	Floral	acacia, honeysuckle, chamomile, elderflower, geranium, blossom, rose, violet
simple or complex?	Green fruit	apple, gooseberry, pear, pear drop, quince, grape
generic or well-defined?	Citrus fruit	grapefruit, lemon, lime, orange peel, lemon peel
fresh or cooked?	Stone fruit	peach, apricot, nectarine
under-ripe or ripe or overripe?	Tropical fruit	banana, lychee, mango, melon, passion fruit, pineapple
	Red fruit	redcurrant, cranberry, raspberry, strawberry, red cherry, red plum
	Black fruit	blackcurrant, blackberry, bramble, blueberry, black cherry, black plum
	Dried fruit	fig, prune, raisin, sultana, kirsch, jamminess, baked/stewed fruits, preserved fruits
	Herbaceous	green bell pepper ( <i>capsicum</i> ), grass, tomato leaf, asparagus, blackcurrant leaf
	Herbal	eucalyptus, mint, medicinal, lavender, fennel, dill
	Pungent spice	black/white pepper, liquorice, juniper, ginger
	Other	flint, wet stones, wet wool, rubber

##### Secondary Aromas and Flavours

*The aromas and flavours of post-fermentation winemaking*

Key questions	Clusters	Descriptors
Are the aromas and flavours from yeast, MLF, and/or oak?	Yeast (lees, autolysis, flor)	biscuit, bread, toast, pastry, brioche, bread dough, cheese, yoghurt
	MLF	butter, cheese, cream, yoghurt
	Oak	vanilla, cloves, nutmeg, coconut, butterscotch, toast, cedar, charred wood, smoke, chocolate, coffee, resinous

##### Tertiary Aromas and Flavours

*The aromas and flavours of maturation*

Key questions	Clusters	Descriptors
Do the aromas and flavours show deliberate oxidation, fruit development and/or bottle age?	Deliberate oxidation	almond, marzipan, coconut, hazelnut, walnut, chocolate, coffee, toffee, caramel
	Fruit development (white)	dried apricot, marmalade, dried apple, dried banana, etc.
	Fruit development (red)	fig, prune, tar, dried blackberry, dried cranberry, etc. cooked blackberry, cooked red plum, etc.
	Bottle age (white)	petrol, kerosene, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, toast, nutty, cereal, mushroom, hay, honey
	Bottle age (red)	leather, forest floor, earth, mushroom, game, cedar, tobacco, vegetal, wet leaves, savoury, meaty, farmyard

As you can see, the Wine-Lexicon contains a list of suggested descriptors for aroma and flavour characteristics and groups these into individual clusters under three headings or ‘types’:

1. **Primary aromas and flavours** are those associated with the grape and the alcoholic fermentation. They are the aromas and flavours that originate in compounds found in the grapes such as fruity, floral and herbaceous aromas and flavours and fermentation aromas and flavours, e.g. the pear drop aromas found in some inexpensive cold-fermented whites or the banana and kirsch aromas generated by carbonic maceration in red wines.
2. **Secondary aromas and flavours** are those associated with post-fermentation winemaking. The most obvious of these are aromas and flavours extracted from oak such as vanilla and toast. Secondary characteristics also include creamy, buttery flavours from malolactic fermentation or the yeasty and biscuity aromas and flavours that can develop in sparkling wines as a result of lees contact.
3. **Tertiary aromas and flavours** are those associated with maturation. These characteristics have their origin in ageing processes. The ageing process could be oxidative (caused by the action of oxygen), for example, due to a long period in oak. This can add tertiary aromas such as coffee, toffee, caramel and chocolate. Alternatively, the ageing process could be protected from the action of oxygen, for example due to a long period in bottle. This can add tertiary aromas and flavours such as petrol, toast, honey and mushroom.

#### **How to assess aroma and flavour characteristics using the Wine-Lexicon**

The starting point when smelling or tasting a wine should be to think in general terms about the aroma or flavour clusters that it displays, for example, ‘Citrus fruit’, ‘Black fruit’, ‘Herbaceous’, ‘Oak’, etc. Having done this, the next step is to identify specific descriptors for each cluster that you think is present, e.g. ‘lemon’, ‘blackberry’, ‘tomato leaf’, ‘vanilla’, etc. These descriptors should form the basis of your note for aroma and flavour characteristics. There are three important points to note:

1. **Use valid descriptors from as many types** (e.g. primary, secondary and/or tertiary) **and clusters** (e.g. ‘Stone fruit’, ‘MLF’, ‘Bottle age (white)’, etc.) **as you feel apply to the wine**.

The examiners will have allocated the marks available for aroma and flavour characteristics across all relevant types and clusters. This means, for example, that simply writing five valid descriptors from one type or cluster will be unlikely to get you the full five marks available for aroma characteristics (unless the wine is a very simple example of its style; see the *Aroma characteristics* section in Chapter 3).

Remember, clusters and their descriptors are grouped into primary, secondary and tertiary types on the Wine-Lexicon to encourage you to think about how different aromas and flavours coincide with different stages of a wine’s development. In some cases, flexibility will be required. For example, you may decide that a youthful wine with mainly primary aromas and flavours also shows a ‘tar’ or ‘kerosene’ character more commonly associated with the tertiary type. If this is the case, you should write down the descriptor you feel applies regardless; this characteristic could be the product of the grape variety used, its origin or a particular winemaking technique rather than an indicator of maturation. If the descriptor is valid, it will be credited by the examiner.

It can help to ask yourself a series of questions to ensure you do not overlook important characteristics. If a wine displays simple primary fruit, then a short list of fruit or descriptors from one or two clusters may be sufficient. Consider whether the fruit character is ‘fresh’ (suggesting early harvesting or cool ripening conditions) or ‘jammy’ or ‘cooked’ (suggesting later harvesting or hotter ripening conditions). Again, if you feel any of these additional words apply to wines in the examinations, write them down. These observations can be particularly useful when thinking about grape variety or region of origin in the Conclusions section of your answer.

2. **Use the Wine-Lexicon vocabulary.** The examiners compile the marking keys for the examination wines with reference to the Wine-Lexicon. This means that the Wine-Lexicon should be your primary source of descriptors for aroma and flavour characteristics in the examinations. The Wine-Lexicon is not, however, exhaustive. You may use additional words to describe the aroma and flavour of wines in the examinations, provided the words you use will be understood by the examiner and are considered valid for the wine in question.
3. **Give specific descriptors, not clusters.** In the tasting examinations, marks are awarded for specific descriptors, not clusters. This means that for a wine with stone fruit characteristics you would have to use terms such as 'peach', 'apricot' or 'nectarine'. Just writing 'stone fruit' in isolation would not gain any marks.

Some candidates find it helpful to introduce specific descriptors with the applicable cluster. This can help focus the mind when it comes to selecting appropriate descriptors. For example, a good description for a Cabernet Sauvignon with black fruit and oak aromas might be: '*Medium (+) intensity of ripe black fruit (blackcurrant, black cherry, black plum) and oak aromas (vanilla, toast)*'. You could gain the 5 marks available just by giving the descriptors (e.g. 'blackcurrant', 'black cherry', etc.), but introducing them with the name of the applicable cluster (e.g. 'black fruit') may help you select the most suitable words.

### 3 Describing Wines using the Wine SAT

In this Chapter we will explain how to describe a wine's Appearance, Nose and Palate using the Wine SAT. Each section also contains important information about how marks are allocated and awarded in the examinations. You should read this and the following chapters with a copy of the Wine SAT and Wine-Lexicon to hand.

#### Appearance (2 marks)

The Appearance section of the Wine SAT consists of four headings or lines: 'Clarity', 'Intensity', 'Colour' and 'Other observations'.

##### CLARITY (0 marks)

*Is the wine clear or hazy (faulty)?*

The vast majority of wines can be described as '**clear**'. Haze is caused by particles suspended in the wine. If a wine has an unusually high amount of suspended particles then it can be described as '**hazy**'.

Excessive haze or dullness can indicate that the wine may be faulty, for example as a result of microbiological activity. The nature of the fault can normally only be determined by assessing both the nose and palate.

Wines in the Diploma examinations will always present as clear so this line of the Wine SAT is not assessed.

##### INTENSITY (1 mark)

*Is the wine pale, medium or deep in colour intensity?*

Intensity is how much colour the wine has. Intensity can be assessed by holding the glass at a 45° angle and looking through the liquid from above to see how far the colour extends from the core (at the deepest part of the bowl) to the rim (where there is the shallowest depth of wine).

All white wines appear colourless right at the rim when the glass is held at a 45° angle. A white wine that has a broad watery rim should be described as '**pale**', whereas if the pigment reaches almost to the rim it should be described as '**deep**'.

For red wines tilt the glass and look at the rim; if the wine is lightly pigmented from the rim to core it can be described as '**pale**'. In this instance, when looking down through an upright glass, it should be easy to clearly see the stem of the glass. If the wine is intensely pigmented right up to the rim, it should be described as '**deep**', and looking down through the wine in the bowl, it should be impossible to see the stem.

Sparkling, sweet and fortified wines should be assessed using the same scale. An Amontillado Sherry is likely to be '**deep**' in colour, even though an older Oloroso, a PX or a Rutherglen Muscat would show as even deeper.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **colour intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*pale-medium*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### COLOUR (1 mark)

*If a white wine, is it lemon-green, lemon, gold, amber or brown in colour?*

*If a rosé wine, is it pink, salmon, orange or onion skin in colour?*

*If a red wine, is it purple, ruby, garnet, tawny or brown in colour?*

Colour is the balance of levels of red, blue, yellow, green or brown found in a wine, and is independent of the level of intensity.

The composition of a wine at the rim is the same as the composition at the core, so the colour itself does not change when looking through different parts of the wine in a tilted glass. However, because the depth of liquid changes, the intensity of the colour changes. White and most rosé wines appear very pale, almost colourless at the rim, so the colour is best judged where there is sufficient depth of liquid for the colour to be easily assessed: the core. By contrast, many red wines are so deeply pigmented that they can appear opaque at the core, so their colour is most accurately assessed near the rim.

When assessing colour, white wines can be placed on a scale that runs from 'lemon-green' to 'brown'. The most common colour for white wines is '**lemon**'. If there is a noticeable greenness to the colour, the wine is '**lemon-green**'. If there is a hint of orange or brown, the wine is '**gold**'. Wines with a very noticeable level of browning could be described as '**amber**' or '**brown**', but these will generally be wines that are very old, or wines that are deliberately oxidised.

Red wines can be placed on a scale that runs from 'purple' through to 'brown'. The most common colour for red wine is '**ruby**'. Wines with a noticeable blue or purple colour are described as '**purple**'. If there is a noticeable orange or brown colour but the wine is still more red than brown, it is described as '**garnet**'. If the wine is more brown than red, it may be described as '**tawny**'. '**Brown**' should be used for wines where no redness in the colour remains. Tawny and brown are usually seen only in very old wines, or wines that are deliberately oxidised.

A similar scale exists for rosé wines, which can be considered as pale red wines, but by convention have their own set of appearance descriptions. '**Pink**' describes wines that have a very pure pink colour. They may display a hint of purple. If a pink-coloured wine shows a hint of orange then it can be described as '**salmon**'. '**Orange**' can be used to describe a rosé in which orange is the dominant colour. '**Onion skin**' is a distinctly brownish pink.

Note that although certain colours are more often found at certain levels of intensity ('brown', in a white wine, is usually 'deep', whereas 'lemon-green' is rarely 'deep'), it is possible to encounter all permutations of colour and intensity. Thus, '**deep ruby**' differs from '**medium garnet**' both in the intensity of colour, and where it lies on the 'purple' to 'brown' spectrum.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **colour intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*pale-medium*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.  
This means that if you think a wine sits on the border of two colours (e.g. 'ruby' and 'garnet'), you must select one of them. If the examiner considers that both colours are valid descriptions, then the available mark will be awarded for either 'ruby' or 'garnet', but not both together.
- Do not spend too much time considering the wine's appearance. Many more marks are available for describing other aspects of the wine so make a quick assessment and move on.

### OTHER OBSERVATIONS (0 marks)

*Does the wine have legs/tears, a deposit, pétillance or bubbles?*

Outside of the examination room there are other observations that can be made about the appearance of a wine. These are rarely conclusive so while this heading appears on the Wine SAT, no marks are available for other observations in the examinations.

- When served in a suitable glass, all wines show legs or tears (streams of liquid adhering to the side of the glass after the wine has been swirled). Wines that contain sugar or high alcohol levels are more viscous and have thicker, more persistent tears. Some red wines are so intensely coloured that the tears are visibly pigmented.
- Some wines may have a deposit which can indicate that the wine is unfined and/or unfiltered.
- Some still wines show a slight carbon dioxide petillance or bubbles. This can be evidence of a fault (such as refermentation or malolactic fermentation in the bottle). However, some light-bodied, unoaked white wines are handled very carefully in order to retain some of the dissolved carbon dioxide produced during the fermentation. This can add desirable freshness and texture.
- Bubbles are fundamentally important to sparkling wines. There are a number of factors, in particular the cleanliness of the wine glass, that can affect how the bubbles appear in a glass and therefore their appearance cannot reliably indicate anything about the quality of a wine.

## Nose (6 marks)

The Nose section of the Wine SAT consists of three headings: ‘Condition’, ‘Intensity’ and ‘Aroma characteristics’.

### CONDITION (0 marks)

*Is the wine clean or unclean (faulty?)*

Assessing faults is a skill that is not assessed in the Diploma examinations: wines will always present as ‘clean’ as they will have been checked by the examiners before being decanted into neutral bottles.

Nevertheless, it is important that you are aware of common wine faults. These are listed for reference in Appendix 1: *Common Wine Faults*.

### INTENSITY (1 mark)

*Is the wine light, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or pronounced in aroma intensity?*

Aroma intensity is a description of how marked a wine’s aromas are. As a general rule, if when you place your nose above the glass aromas are immediately apparent then they are ‘pronounced’. If you find the aromas to be faint and hard to detect, the intensity is probably ‘light’. Otherwise, the aroma intensity will fall into the ‘medium’ category (medium(-), medium or medium(+)).

### AROMA CHARACTERISTICS (5 marks)

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine’s **aroma intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘medium(+) to pronounced’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

*What aroma characteristics does the wine have?*

Describing a wine’s aroma can be a challenging task. When you initially smell a wine it can be difficult to identify the individual aromas that produce the overall aroma signature of a wine, especially if the wine is complex. When you swirl the wine in the glass and smell it for the first time, it can help to make a note of first impressions in terms of clusters on the Wine-Lexicon, e.g. ‘red fruit’, ‘black fruit’ or ‘oak’. You should think broadly about what types/clusters apply. Then, when you smell the wine again, try to pinpoint the specific aromas using descriptors, e.g. ‘strawberry’, ‘blackcurrant’ or ‘vanilla’.

Detailed guidance on how to approach this line of the Wine SAT in the examinations is given in *How to assess aroma and flavour characteristics using the Wine-Lexicon* in Chapter 2.

- The 5 marks available for **aroma characteristics** will be allocated to specific clusters from any or all of the three aroma types: primary, secondary and tertiary. This is to ensure that those candidates who identify all of the key components of a wine's aroma profile are rewarded above those who miss something out. It is important to keep an open mind; describe the wine as it appears to you rather than how you think it might have appeared to the examiners. Typically one valid descriptor will get one mark, depending on how the marks have been allocated between clusters. To illustrate this, let us consider the following examples:

**(i) Wines with primary aromas only.** If the wine only has primary aromas, then all 5 marks will be allocated to this type. You should consider the nature of the aromas – are they simple or complex?

If the wine is simple it may be that only one aroma cluster applies. In this case, you should acknowledge the wine's simplicity in your description, e.g. '*this wine has simple green fruit (pear, apple, quince, gooseberry)*'. Assuming the four primary descriptors given are valid for the wine in question, this answer would score 5 marks, with one mark allocated for 'simple'.

In a more complex primary wine there is likely to be more than one applicable aroma cluster. For example, a high-quality Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc would typically show tropical fruit and herbaceous characters. The marking key would reflect this with the 5 marks available split between these two clusters:

- Up to 3 marks for tropical fruit aromas (e.g. lychee, melon, passion fruit); and
- Up to 3 marks for herbaceous aromas (e.g. green bell pepper, tomato leaf, asparagus, blackcurrant leaf).

You could accurately describe the wine by giving three valid descriptors for tropical fruit and two for herbaceousness or three valid descriptors for herbaceousness and two for fruit. Either combination would score full marks.

**(ii) Wines with primary and secondary aromas.** Where a wine shows primary and secondary aromas, the 5 marks will be split between the most obvious primary and secondary aroma clusters. For example, the marking key for a Cabernet Sauvignon with subtle oak influence might read as follows:

- Up to 4 marks for black fruit aromas (e.g. blackcurrant, blackberry, bramble, black plum, etc.); and
- Up to 2 marks for oak aromas (e.g. toast, cedar, smoke).

Again, you could score full marks in one of two ways here, either by giving three valid descriptors for black fruit and two for oak or by giving four for black fruit and one for oak. If the oak influence were more pronounced, the mark allocation would be split more evenly.

**(iii) Wines with primary, secondary and tertiary aromas.** Where a wine shows primary, secondary and tertiary characteristics the 5 marks will be split between clusters from all three types. For example, the marking key for a red Rioja Reserva might read as follows:

- Up to 2 marks for red fruit/citrus aromas (e.g. redcurrant, red cherry, orange peel);
- Up to 2 marks for oak aromas (e.g. vanilla, toast, coconut); and
- Up to 2 marks for bottle age (red) (e.g. leather, earth, mushroom, game).

You could score full marks here in a number of ways. You could, for example, give two valid descriptors for red fruit/citrus, two for oak and one for bottle age or one valid descriptor for red fruit, two for oak and two for bottle age.

## Palate (10 or 12 marks)

The Palate section consists of ten headings. ‘Sweetness’, ‘Acidity’, ‘Alcohol’, ‘Body’, ‘Flavour intensity’, ‘Flavour characteristics’ and ‘Finish’ apply to all wines in the examination. ‘Tannin - level’ and ‘Tannin - nature’ apply only to red wines. ‘Other observations’ may apply, depending on the wine in question.

In the tasting examinations the total number of marks available for your description of a wine’s palate will be 10 or 12 marks, depending on its colour. With so many marks available here, it is important to be methodical and comment on every aspect of the wine as appropriate. In the pressure of the exam situation, and without the Wine SAT for reference, it is easy to forget headings and fail to comment on e.g. a wine’s body or alcohol level. Many candidates overcome this by writing down memory aids to help them remember all of the headings to comment on before they start tasting.

### Capping of marks

Before we consider each heading of the Palate section in turn, a general point about how this part of your tasting note will be marked in the examinations. In some cases, a structural component of a particular wine may be considered so essential to its character that getting it wrong carries an additional penalty. For example, the examiners might conclude that a particular Rutherglen Muscat is so ‘luscious’ that a failure to describe it as at least ‘sweet’ would constitute a fundamental error. In such a case, the examiners may, at their discretion, reduce the total number of marks available for Palate by one. This means that a candidate who described this particular Rutherglen Muscat as ‘off-dry’ would not only miss the mark available for sweetness but incur an additional one-mark penalty. Conversely, a candidate who described a luscious wine as ‘sweet’ would likely miss out on the mark available for sweetness but not incur a penalty. This is because mistaking a luscious wine for sweet is, in the scheme of blind tasting, not as serious an error as mistaking it for off-dry.

### SWEETNESS (1 mark)

*Is the wine dry, off-dry, medium-dry, medium-sweet, sweet or luscious?*

Sweetness is mainly the taste of sugar present in the wine, though alcohol and glycerol can add a perception of sweetness too. Each entry on the basic three-point scale for sweetness (dry — medium — sweet) is subdivided into two. Almost every wine has some residual sugar and this scale has been subdivided in this way to reflect the range of sweetness that can be found within sweet styles of wine.

A ‘dry’ wine either has no residual sugar or has levels that are so low they cannot be detected on the palate. If the wine has a very small amount of detectable sugar, the wine is described as ‘**off-dry**’. Many, but not all, Alsace Gewurztraminers, Brut Champagnes, and inexpensive red, white and rosé wines are ‘off-dry’.

‘**Medium-dry**’ to ‘**medium-sweet**’ covers wines with a distinct presence of sugar, but which are generally not sweet enough to partner desserts. ‘Medium-dry’ covers wines that are closer to dry than sweet and includes wines such as Vouvray demi-secs. ‘Medium-sweet’ covers wines that are closer to sweet and includes many White Zinfandels and *Moelleux* Vouvrys.

‘**Sweet**’ covers wines where the presence of sugar has become the prominent feature of the wine. This broad category covers most classic sweet wines such as Sauternes and Port. There are some very sweet wines which can be described as ‘**luscious**’. Here the level of sugar is such that the wines are notably more viscous and the wine leaves the mouth and lips with a sticky sweet sensation after swallowing/spitting. Examples include Rutherglen Muscats, PX Sherries and some *Trockenbeerenauslesen*.

Labelling terms for sweetness are legally controlled in the EU and the categories for still and sparkling wines are different. The tasting examinations are focussed on your ability to perceive sweetness in broad terms so you should not concern yourself with the legal definitions or give an estimate of sugar content in g/L. For example a demi-sec Champagne, which must have a residual sugar level in the range of 32-50 g/L, should be described as either ‘medium-sweet’ or ‘sweet’ depending on how it appears to you on the palate.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **sweetness**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*off-dry to medium-dry*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### ACIDITY (1 mark)

*Does the wine have low, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or high acidity?*

For most people acids are detected most strongly at the sides of the tongue, where they cause a sharp, tingling sensation. They also cause your mouth to water, as it tries to restore its natural acid balance. The more your mouth waters, and the longer it waters, the higher the level of acid in the wine. Note that if you are dehydrated when tasting, your mouth will water less. Wines described as having '**low acidity**' will feel broad, soft or even flabby on the palate. Conversely, wines with '**high acidity**' will be notably crisp, zesty and mouth-watering.

Remember, high levels of sweetness can lessen your perception of acidity. This means that the acidity in a sweet wine will appear less obvious than the acidity in a dry wine. However, whatever the level of sugar, the mouth-watering effect caused by the acidity remains and this is always a reliable guide when it comes to judging the level of acidity.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **acidity**. Alternative words are not acceptable for this heading and if you write down more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*medium(-) to medium*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### TANNIN (2 marks, red wines only)

*If a red wine, does it have low, medium(-), medium , medium(+) or high tannins?*

*What is the nature of the tannin?*

Tannins bind to proteins in your saliva, causing a drying sensation on the palate. They contribute to the texture or feel of a wine in the mouth and can also have a bitter taste. The astringent, drying sensation produced by tannin can be felt most clearly on the gums above your front teeth, so make sure some of the wine you are tasting reaches this part of your mouth.

Tannin levels can be easy to misread because not all tannins have the same effect. Unripe tannins tend to be more astringent, whereas ripe tannins contribute more to textural richness. It takes experience to be able to conclude that a basic-quality Cabernet Sauvignon made from just-ripe grapes has a medium level of tannins, despite them being very astringent and harsh, whereas a high-quality Shiraz from a hot region may have very high levels of velvet-textured ripe tannins but not be astringent.

Descriptions of tannin nature tend to fall into one of two types. You could describe the ripeness of the tannin: under-ripe tannins often taste bitter, green or stalky whereas ripe tannins taste rich and rounded, adding to the wine's body and mouthfeel. Alternatively you could describe the grain or texture of the tannins. Are they rough or are they smooth? Generally, ripe tannins are fine-textured whereas unripe tannins feel rougher.

- Remember, there are no marks available for **tannin** for white or rosé wines in the examinations. It is possible for these wines to have very low levels of tannin, e.g. some white wines made with skin contact can have a waxy bitterness, some oaky whites can be slightly astringent due to the high impact of the oak and some rosés can have been kept on the skins long enough for tannins to be detectable. In these scenarios, you could mention the tannin as an ‘Other observation’ or use it in the assessment of quality section of your answer when discussing the wine’s overall component balance.
- For red wines you must comment correctly on both the level and the nature of tannin for the two marks available:
  - For the **level of tannin** you must select one and only one entry from the scale. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘medium(+) to high’) you will not gain the available mark even if one of these entries is correct.
  - For the **nature of the tannin**, you may use one or more of the words listed on the Wine SAT (e.g. ‘ripe’, ‘soft’, ‘green’, ‘coarse’, etc., as applicable) or use other words as appropriate. Remember, the examiner has to be able to understand what you mean before they can consider whether a descriptor you have given is valid and award you the mark. With this in mind, care should be taken not to write down multiple contradictory descriptors.

### ALCOHOL (1 mark)

*Does the wine have low, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or high alcohol?*

Alcohol is detected mainly through the sense of touch. Although alcohol is less dense than water, it is more viscous, and higher alcohol tends to make a wine seem heavier in the mouth. Low levels of alcohol can make a wine seem watery, although other structural elements such as grape extract and sweetness can compensate for this.

At high levels, alcohol can trigger pain receptors, giving a hot, burning sensation, especially after spitting or swallowing. This burning sensation can be confused with the tingling sensation caused by acidity.

Therefore, if you are trying to distinguish the two, consider whether the wine is also mouth-watering (and therefore high in acidity) or feels thick and viscous (and high in alcohol). Remember that it may be high in both.

Alcohol levels in wines are generally rising, but currently a wine with medium (+/-) alcohol would have a level of about 11% - 13.9% abv. Within this range, 11%-11.9% abv would be ‘**medium(-)**’, 12% - 12.9% abv would be ‘**medium**’ and 13% - 13.9% abv would be ‘**medium(+)**’. Anything below 11% abv would be considered ‘**low**’, and anything at 14% abv or above would be considered ‘**high**’.

For fortified wines where alcohol levels start at 15% abv, the medium level would be 17-19% abv.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine’s **alcohol**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘medium(-) to medium’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### BODY (1 mark)

*Is the wine light, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or full in body?*

Body is the perception of a wine’s weight on the palate, its fullness. It is not a single component, but an overall impression created by all the structural components of the wine working together. For most wines, alcohol is the main factor contributing to body. Sugar and grape extract add to body, whereas high acidity makes a wine feel lighter in body. Generally high levels of tannin make a wine feel fuller-bodied, but low levels of astringent tannin can make it seem harsher, thinner and therefore lighter in body.

For a wine that is high in alcohol, with ripe tannins, and intense flavours (i.e. full-bodied), or a wine that is low in alcohol, high in acid and delicately flavoured (i.e. light-bodied), assessing the level of body is straightforward. For wines that are sweet, but high in acidity and low in alcohol (for example), it can be harder to agree on the level of body, and the decision will be based on which of these factors contributes the most to the texture of the wine.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **body**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*medium(-) to medium*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### **FLAVOUR INTENSITY (1 mark)**

*Is the wine light, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or pronounced in flavour intensity?*

Flavour intensity is an impression of how flavoursome the wine is on the palate. Flavour intensity and flavour characteristics are detected through the sense of smell. Once the wine is in your mouth, your body heat raises the wine's temperature and causes aromatic molecules to rise up the back of your nose to the receptor that handles your sense of smell. Your brain integrates these impressions with the taste and touch impressions provided by your mouth.

In some cases the warming of the wine on your tongue can release larger quantities of some aromas, and bring them to your attention when you were unable to detect them on the nose.

The next two headings on the Wine SAT – 'Flavour characteristics' and 'Other observations' – are linked for examination purposes. There is a maximum of 4 marks available for 'Flavour characteristics' but of those 4 marks the examiners may allocate one to 'Other observations', if appropriate for the wine in question.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a wine's **flavour intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*medium(-) to medium*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### **FLAVOUR CHARACTERISTICS (4 marks)**

*What flavour characteristics does the wine have?*

Generally, a wine's flavour profile will match its aroma profile, so you will be using the same or similar descriptors for 'Flavour characteristics' as for 'Aroma characteristics'.

You should refer to *How to assess aroma and flavour characteristics using the Wine-Lexicon* in the Chapter 2 for further guidance on how to describe the flavour profile of a wine.

### **OTHER OBSERVATIONS (up to 1 mark, within the 4 mark total available for 'Flavour characteristics')**

*Does the wine have a particularly steely, oily, creamy or mouthcoating texture?  
If a still wine, is it pétillant?*

There are two main aspects of a wine's palate that you may wish to comment on under this heading: texture and, in the case of still wines, pétillance. In the tasting examinations, 1 mark may be allocated to one of these aspects if the examiners consider it a prominent feature of the wine. Other observations in addition to these will also be considered by examiners here.

**Texture** is closely related to body and can best be described as a wine's mouthfeel, an overall sensation produced by the interplay of a wine's viscosity, acidity and astringency (tannin). Just as higher acid/less

ripe wines, tend to be lighter in body, so they tend to be more crisp in texture. Richer, riper, fuller-bodied styles with lower acidity tend to be more dense on the palate, with a softer, creamier texture. If you feel the texture of a wine is particularly noteworthy, you should give a descriptor here. Examples of words you could use are listed on the SAT, but – as with aroma and flavour descriptors – you are free to use alternative words if you wish.

In sparkling wines, mousse (the feel of the wine's bubbles) is often an important constituent of texture. Some wines have a very frothy, creamy mousse which fades quickly on the palate; others – particularly those which have undergone maturation – have a fine-beaded, persistent mousse which lingers on the finish. If you taste a wine in the Unit 5 examination and feel that the mousse makes a particular contribution to the overall mouthfeel or texture, you should give an appropriate descriptor of your choice. Mousse will also be a relevant consideration when assessing quality for sparkling wines.

**Pétillance** refers to dissolved carbon dioxide which gives still wines a discernible spritz on the palate. It is commonly found in young white wines where carbon dioxide is either retained from the fermentation or topped up to minimise sulfur usage. Not all still wines will show this characteristic but where it is present it may add desirable freshness and texture. Where a mark has been allocated for this observation it is sufficient to write the word 'pétillance'.

- There is a total of 4 marks available for '**Flavour characteristics**' and '**Other observations**' combined. This means that where the examiners have allocated a mark to texture or pétillance, for example, you can achieve full marks by giving:
  - ◊ four valid descriptors for 'Flavour characteristics' and no observation about texture or pétillance; or
  - ◊ three valid descriptors for 'Flavour characteristics' and one correct observation about texture or pétillance.
- Remember, the Wine-Lexicon is there to help you put what you are tasting into words. As with aroma characteristics, you should think in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary types to write a comprehensive description of the wine's flavour characteristics.
- In the examinations you must use specific descriptors to describe a wine's flavour characteristics. No marks are available for cluster headings.

### FINISH (1 mark)

*Does the wine have a short, medium(-), medium, medium(+) or long finish?*

The finish is the collection of sensations on the palate after you have swallowed or spat the wine out. How long the sensations linger is an important indicator of quality, but when assessing the length of the finish you should only consider the persistence of the positive sensations. A wine with a very long lingering bitterness could be described as having a bitter aftertaste, but if the fruit impressions disappear quickly, the finish should be described as short.

Generally, for a basic quality wine, the pleasant flavours will often disappear within a few seconds, and the finish is '**short**'. For a very fine wine the flavours can last for a minute or more, and the finish is described as '**long**'.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe the length of a wine's **finish**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examinations and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*medium(+)* – *long*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

# Evaluating Wines using the Wine SAT 4

In this Chapter we will explain how to evaluate a wine using the Conclusions section of the Wine SAT.

In the tasting examinations the total number of marks that are allocated for Conclusions will depend on the Unit and the number of marks that have been allocated to Palate. The marks available for Conclusions may or may not be split evenly between the three wines in a flight, and a proportion of the marks may be allocated to identifying a common link for the three wines as a stand-alone question.

In the Conclusions section of your answer you may be asked to do any of the following, giving reasons when required (the mark allocation for these subsections may vary between wines but will always be stated on the examination paper):

- assess the **quality of the wine**;
- assess the wine's **readiness for drinking and potential for ageing**;
- identify the wine's **country and/or region of origin**;
- identify the wine's **grape variety/(ies)**;
- identify the wine's **style within its category** (for sparkling or fortified wines only); and/or
- identify the wine's **method of production** (for sparkling or fortified wines only).

You will **not** be asked to identify the price category of a wine or estimate its age in years.

## Quality

Wine professionals use many different scales to assess quality, with numerical scores particularly common. At the WSET we use a qualitative (descriptive) scale ranging from 'poor' to 'outstanding'. 'Faulty' is included on the assessment of quality scale for completeness but you will never be presented with a faulty wine in an examination.

An assessment of quality is your overall impression of where the wine sits relative to others you have tasted based on the sum of its structural components (acidity, tannin, alcohol, etc.) and its flavour and aroma characteristics. There are many criteria for judging wine quality and the relative importance of those criteria can depend on personal preferences. One of the challenges of tasting wine as a professional is being able to recognise and put aside these personal preferences to reach a considered view based on the evidence.

## QUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

The Wine SAT lists some considerations when assessing quality e.g. balance/integration, intensity, finish, complexity, mousse, varietal definition, potential for ageing. Not all of these considerations will be relevant for every wine, nor is this list intended to be exhaustive. It can, however, help you think about how to use some of the observations you have made about the sample under Nose and Palate to form a professional judgement as to a given wine's quality level.

The examinations will test how well you apply these criteria to a wine, with marks available for correct observations, even if you place the wine in the wrong quality category.

### Balance/integration

A wine's overall balance and/or integration is perhaps the most reliable indicator of quality and one which underpins other quality criteria. In high-quality wines an impression of sweetness on the palate (in the form of fruit character and/or residual sugar) is balanced by an impression of sourness (in the form of acidity or tannic astringency). With too little fruit character or residual sugar, a wine will seem unbalanced, austere and thin. With too little acid or tannin a wine will seem flabby or unstructured.

It can help to ask yourself whether a particular feature of the wine stands out on the palate. Is it a positive characteristic, enhancing your overall impression of the wine? Perhaps the acidity is marked but this complements the depth of fruit, freshening the palate. Alternatively, it could be a negative attribute - perhaps the alcohol dominates, resulting in a hot, burning finish. Both of these are examples of the kind of observations you should include in your assessment of quality, justifying why you think a wine belongs to a particular quality category.

When discussing how well balanced a wine is in the examinations you **must** do so with reference to its structural components. It is not sufficient to say a wine is simply 'balanced' or 'integrated'; you have to explain how the balance or integration is achieved (i.e. what is balanced/integrated with what) and how this contributes to overall quality level.

Whereas in the first part of the SAT you have to describe the structural components of a wine using the entries for the relevant scale (e.g. 'high' acidity), the Conclusions section is an opportunity to use additional words to demonstrate your understanding of the wine in front of you. These can be helpful when the level of the structural component is particularly high or low. For example, a wine's acidity could be crisp, tart or zesty, its alcohol warming or spirity, its texture fine and crisp or thick and viscous. Feel free to use these or alternative words to enhance your assessment of quality; they can help you explain more vividly how the structural components of a wine fit together and lend credibility to your answer. Your evaluation should not simply repeat your description.

In addition to the balance of fruit/sweetness vs. acidity, alcohol and tannin, you should also think about how aromas and flavours and other factors such as texture interplay with these structural elements. If the wine has high levels of **oak** aromas or flavours, does this complement the wine's fruit character or does it mask it? If you feel that a sparkling wine's texture is noteworthy, is the **mousse** smooth and well-integrated or frothy and short-lived? Again, this is an opportunity to use descriptive words to communicate your understanding of the wine.

### Intensity and finish

Intensity is the wine's concentration or depth of aroma or flavour. The more concentrated and expressive a wine is on the nose and palate, the higher its quality level. A wine that has weak or dilute flavours is seldom high in quality but bear in mind that above a certain level concentration of a particular aroma or flavour can make a wine seem out of balance (see above).

Intensity is closely linked to finish; a wine with a pleasant, long finish is likely to have high levels of concentration. Conversely, a short or simple finish is an indicator that a wine lacks intensity. Finish or the length of a wine is an important factor in assessing quality. You will already have identified the nature of the wine's finish under Palate (e.g. 'medium(+) or 'long', etc.), so you should expand on this when assessing quality, describing what – if any – flavours persist in the mouth after you have spat the wine out. Again, consider balance – is the overall impression one of harmony or is the wine disjointed, with one element overly dominant on the finish?

### Complexity, varietal definition and typicity of style

Complexity is a desirable feature in a wine and one which can result from fruit character alone or from a combination of primary, secondary and tertiary aromas and flavours. Not all high-quality wines are complex; sometimes varietal definition is what makes a wine great, and oak or tertiary characteristics might detract from the high quality. As with 'balanced', only use the word 'complex' with context. It is not enough to say whether a wine is complex or not; you have to explain what provides the complexity. It may be obvious to you that the wine in front of you is complex, but you need to demonstrate to the examiners how you have come to this point of view. You must always refer to the evidence in the glass that supports your argument.

In some wines varietal definition – how clearly a wine expresses varietal character – will be an important consideration, particularly for wines made from aromatic grape varieties such as Riesling and Muscat. If a wine exhibits distinctive aromas and flavours associated with a particular grape variety, it is more likely to be a high-quality example of its type than one that does not.

A great wine will also show typicity of style, expressing some of the character of its origin. This may be the result of the grape varieties used and/or the location where they are grown. When the identity of the wine is unknown to you, it can be helpful to think about whether the aromas and flavours are generic or well-defined. The more focussed and precise these individual characteristics are, the higher the likely quality level. A loosely structured wine with diffuse aromas and flavours which are hard to pinpoint with specific descriptors is likely to be of inferior quality.

### Potential for ageing

Whether a wine has potential for ageing is relevant for some wines. If a wine has sufficient concentration, acidity (and tannin) to age successfully, this generally implies that it is of higher quality than other wines of its type which lack these attributes.

Having discussed some of the relevant factors to consider, let us now turn to how you should assess quality in the examinations.

### ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY

*Is the wine of poor, acceptable, good, very good or outstanding quality? Why?*

Where you are asked to assess quality you must select one of the applicable Wine SAT quality categories from the scale and give reasons. The number of marks available will vary significantly but will always be stated on the question paper. Of the number of marks indicated, 1 mark will typically be allocated to the correct quality category (e.g. 'good') and the remainder will be allocated to your explanation of why the wine belongs to that category. This means that the emphasis is on your ability to justify your choice of quality category.

#### Quality category

A '**good**' wine typically has well balanced fruit, sugar, acid and tannin. It is free of faults, and shows some complexity and concentration, as well as expressing something of its grape variety/(ies) or region of origin.

If a wine is out-of-balance, dilute in flavour or has a generic character that fails to express any particular grape variety or region, but is otherwise drinkable, then it is '**acceptable**'. If any minor faults or any dominant flavours of components make it unpleasant, then it is '**poor**'. If any faults make the wine unsuitable to drink, then it is simply '**faulty**'.

On the other hand a '**very good**' wine will show some elements of concentration, length, complexity or expressiveness that lift it out of being merely 'good'. An '**outstanding**' wine should be almost entirely free of criticism. It will be perfectly balanced, concentrated and very expressive with high levels of complexity or purity depending on the style.

#### Reasoning

You will always have to provide an argument to support your assessment of quality, using the quality considerations outlined above. Occasionally the marking key will accept more than one quality category, and you can gain good marks as long as you use correct observations about the wine to justify your choice.

How much detail is required will depend on the number of marks allocated, but you should always aim to explain why a wine fits the chosen quality category by reference to its positive and negative characteristics, i.e. how well it scores on the quality criteria. If a wine is '**outstanding**', you should be able to provide several distinct, positive reasons why the wine is in that top category. Conversely, if a wine is '**poor**' you should be able to provide several separate negative reasons why it is in such a low quality category. Where a wine is '**acceptable**', '**good**' or '**very good**', you should be able to give several positive reasons why it is better than the category below and one or two negative reasons why it is not good enough for the category above.

- Remember, focus on explaining **why a wine belongs to a particular quality category** using the quality considerations outlined above; this is where the majority of marks lie. Credit will be given for sound reasoning even if you reach the wrong conclusion.
- Be guided by the mark allocation on the question paper; the more marks are available for an assessment of quality the longer you should spend on your answer and the more detail you should include.
- Not all of the quality considerations listed above will be relevant for every wine. Try to select the most important observations from the first part of your tasting note and assess them using the quality considerations you consider most appropriate.
- Using descriptive words when discussing a wine's structural components, balance, and finish when assessing can make your answer more convincing, provided the meaning is clear to the examiners and it accurately represents what is in the glass in front of you.

## Readiness for Drinking and Potential for Ageing

The first thing to consider when assessing readiness for drinking is whether the wine is the kind of wine that benefits from ageing at all. This involves considering how developed the aroma and flavour characteristics are, together with the structural components of the wine such as acid and tannin. Quality considerations such as intensity/concentration and complexity may also be relevant.

### READINESS FOR DRINKING AND POTENTIAL FOR AGEING

*Is the wine too young, can drink now but has potential for ageing, drink now not suitable for ageing or further ageing or too old? Why?*

Where you are asked to assess readiness for drinking and potential for ageing you must select one of the applicable Wine SAT categories. Of the number of marks indicated, 1 mark will typically be allocated to the correct Wine SAT category (e.g. 'drink now not suitable for ageing or further ageing') and the remainder – if applicable - will be allocated to your explanation of why the wine fits that category.

### Reasoning

Unlike for an assessment of quality, you will not have to provide an argument to support your assessment of a wine's readiness for drinking and potential for ageing in every case. Where just 1 or 2 marks is allocated, you need only select the appropriate Wine SAT category. Where more than 2 marks are allocated, however, you will need to provide reasons for your choice. The Wine SAT lists some of the factors you should include in your answer: concentration, acidity, tannin and the development of aroma and flavour characteristics all play a part.

If a wine is mainly fruity (i.e. primary in character), with a light acid or tannin structure, then it is almost certainly in the '**drink now: not suitable for ageing or further ageing**' category. Such a wine may have a shelf life of a year or more, but the fact it will last does not mean that it will improve with age. If a wine tastes like it should have been fruity, with a light tannin or acid structure, but has lost its freshness, or the flavours that have developed through the passage of time are unpleasant and at a level high enough to spoil the wine, then it is '**too old**'.

If a wine has a very firm structure of acid or tannin, and a high level of flavour concentration, then it may benefit from ageing. As wines age their aromas and flavours tend to develop from fruity and floral (primary) towards more savoury, earthy and spicy characters (tertiary), and any tannins soften. The alcohol levels will not change, and the acid and sugar levels will change very little. With this in mind, you can make a tentative prediction of how the wine will develop from now on, and whether or not it will improve.

If you think that a wine is drinking pleasurable now but will improve positively in the next few years then you can place it in '**can drink now, but has potential for ageing**'. If you believe that the wine will be so much better in a few years' time that it would be a pity to drink it now, then you should classify it as '**too young**'. This does not mean the wine is undrinkable, but rather that there is significant scope for further improvement.

If a wine has already undergone ageing (evidenced by a predominance of tertiary characteristics), but is close to the end of its drinkable life in that any further changes are unlikely to be positive) then you should classify it as '**drink now: not suitable for ageing or further ageing**'. The same category would apply if the wine is in decline, i.e. the changes that have occurred are beginning to undermine its quality. If you think the wine has declined so far that the negative changes have come to dominate the wine then it is '**too old**'.

Note that where a wine is 'can drink now but has potential for ageing', you do **not** need to give a time frame for how long the wine will improve (although you may choose to for context). It will be sufficient to describe how the aromas and flavours will change over time and why, commenting on the structural components that will keep the wine in condition as it ages.

## The Wine in Context

The Wine in Context section contains four headings which relate to the identity of the wine: 'Country and/or region of origin', 'Grape variety(ies)', 'Style within the category' and 'Method of production'. You may be asked to comment on any combination of these in the examinations, either as a conclusion for each wine in the flight (for one or two marks) or as a stand-alone common link question at the end of a flight of three wines (where more marks will be available and you will be expected to justify your conclusion with reasons, referring to each of the wines in the flight).

Note that 'Style within the category' and 'Method of production' will only be examined for sparkling and fortified wines, i.e. in the Unit 5 and Unit 6 examinations. Note also that while this section provides guidance as to how Conclusions have been assessed in the past, the examiners may change the format or focus of examination questions relating to these headings at their discretion.

### Country and/or region of origin

There is often an element of luck involved when trying to identify a wine's country and/or region of origin. Even if you successfully identify, for example, an aromatic white as being from a premium-quality cool-climate old-world region, there will be several possibilities. For this reason, where origin takes the form of a common link question requiring reasoning, you will gain marks for logical reasoning even if you get the origin wrong.

When considering where a wine is from, it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the quality of the wine very good or outstanding - suggesting it probably comes from a premium European or premium New World region - or is the quality just acceptable or good, suggesting it may come from a less prestigious region?
- Does the wine seem to come from a hot region (riper primary aroma and flavours, fuller body, higher alcohol, lower acid, riper tannins), or a cool region (fresher fruit, lighter body, higher acid, and perhaps more astringent tannins)?
- Does the wine seem European or New World in style? For some varieties, such as Chardonnay, the differences can be small. For others, such as Pinot Noir, New World wines generally have more generous fruit and the structural elements (acidity and tannin) are less prominent. European examples tend to be more savoury in character, with more prominent acidity and tannins. Of course, this picture is confused by many New World producers successfully making savoury, structured wines, and some Old World producers making some lightly-structured, very fruity wines.

Where you have to select a county and/or region of origin for a flight of wines and give reasons, you should briefly discuss what characteristics the wines have in common and how they are consistent with the origin you have suggested. Levels of structural components (e.g. acidity and alcohol), particular aroma and flavour characteristics, evidence of production techniques (use of oak or oxidation for example), evidence of grape growing conditions (hot, cool or somewhere in between) might all be relevant here. You should also consider how the wines differ and how these characteristics make a particular wine in the flight typical – or not – of where it is from.

### **Grape variety/(ies)**

The first question to ask is whether the wine(s) show any prominent varietal character. For white wines, it can be helpful to group varieties into those that are intensely aromatic (for example Muscat, Viognier, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc), and those that are more neutral (for example Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Garganega, Trebbiano). Within these groups, further clues can be found in the nature of the aromas (are they fruity/floral or herbaceous?), the wine's sweetness and acidity level, and whether or not the wine shows oak. It can be helpful to group black varieties into thick-skinned grapes that give deeply coloured wines (for example Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Malbec, Carmenère) and thinner-skinned varieties that generally give paler-coloured wines (such as Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Grenache). Within these two groups, further clues can be found in the aromas (fruity, herbaceous, spicy or savoury), the levels of tannin, alcohol and acid, and the texture of the tannins.

Where you do have to give reasons for your choice of grape variety/(ies) for a flight of wines, you should – as with origin - discuss how any characteristics shared by the wines point to a common grape variety/(ies). Many of the considerations will be similar, e.g. structural components, evidence of production techniques and evidence of grape growing conditions. Again, it can be constructive to highlight any differences in the wines and what makes a particular wine in the flight typical of the grape variety you feel is represented.

### **Style within the Category**

You may be asked to identify a sparkling or fortified wine's style within its category, typically for 1 or 2 marks. You should aim to identify both the style and category of the wine in question.

For the purposes of the Unit 5 examination, 'Champagne' or 'Cava' are examples of categories and 'Vintage' or 'Non-vintage' styles within these categories. Note that you do **not** need to give the local labelling terms for wines of different sweetness levels (Brut, Demi-Sec, etc.) or varietal composition (e.g. Blanc de Blancs or Blanc de Noirs). A mark will already have been allocated to sweetness on the Palate and, if appropriate, to grape variety/(ies) separately.

For the purposes of the Unit 6 examination, 'Sherry', 'Port', 'Madeira' and 'Vin Doux Naturel' are examples of categories, each comprising different styles. For Sherry, these styles would include 'Fino', 'Amontillado', 'Oloroso' and 'Cream'; for Port, 'Ruby', 'Reserve Ruby', Tawny (with a statement of age as appropriate), 'LBV', 'Vintage', etc.; and for a VDN, 'Banyuls' or 'Maury', etc.

Note that for VDNs you do not need to use local labelling terminology or identify specific ACs associated with ageing requirements, e.g. Maury Hors d'Age AC or Banyuls Grand Cru AC. It would be sufficient to identify the wine as 'Maury' or 'Banyuls', as appropriate.

For Madeira the examiners would expect you to give the age or equivalent designation (e.g. '10 year-old' or 'Special Reserve'). Grape variety/(ies) would be asked for separately if required.

### **Method of Production**

You may be asked to identify a sparkling or fortified wine's method of production, typically for 1 or 2 marks. In some cases, this may be followed by a more directed question (e.g. 'what evidence in your tasting note supports this conclusion?') for further marks.

For sparkling wines, the key theme is likely to be whether the wine is traditional or tank-method. For a Prosecco, for example, you could note that the absence of bready/biscuit notes discounts autolysis,

indicating a tank method wine.

For fortified wines, the key theme is likely to be how the wine has been matured. For a dry Amontillado, for example, you could note that the yeasty, savoury aromas and flavours indicates preliminary ageing under flor but the amber colour and tertiary characteristics indicate extended oxidative ageing thereafter.

- Remember, even where origin, grape, etc. appear as a common link question at the end of a flight of wines, **many more marks are available for describing each wine accurately than for this element of your Conclusions**. You should try to describe the Appearance, Nose and Palate methodically for the wine(s), assess quality if you are asked to do so, then consider origin, grape, etc. as the case may be. Do not spend too much time trying to identify the wine where only 1 or 2 marks are available.
- Where you have to give reasons for your Conclusions you can misidentify the origin, grape variety/(ies), style within the category and method of production but still gain marks for your supporting arguments.

## 5 Examples of Wine Tasting Notes

### EXAMPLE 1 - DETAILED ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY

Wine 1 is an entry-level Italian Pinot Grigio and Wine 2 is a high-quality Italian Pinot Grigio. Note the level of detail in the conclusion.

#### WINE 1

Appearance:

*The wine is pale lemon.*

Nose:

*The wine has light intensity aromas of very simple, neutral green fruit (pear, apple, grapefruit).*

Palate:

*The wine is dry, with medium(-) acidity, medium(-) alcohol, watery light body and light intensity flavours of simple neutral fruit (pear, apple, grapefruit). The finish is short.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Acceptable quality. The wine is clean and correct, and there is a balance between the light acid structure and the rather neutral fruit. The lack of flavour and short finish indicate a wine of fairly basic quality. Also, the wine is very simple, and expresses little if any varietal character. It is no more than a technically correct example of a generic style of easy-to-drink white, rather than anything expressive or fine.*

Readiness for drinking and potential for ageing:

*Drink now: not suitable for ageing. This wine lacks any kind of acid structure, and the fruit flavours are too weak for them to develop into anything interesting. The fruit will fade quickly over 12 months.*

## WINE 2

Appearance:

*The wine is medium lemon.*

Nose:

*The wine has medium intensity aromas of fresh stone fruits (peach, apricot), with some green fruit (pear) and banana and hints of sweet spice (ginger).*

Palate:

*The wine is dry, with medium acidity, medium(+) alcohol, medium body and medium(+) intensity flavours of fresh stone fruits (peach, apricot), apple and ginger. The finish is medium(+) and slightly waxy.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Very good quality. The wine shows a very well-defined and complex fruit character, ranging from fresh notes of pear, through to some tropical and spicy notes. This indicates well-ripened but not over-ripe grapes. Although there is no other source of complexity (it is unoaked, and young), the wine has plenty of character. It is also very well-balanced between the fruit and the acid, with concentration on the palate. There is some waxiness, which makes the finish slightly bitter, but it is not unpleasant. The wine is not complex or concentrated enough to be considered outstanding, but it is a very good, expressive example.*

Readiness for drinking and potential for ageing:

*Drink now: not suitable for ageing. The wine has enough substance (from the fruit concentration and the acid and tannin structure) to last 2-3 years, but it is unlikely the flavours will develop into anything more interesting than the attractive fresh fruit that it currently displays.*

**EXAMPLE 2 - COMMON LINK: GRAPE VARIETY**

Wine 1 is a one year-old Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon, Wine 2 is a ten year-old Haut-Médoc Cru Bourgeois. Wine 3 is a high-quality five year-old Napa Cabernet Sauvignon.

**WINE 1**

Appearance:

*The wine is deep purple.*

Nose:

*The wine has pronounced intensity of ripe and slightly jammy black fruit (blackcurrant, blackberry), distinct herbaceous notes (eucalyptus, green pepper) and a hint of oak (vanilla, toast).*

Palate:

*The wine is dry, with medium acidity, a medium level of soft tannins. It has medium(+) body and medium(+) alcohol, with medium flavour intensity of ripe jammy black fruits (blackcurrant, blackberry), eucalyptus and spicy oak (vanilla). The finish is medium(-).*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Good quality. The wine has a good balance between fruit and tannin, with oak not too dominant. It is also a very clear expression of Cabernet Sauvignon – with typical black fruit and herbal aromas, though the fruit is a little overripe and jammy/confected in nature. However, the wine is not very complex, and although the nose promises a lot of flavour, the palate is quite light and lacks the substance of a very good Cabernet Sauvignon. This makes it good, rather than very good.*

Readiness for drinking and potential for ageing:

*Drink now: not suitable for ageing. The wine has a lot of fruit intensity, and some tannic structure, which will help give it a shelf life of 2-3 years, but it will be in decline over this period as the fruit fades.*

## WINE 2

Appearance:

*The wine is medium garnet.*

Nose:

*The wine has medium intensity aromas of black fruits (blackcurrant, black cherry), some herbaceousness (mint), a hint of oak (vanilla) and obvious tertiary aromas (earth, cedar, tobacco).*

Palate:

*The wine is dry, with medium(+) acidity, a medium level of firm, fine tannins. It has medium body and alcohol, with medium flavour intensity of blackcurrant, earth, vanilla. The finish is medium(+).*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Very Good. Although not especially concentrated, the wine is very elegant, showing a freshness despite its age, and a liveliness from fresh acidity. There is enough flavour to balance this acid but overall it lacks the concentration to be outstanding, but is a very classic, savoury and elegant style of Bordeaux, showing a great deal of complexity from bottle age.*

Readiness for drinking and potential for ageing:

*Can drink now: not suitable for further ageing. The wine is fully developed, and showing a lot of tertiary cedar/earth character. It is in slow decline, and although it will last 3-5 years before the fruit fades totally, there is nothing to gain from keeping it any longer.*

**WINE 3**

Appearance:

*The wine is deep ruby.*

Nose:

*The wine has pronounced intensity of ripe black fruit (black cherry, blackberry), pronounced high quality oak (toast, vanilla, cloves) and some tertiary characters beginning to appear (black olive, earth).*

Palate:

*The wine is dry, with medium(+) acidity, a high level of soft, velvety tannins. It has full body and warming high alcohol, with pronounced flavour intensity of black cherry, earth and toast. The finish is long.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Outstanding. The wine is an exceptionally precise expression of Cabernet Sauvignon character, with ripe yet fresh black fruits, firm yet very fine tannins and refreshing acidity. The wine has highly concentrated fruit which is able to absorb the high level of oak. The balance of fruit and oak, and the high level of extract mean that even at this stage of its life, it is showing a lot of complexity reflecting high quality fruit and oak which follow through onto the long finish. The high tannins, full body and concentration support the alcohol which is integrated despite being high. An outstanding example of a premium New World Cabernet Sauvignon.*

Readiness for drinking and potential for ageing:

*Can drink now, but has potential for ageing. The concentrated fruit and high tannins are in balance now, but the wine has a lot of extract, indicating it is capable of further evolution before it reaches its peak.*

**GRAPE VARIETY FOR WINES 1–3: *Cabernet Sauvignon*****REASONS FOR YOUR CHOICE OF GRAPE VARIETY:**

*The deep colour (wines 1 and 2) indicates a thick-skinned grape variety. The high quality (wines 2 and 3 in particular) indicates a classic grape variety. Herbaceous characters (wines 1 and 2) make a Bordeaux variety more likely than Syrah/Shiraz, as does the fresh acidity of 2. The well-defined black fruit character of wines 1 and 3 and high level of tannin on Wine 2 makes Cabernet Sauvignon more likely than Merlot.*

## The Spirits SAT and Spirits-Lexicon 6

The Spirits SAT follows the same format as the Wine SAT but with different headings and scales. As with the Wine SAT, the first part of the Spirits SAT is descriptive and the second part evaluative.

The sections entitled Appearance, Nose and Palate are used in the Unit 4 examination to test your ability to:

- describe the structural components of each sample accurately using the correct headings and entries; and
- describe the aromas and flavours of the sample in detail, communicating what the sample smells and tastes like.

The Conclusions section is used in the Unit 4 examination to test your ability to do any of the following, giving reasons when required:

- assess the **quality of the spirit**;
- identify the spirit's **country and/or region of origin**;
- identify the spirit's **raw material**;
- identify the spirit's **style within its category**; and/or
- identify the spirit's **method of production**.

You will **not** be asked to identify the price category of a spirit.

# WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Spirits®

<b>APPEARANCE</b>	
<b>Clarity/brightness</b>	clear – hazy/bright – dull (faulty?)
<b>Intensity</b>	water-white – pale – medium – deep
<b>Colour</b>	colourless – lemon – gold – amber – mahogany – brown pink – red – orange – yellow – green – blue – purple – brown – black
<b>Other observations</b>	e.g. louching

  

<b>NOSE</b>	
<b>Condition</b>	clean – unclean (faulty?)
<b>Intensity</b>	neutral – light – medium – pronounced
<b>Aroma characteristics</b>	e.g. fruits, flowers, vegetables, grains, botanicals, herbs, oak, sweetness, other
<b>Maturation</b>	unaged – short-aged – matured – very aged

  

<b>PALATE</b>					
<b>Sweetness</b>	dry – off-dry – sweet				
<b>Alcohol</b>	soft – smooth – warming – harsh				
<b>Body</b>	light – medium – full				
<b>Other observations</b>	e.g. tannin, texture, other				
<b>Flavour intensity</b>	neutral – light – medium – pronounced				
<b>Flavour characteristics</b>	e.g. fruits, flowers, vegetables, grains, botanicals, herbs, oak, sweetness, other				
<b>Finish</b>	<table style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td><i>length</i></td><td>short – medium – long</td></tr> <tr> <td><i>nature</i></td><td>simple – some complexity – very complex</td></tr> </table>	<i>length</i>	short – medium – long	<i>nature</i>	simple – some complexity – very complex
<i>length</i>	short – medium – long				
<i>nature</i>	simple – some complexity – very complex				

  

<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	(see Candidate Assessment Guide for further information)
<b>QUALITY</b>	
<b>Assessment of quality</b>	faulty – poor – acceptable – good – very good – outstanding <i>then give reasons, assessing e.g. balance, finish, intensity, complexity, oak character, etc.</i>
<b>THE SPIRIT IN CONTEXT</b>	
<b>Country and/or region of origin</b>	<i>state the country and/or region of origin, giving reasons when required</i>
<b>Raw material</b>	<i>state the raw material, giving reasons when required</i>
<b>Style within the category</b>	<i>state the style within the category, giving reasons when required</i>
<b>Method of production</b>	<i>state the method of production, giving reasons when required</i>

- For headings where entries are separated by a hyphen, you should select only ONE of the terms to describe the spirit. Remember, you are restricted to the entries given; alternative words will not score marks.
- For headings where entries are separated by commas, the entries are points to consider. You may not need to comment on each entry for every spirit and any descriptors are indicative only. However, you are encouraged to use the descriptors in the Spirits-Lexicon for ‘Aroma characteristics’ and ‘Flavour characteristics’.
- The Spirits SAT relies on **three- or four-point scales** to describe the structural components of a spirit. These allow you to quantify the component on a scale ranging from low (or water-white, neutral, dry, short, simple) through medium to high (or deep, pronounced, sweet, harsh, long, very complex).
- For intensity for Appearance, Nose and Palate, the bottom end of the three-point scale has been divided into ‘water-white’ and ‘pale’ or ‘neutral’ and ‘light’. This allows for a more faithful description of certain spirits (e.g. vodka which is very low in aroma and flavour).
- **Sweetness** – nearly all spirits are dry so this is a simplified three-point scale.

### The Spirits-Lexicon

As with the Wine SAT, the reverse side of the laminated Spirits SAT card contains a list of suggested descriptors for the aroma and flavour compounds you may identify in a spirit. It is not exhaustive but is intended to help you compose your tasting notes by giving examples of appropriate vocabulary. You do not need to learn these terms by heart but the more you practise describing spirits using the Spirits-Lexicon, the quicker these will come to mind in the Unit 4 examination.

Note that unlike the Wine-Lexicon, the Spirits-Lexicon is not broken down into primary, secondary or tertiary types because spirits do not develop over time in the way that wines do.

### **WSET Level 4 Spirits-Lexicon:** *supporting the WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Spirits®*

<b>AROMA AND FLAVOUR CHARACTERISTICS</b>	
<b>FRUITY/FLORAL (ESTERY)</b>	
Citrus fruit	orange, tangerine, grapefruit, lemon, lime
Orchard fruit	apple, gooseberry, pear, apricot, peach, plum, red cherry, black cherry
Berry/currant	grape, strawberry, raspberry, redcurrant, blackcurrant, blackberry
Tropical fruit	banana, kiwi, lychee, mango, melon, passion fruit, pineapple
Dried fruit	fig, prune, raisin, sultana, citrus peel, fruit cake
Flowers	elderflower, orange blossom, rose, violet, perfume, lavender, lilac, dried flowers
<b>VEGETAL</b>	
Cereal	husk, porridge, barley, rye, linseed, malt, flour
Fresh vegetable	agave, bell pepper, mushroom, asparagus
Herbaceous	grass, hay, eucalyptus, blackcurrant leaf, wet leaves, conifer
Botanicals/herbs	juniper, coriander, basil, rosemary, thyme, sage, lemongrass, mint
Kernal	chocolate, coffee, hazelnut, almond, coconut, cashew
<b>OAK/SWEETNESS/SPICE</b>	
Oak	toast, coffee, cedar, char, spice, sherry, sawdust
Sweetness	corn, vanilla, butterscotch, menthol, caramel, burnt sugar, toffee, molasses
Spice	anise, fennel, liquorice, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg, cardamom, black/white pepper, cumin
<b>OTHER</b>	
Peat (phenolic)	peat, medicinal, smoked fish, earthy, smoky, seaweed
Animal	leather, meaty, gravy, yeast extract
Rancio	fruit cake, candied fruits, mushroom, forest floor, polish
Solvent	pear drop, turpentine, paint, varnish
Feinty	wax, leather, biscuits, tobacco, cheese, sweat, plastic
Sulfur	rubber, spent matches, boiled cabbage, drains

## 7 Describing Spirits using the Spirits SAT

In this Chapter we will discuss the first part of the Spirits SAT, giving further information about the headings for Appearance, Nose and Palate and how the corresponding entries on each line should be used. Each section also contains important information about how marks are allocated and awarded in the examinations.

### Tasting Spirits

Tasting spirits is unlike tasting wine in that water is added. This is necessary to help open up the aromas of the spirit in the glass and to prevent the alcohol overwhelming your senses. Consistency is very important.

The examiners use the following approach when assessing spirits and we recommend that you do the same:

- Pour the spirit;
- Assess the Appearance;
- Add water;
- Re-assess the Appearance if necessary;
- Assess the Nose; and
- Assess the Palate.

### Appearance (2 or 3 marks)

The Appearance section of the Spirits SAT consists of four headings, ‘Clarity/brightness’, ‘Intensity’, ‘Colour’ and ‘Other observations’.

#### CLARITY/BRIGHTNESS (0 marks)

*Is the spirit clear and bright or dull (faulty)?*

Most spirits are ‘clear’ and ‘bright’. A spirit that is ‘hazy’ and ‘dull’ may be faulty but it could indicate that the spirit has received minimal treatment prior to bottling. In order to achieve the clarity and brightness that consumers expect, most producers filter their spirits to remove those elements that can cause haziness when a spirit is either chilled or diluted with ice or water. Some producers feel that filtration has an impact on the flavour and body of a spirit and choose not to do it.

This line is not assessed in the Unit 4 examination.

#### INTENSITY (1 mark)

*Is the spirit water-white, pale, medium or deep in intensity?*

Intensity is a measure of how easy it is to see through a spirit and ranges from ‘water-white’ to ‘opaque’. Unaged spirits have no colour and their intensity is ‘**water-white**’; this is quite common. Most other spirits will be either ‘**pale**’, ‘**medium**’ or ‘**deep**’.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit’s **intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘pale-medium’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

#### COLOUR (1 mark)

*Is the spirit colourless, lemon, gold, amber, mahogany, brown in colour?*

*Or is it pink, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown or black?*

All spirits, when they come off the still, are colourless. Any colour that a spirit has is added after distillation. There are three main sources of colour: oak, natural colourings (such as those extracted from herbs or

fruits) and manufactured colourings. When assessing the colour of a spirit it is almost impossible to tell how the colour has been obtained. Many oak-aged spirits have their colour adjusted with caramel, and some plant or fruit extracts can be as vivid as artificial dyes.

When assessing colour using the Spirits SAT you should select the colour from the scale that best describes the colour of the spirit. For convenience the colours have been arranged in two lines. The first line broadly reflects the changes that can happen to a spirit during maturation in oak, as the colour shifts from colourless through yellow to more orangey colours and, finally, brown. However, this is not a colour progression that applies equally to all oak-aged spirits as the type of oak, the age of the barrel, the method of cooperage and the environmental conditions of the warehouse all influence the way in which colour is taken up. The second line is a short list of colours that commonly occur in spirits that have acquired their colour from natural or manufactured colourings. Remember that the colour alone tells relatively little about the type or quality of the spirit you are assessing and you should not spend a lot of time assessing it.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit's **colour**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. 'lemon-gold') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### **OTHER OBSERVATIONS (1 mark)**

*Does the spirit louch when water is added?*

Due to their high alcohol content, all spirits should form legs or tears on the side of the glass, so this is not a meaningful observation. Spirits can, however, change in appearance when water is added. With unfiltered, high-strength spirits, you may notice hazy spirals forming in the liquid in the glass. With aniseed-flavoured spirits, you should notice a more extreme effect called 'louching': the liquid becomes milky and opaque when water is added.

You should assess the Appearance (intensity and colour) of the spirit neat and then add water, noting '*touches when water is added*' as appropriate.

- Where aniseed-flavoured spirits are shown in the Unit 4 tasting examination, 3 marks will be available for Appearance. The mark for Other Observations is not available for spirits that do not louch, therefore 2 marks will be available for Appearance for spirits that do not louch. This will not be indicated on the question paper.
- As with wines, do not spend too much time considering the spirit's appearance. Many more marks are available for describing other aspects of the spirit so make a quick assessment and move on.

## **Nose (7 marks)**

The Nose section of the Spirits SAT consists of four headings: 'Condition', 'Intensity', 'Aroma characteristics' and 'Maturation'.

When assessing the nose of a spirit there is no need to swirl the sample; the aroma components in spirits are sufficiently volatile. In fact, swirling the spirit is to be avoided because it can cause so much alcohol to evaporate that it dulls your sense of smell, making it difficult to identify aroma characteristics. You should take a quick, short sniff.

### **Condition (0 marks)**

*Is the spirit clean or unclean (faulty?)*

To decide whether a spirit is 'clean' or 'unclean' you need to consider whether it displays any off-notes. Some of these (feintness, woodiness) can contribute to complexity when present at low levels, and the point at which they become detrimental to quality (and, after that, the point at which they become an unacceptable fault) is something that tasters can reasonably disagree about. The same is true of how much staleness is tolerable. Cork taint, however, is always a fault, as it is in wines.

Feinty aromas (plastic, cheese, sweat) can indicate that the distillation has not been well controlled, but these are unlikely to appear in commercially produced spirits. It is possible for cork taint aromas to appear in spirits, either from the cork or from poor casks. However, this is much rarer in spirits than in wines, because even when cork stoppers are used the bottles are usually stored upright, which prevents the liquid extracting the chemicals that cause the taint.

The fault most commonly encountered in spirits is oxidation due to a bottle that has been open too long. Although the high alcohol content of spirits makes them more robust than wines, the spirit in an opened bottle will still be attacked by air over time. Also, the more volatile (floral and fruity) aromas will evaporate and disappear over a period of months. The combined effect of these processes is to make the spirit smell and taste less fresh and complex.

As with wines, condition is not assessed for spirits. You will only ever be presented with a ‘clean’ spirit in the examinations.

### **Intensity (1 mark)**

*Is the spirit neutral, light, medium or pronounced in aroma intensity?*

Assuming the spirit is clean, you then need to consider how intense the aromas are. Nearly all spirits will be either ‘light’, ‘medium’ or ‘pronounced’. The exception to this is vodka where it is the intention of the distiller to produce a spirit that has a very low level of congeners. In this case the spirit should be described as ‘neutral’. Note that this does not mean that the spirit has no aroma at all.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit’s **intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘medium to pronounced’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### **Aroma Characteristics (5 marks)**

*What aroma characteristics does the spirit have?*

The Spirits-Lexicon contains a list of suggested descriptors for aroma and flavour characteristics and groups these into individual clusters under various headings: ‘Fruity/floral (estery)’, ‘Vegetal’, ‘Oak/sweetness/spice’ and ‘other’.

As with the Wine-Lexicon, the Spirits-Lexicon is not exhaustive but it is used by the examiners when preparing marking keys for the Unit 4 examination. This means that the Spirits-Lexicon should be your primary source of descriptors for aroma and flavour characteristics. You may use additional words to describe spirits in the examination, provided the words you use will be understood by the examiner and are considered valid for the spirit in question.

Before describing the aromas you should have added a splash of water. The water should be non-chlorinated, such as mineral water, and should be added at room temperature. Adding water helps to release volatile aroma components but avoids the release of anaesthetising alcohol. It also slows palate fatigue. How much water you add is up to you, but we suggest up to half the volume of the spirit. It is important to add the same amount to each sample so that you can make fair comparisons between them.

- Clusters for spirits are not grouped under primary, secondary or tertiary types but under ‘Fruity/Floral (estery)’, ‘Vegetal’, ‘Oak/sweetness/spice’ and ‘other’. Marks are not allocated to different clusters in the way they are for wines but you should nevertheless give descriptors from a range of clusters to provide a detailed impression of a spirit’s aroma profile. The majority of spirits will show a complex array of aromas (and flavours).
- Remember, you must use **descriptors**, not clusters, to describe the spirit. Marks are not available for cluster headings such as ‘vegetal’ or ‘oak’. You must be specific.

## Maturation (1 mark)

*Is the spirit unaged, short-aged, matured or very aged?*

If the spirit is '**unaged**', it may seem a little harsh and spirity on the nose (depending on how it has been distilled), and will have no evidence of the aromas derived from oak such as vanilla, cream and toast. Some spirits that appear to be unaged (in that they are colourless) have in fact been rested in wood for a short period and had any colour removed by filtration. Conversely, some inexpensive unaged spirits have a deep colour, much of which has come from added caramel. The absence of integrated oak aromas on the nose can indicate that the spirit has not gained much of its colour from maturation. It is likely to be a blend made with a significant percentage of unaged or 'short-aged' spirits. This is true of some dark rums.

For spirits that have undergone an ageing process their development can variously be described as 'short-aged', 'matured' or 'very aged'. '**Short-aged**' spirits will typically only have been aged long enough to acquire oak aromas; there will be little in the way of aroma development from the passage of time. '**Matured**' spirits are ones where the oak aromas are integrated into the aroma profile, and some savoury aromas derived from ageing are also present. '**Very aged**' spirits have undergone a particularly long ageing process. They will have developed aromas reminiscent of mushrooms, decaying leaves, wood polish and concentrated dried fruits, or fruit cake. These aromas are sometimes described as 'rancio'.

Whether spirits show as short-aged or very aged can depend on the ageing conditions rather than the passage of time. Temperature and temperature variation are particularly important in this regard. For example, in hot, widely fluctuating conditions (such as in Kentucky), 'very aged' aromas can start to appear after four to five years, whereas a whisky aged in Scotland for a similar period could still show as 'short-aged'.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit's **maturation**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*short-aged/very aged*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.
- Some spirits are aged but then filtered so that they appear water-white and colourless. In these circumstances, '**unaged**' would be one of the answers accepted by the examiners.

## Palate (9 marks)

### SWEETNESS (1 mark)

*Is the spirit dry, off-dry or sweet?*

Sweetness is an indicator of how much sugar a spirit contains. Spirits contain no sugar when they are first distilled. All sugars are either added or are created from the breakdown of wood during cask ageing. Most spirits are therefore '**dry**', but a few can be described as '**off-dry**' – for example, some rums and Bourbons. Producers are permitted to add levels of sugar to some spirits. In most cases this cannot be tasted and is done to 'soften' the spirit on the palate. However, for some spirits, such as Pastis, the levels can be very high. Such spirits can be described as '**sweet**'.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit's **sweetness**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. '*dry to off-dry*') you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### ALCOHOL (1 mark)

*Is the alcohol soft, smooth, warming or harsh?*

In spirits alcohol can often be detected as a painful, burning sensation – especially when a spirit is at a high strength or tasted neat. Ethanol also gives a sensation of weight or oiliness, contributing to the body. Young spirits and those distilled in ways that retain a lot of congeners can be quite '**harsh**': the alcohol can burn even when the spirit is reduced with water. Indeed, because the spirit might be deliberately made to retain its 'bite' even when mixed.

In most spirits, the alcohol effect is best described as ‘**warming**’ – providing a glow, and stimulating the pain receptors a little, but not in a way that is unpleasant to most people. In some spirits there are particularly low levels of impurities from distillation, or the impurities that would lead to harshness have mostly been removed through a period of ageing. These can be described as ‘**smooth**’. Very aged spirits and very pure, clean spirits can have very ‘**soft**’, well-integrated alcohol that makes them suitable for sipping neat. Such softness means the alcohol barely makes its presence known when these spirits are used in cocktails.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit’s **alcohol**. Alternative words are not acceptable for in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘smooth-soft’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### BODY (1 mark)

*Is the spirit light, medium or full in body?*

This is the sensation of a spirit’s richness, weight or viscosity on the palate and is a combination of the effects of alcohol, sugar and flavour compounds (and, occasionally, wood tannins). The body can be described as either ‘**light**’, ‘**medium**’ or ‘**full**’.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit’s **body**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘medium to full’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### OTHER OBSERVATIONS (up to 1 mark, within the 3 mark total available for ‘Flavour characteristics’)

This is an opportunity for you to comment on any textural elements of the spirit, such as tannin. In the Unit 4 examination, one of the three marks available for ‘Flavour characteristics’ may be allocated to one of these aspects if the examiners consider it a prominent feature of the spirit. You may use any descriptors you consider appropriate to describe the mouthfeel of a spirit, provided the meaning is clear.

### FLAVOUR INTENSITY (1 mark)

*Is the spirit neutral, light, medium or pronounced in intensity?*

This is an impression of how flavoursome the spirit is on the palate.

- Remember, you must select one and only one entry from the scale to describe a spirit’s **flavour intensity**. Alternative words are not acceptable for this heading and if you write down more than one entry or a range (e.g. ‘neutral to light’) you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

### FLAVOUR CHARACTERISTICS (3 marks)

*What flavour characteristics does the spirit have?*

Generally, a spirit’s flavour profile will match its aroma profile, so you will be using the same or similar descriptors for ‘Flavour characteristics’ as for ‘Aroma characteristics’.

In contrast to sweetness, body and alcohol, which are detected in the mouth, flavour characteristics are detected when volatile components in the spirit evaporate off the tongue and rise up to the back of the nose. The groups of flavour descriptors are the same as those for aromas, however it is possible that aromas that were not apparent on the nose will appear on the palate as some congeners become volatile due to the heat in your mouth. We recommend that you keep the spirit in your mouth for a few seconds to appreciate any differences that might emerge.

- There is a total of 3 marks available for '**Flavour characteristics**' and '**Other observations**' combined. This means that where the examiners have allocated a mark to the texture of a spirit you can achieve full marks by giving:
  - ◊ three valid descriptors for 'Flavour characteristics' and no observation about texture; or
  - ◊ two valid descriptors for 'Flavour characteristics' and one correct observation about texture.
- Remember, the Spirits-Lexicon is there to help you put what you are tasting into words. As with aroma characteristics, you should aim to write a comprehensive description of the spirit using specific descriptors. One valid descriptor will get 1 mark.

### **FINISH (2 marks)**

The finish has two elements: how long the pleasant sensations last for ('length') and how complex they are ('nature'). When assessing spirits it is important to record these two observations separately as flavours can develop and change significantly even after the spirit is swallowed or has been spat out.

**Length** – This refers to how long the pleasant sensations (rather than any alcohol burn, cloying sweetness or oaky astringency) linger in the mouth after the spirit has been swallowed or spat out. Length can be an indicator of quality (see below). The length can be described as '**short**', '**medium**' or '**long**'.

**Nature** – This is used to refer to the flavour characteristics of the finish and, in particular, how complex they are. Some spirits are designed not to have a lingering aftertaste, and the remaining flavours are pure, clean and quite '**simple**'. The majority of spirits show '**some complexityvery complex**': they show a succession of flavours, one after the other.

- Remember, you must comment on both 'length' and 'nature', selecting only one entry from each scale to describe that aspect of a spirit's **finish**. Alternative words are not acceptable in the examination and if you give more than one entry or a range you will not gain the available mark, even if one of these entries is correct.

## 8 Evaluating Spirits using the Spirits SAT

In this chapter we will explain the Conclusions headings on the Spirits SAT and how the corresponding entries on each line should be used.

In common with Unit 5 and Unit 6 tasting questions, there is a total of 75 marks available for the Unit 4 tasting question, 25 marks per sample. With fewer marks available for each spirit than for each wine in the Unit 3 tasting examination, the range of Conclusions you may be asked for will be narrower.

You may be asked to give Conclusions for each spirit in the flight (for 7 marks allocated to one or more headings), or a proportion of the marks may be allocated to identifying a common link for the three spirits as a stand-alone question.

In the Conclusions section of your answer you may be asked to do any of the following, giving reasons when required:

- assess the **quality of the spirit**;
- identify the spirit's **country and/or region of origin**;
- identify the spirit's **raw material**;
- identify the spirit's **style within its category**; and
- identify the spirit's **method of production**.

### Quality

Assessing the quality of spirits becomes easier as you gain more experience. Assuming the spirit is not faulty (badly made, out-of-condition, or affected by cork taint), several criteria can be used to differentiate between a poor spirit, a good spirit and an outstanding spirit. These include balance, finish, intensity, complexity and oak character.

### Balance

One flavour (such as peat, juniper or aniseed) that dominates at the expense of everything else will make a spirit seem one-dimensional. Harsh, aggressive alcohol or excessive sweetness, bitterness or astringency can also make a spirit taste unpleasant. Aggressive alcohol may indicate poor quality in a spirit that is supposed to be sipped neat (or with just a splash of water), but it may give a cocktail component some useful ‘bite’.

### Finish, intensity and complexity/expressiveness

A balanced, pleasant finish where complex flavours linger on the palate for several seconds is often an indicator of a high-quality spirit. Lesser spirits often have one or two simple flavours, and fade quickly on the palate, leaving no lingering impression.

The greatest spirits generally have many different flavours which are intense and persist on the palate. These can come from high-quality base materials, or from complex flavours created during distillation or ageing, or from the infusion or maceration of fruits, herbs and spices. Oak influence during maturation can also add complexity to a spirit, provided that it is integrated with the spirit's other components.

The best spirits are expressive in that they show a clearly defined character, whether from their raw material or from the fermentation, distillation or ageing processes. This could be the fine silkiness and purity of a potato-based vodka, the pungent agave-derived flavours of a Tequila 100% agave, the finesse and floral complexity of a Grande Champagne Cognac, or the chlorophyll-green louche of an absinthe.

## ASSESSMENT OF QUALITY

*Is the spirit poor, acceptable, good, very good or outstanding?*

As with wines, an objective assessment of the quality of a spirit goes beyond personal likes and dislikes.

If a spirit lacks distinguishing characteristics, or is unbalanced, it could be described as merely ‘**acceptable**’ or even ‘**poor**’ (depending on the degree of lack of balance, and lack of expressiveness). Spirits that have a particularly fine balance, or some extra level of complexity or expressiveness (especially noticeable in the finish), can be described as ‘**very good**’. If they have all of these things to a high level, they can be assessed as ‘**outstanding**’.

Remember, in some cases an absence of overt complexity may be a positive indicator of quality. With the vodka category, for example, purity and cleanliness and texture are more relevant than flavour characteristics such that a vodka that is especially pure could be described as ‘outstanding’ despite being neutral on the palate.

### The Spirit in Context

The Spirit in Context section contains four headings relating to the identity of the spirit: ‘Country and/or region of origin’, ‘Raw material’, ‘Style within the category’ and ‘Method of production’. You may be asked to comment on any combination of these in the examinations, most likely as a Conclusion for each spirit in the flight rather than a common link question. In some cases, you may simply be asked to identify the spirit, giving reasons. In this case you should aim to cover all four headings in your answer.

As elsewhere, you should be guided by the number of marks allocated on the question paper. Where a heading carries 1 or 2 marks, a simple statement of fact will suffice; where more than 2 marks are available you should give reasons for your answer. Note also that while this section provides guidance as to how Conclusions have been assessed in the past, the examiners may change the format or focus of examination questions relating to these headings at their discretion.

#### Country and/or region of origin

The first step here is to identify the category of spirit and consider which countries/regions make spirits of that type. You should then consider the style of spirit and what particular features lead you to a particular origin. This is likely to be a combination of flavour characteristics and evidence of maturation techniques which make the spirit a distinctive example of its type.

#### Raw material

Being able to identify the raw material of a spirit comes with experience. By tasting spirits category by category (i.e. sampling different examples of spirits from the same raw material alongside each other) you can start to build up a memory bank of the key aroma/flavour signatures that mark out different raw materials, grapes or other fruits, grains, agave, sugar cane, etc. It is important to try aged and unaged examples of the same spirit to understand how the aroma and flavour profile of spirits made from the same raw material evolve with time.

#### Style within the category

Again, the first step here is to identify the category of spirit to which the sample belongs. Is the spirit a Brandy, Whisky, Vodka, Gin, Tequila, Rum, etc.? Then you can consider the different styles within these categories e.g. ‘Cognac’ or ‘Brandy de Jerez’ for Brandy; ‘Single Malt whisky’ or ‘bourbon’ for Whisky, ‘Golden Rum’ or ‘Dark Rum’ for Rum, ‘London (Dry) Gin’ for Gin. Then, on the basis of your tasting note for the sample, you should be able to reach a conclusion as to the style represented. You may or may not be asked to give reasons. Where you are asked for reasons, you should comment on the structural components and aroma and flavour profile and why they fit the style you have suggested.

Cognac, Armagnac and Tequila use specific labelling terms to denote quality by reference to maturation times. These include ‘VS’/‘VSOP’/‘XO’ for Cognac and Armagnac and ‘reposado’ and ‘añejo’ for Tequila.

Where you have identified a spirit as Cognac, Armagnac or Tequila and are asked to identify style within the category you should include the appropriate labelling term in your answer. The following is a good example of a ‘style within the category’ note where reasoning is required:

*‘Reposado Tequila – due to the pronounced intensity of vegetal and pepper aromas characteristic of agave. The very light colour and creamy texture on the palate indicate some oak ageing but the lack of overt vanilla and toast suggested this is a short-aged, reposado style.’*

### Method of production

Method of production questions can cover different aspects of a spirit’s production process, from fermentation of the raw material, to distillation and maturation.

In the Unit 4 examination you will only be asked for information which can be logically deduced from the spirit in front of you (i.e. aspects of the production process which influence the Appearance, Nose and Palate of a given spirit). These could include the raw material used (if not covered as a separate question) and how it has been fermented and then distilled to yield a particular aroma or flavour profile. For example, slow fermentation of molasses will give a Golden Rum its signature burnt caramel flavour, with the addition of dunder giving a high ester character. Maturation in small oak casks in warm conditions will give colour, texture and flavour.

- Remember, even where origin, raw material, etc. appear as a common link question at the end of a flight of spirits, **many more marks are available for describing each spirit accurately than for this element of your Conclusions.** You should try to describe the Appearance, Nose and Palate methodically for the spirit(s), assess quality if you are asked to do so, then consider origin, raw material, etc. as the case may be.
- Where you have to give reasons for your Conclusions you can misidentify the origin, raw material, style within the category and method of production but still gain marks for logical supporting arguments based on the spirit in front of you.

## Examples of Spirits Tasting Notes 9

### EXAMPLE - A MIXED BAG

Spirit 1 is a vodka, Spirit 2 is a VSOP Cognac and Spirit 3 is a very-aged rum.

#### SPIRIT 1

Appearance:

*The spirit is water-white and colourless.*

Nose:

*The spirit has neutral intensity and simple aromas of grain, husk, flour and citrus. It is unaged.*

Palate:

*The spirit is dry with smooth alcohol, light body and neutral, simple flavours of grain and citrus. It has a smooth texture and a short simple finish.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Good quality. The alcohol is well-integrated and the overall texture is smooth with no harsh edges. Although the flavours are neutral, the spirit shows some of the character of the base material (grain) which mean that this is better than acceptable. However these flavours lack the definition of a better example which stops this from being very good or outstanding.*

## SPIRIT 2

Appearance:

*The spirit is pale gold.*

Nose:

*The spirit has medium intensity aromas of flowers, dried fruits (raisin, sultana, citrus peel) and spicy oak (vanilla and toast). It is matured.*

Palate:

*The spirit is off-dry with smooth alcohol, medium body and medium flavour intensity with flavours of flowers, dried fruit and oak. It has smooth texture and a medium length with some complexity on the finish which has a sweet edge to it.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Very good quality. The flavours strike a fine balance between the delicate but complex flavours of the raw material (grapes) and oak maturation although they are lacking a little depth and concentration. The flavours are well integrated with the smooth alcohol and mouthfeel of the spirit. Whilst the sweetness contributes to this, it is slightly cloying on the finish. This prevents this spirit from being outstanding.*

## SPIRIT 3

Appearance:

*The spirit is deep amber.*

Nose:

*The spirit has pronounced intensity aromas of tropical fruits (ripe bananas, melon and mango) dried figs, oak (vanilla and cinnamon) and aged aromas (caramel, toffee, and black treacle). It is very aged.*

Palate:

*The spirit is off-dry with smooth alcohol, full body and pronounced and complex flavours intensity of tropical fruit, oak and caramel, toffee with savouriness/rancio. It has silky smooth texture and very complex finish which reveals layers of flavours throughout its very long length.*

Detailed assessment of quality:

*Outstanding quality. The lifted fruity ester aromas combine with the savouriness of long maturation resulting in an incredible depth and complexity of flavour that is obvious from the first sip and builds across the palate to the finish. The balance struck between the sweetness and the almost bitter savoury quality ensure that the spirit is never cloying and combined with the smoothly integrated alcohol it gives a structure that seamlessly supports these flavours.*

# Appendix 1 – Common Wine Faults

## TCA (Trichloroanisole)

This taint gives the wine aromas reminiscent of damp cardboard. At low levels the taint can be hard to identify, but fruit aromas in particular will be muted and the wine will appear less fresh. This kind of fault can be due to a tainted cork (in which case a replacement bottle is unlikely to be affected), or due to tainted winery equipment, such as barrels (in which case a whole batch may be faulty). Because the origin can lie in the winery, this problem is not limited to bottles closed with a cork.

## Reduction

This gives the wine a ‘stinky’ character, sometimes like rotten eggs, and sometimes more like boiled cabbage, boiled onions or blocked drains. Very low levels of reduction can be surprisingly pleasant, adding character and complexity. In some cases the stinky aromas will dissipate once the bottle is open.

## Sulfur Dioxide

This is added to almost all wines, but levels tend to be highest in sweet white wines. At very high levels it can give a wine an acrid smell of recently extinguished matches. At lower levels, it can mute fruit aromas in a wine. Insufficient sulfur dioxide can lead to oxidation.

## Oxidation

This is the opposite of reduction. It is typically caused by a failure of the closure allowing unwanted oxygen to interact with the wine. The wine will appear deeper coloured and more brown than it should be. It may have aromas of toffee, honey, caramel or coffee, and will lack freshness and fruitiness. Note that some wines are made in an oxidative style and in these cases it is not a fault.

## Out of Condition

These wines have lost their vibrancy and freshness, and may taste dull and stale. This is either because they are too old or have been stored in bad conditions (too hot, too bright, too variable). There may be elements of oxidation too.

## Volatile Acidity (VA)

All wines have some volatile acidity, and at low levels some feel that this helps make the wine seem more fragrant and complex. However, high levels of VA give the wine unappealing aromas often described as vinegar or nail polish remover.

## *Brettanomyces* (‘Brett’)

This is a yeast whose activity gives wine plastic or animal aromas reminiscent of sticking plasters/Band-Aids, hot vinyl, smoked meat, leather or sweaty horses. Some consumers enjoy these characters, and do not consider low levels of Brett to be a fault.