

Things to Consider When Buying Wine

Decisions, decisions. And never have there been more decent wines out there to choose from. Very good wines, at that. Nor have so many been so accessible - particularly with online buying now so common to the drinker's routine. As ever-increasing options often stagger the decision-making process, it is a good idea to start thinking of the 'how to buy' before the 'what to buy': the former should navigate you to the latter.

Here are a few points to consider when pondering your next purchase.

Know Thyself: The eternal maxim. When choosing a wine, internal knowledge is as important as external. Ultimately, this will mean defining your palate, identifying its preferences and finding your style. As a personal example, I prefer to dwell on *the edge of ripeness*, savouring the verve, 'zing' and, well, edginess of vibrantly structured, cool-climate wines. How they amplify the flavours and textures of an appropriately paired dish. So, I lean toward steelier, high-acid, minimal-oak Chardonnays; crunchier, more floral-styled Syrah; reds and whites of Austria, the Jura and the Loire Valley. I could drink Beaujolais everyday... But that's just me. You may tend to weightier, more exotic, spicier fruit in your whites; perhaps to a deeper, darker opulence in your reds, all of which having much to do with your culinary habits and preferences. Whatever the case, gather those intuitive points of fascination as a foundation to build upon. Understanding what you like is more about understanding why you like it, and with this comes more confidence and enthusiasm to explore further afield. Finally, make the effort to keep notes of what you taste though you can train your palate's 'memory', the human mind isn't always as reliable!

The Sterling Decision: Although so often *the* parameter, don't let budget deprive you of potential surprises. Allow yourself some margin for what can be real, added value, since it is value that should take precedence over price. Website price filters are handy, of course, but be flexible: an extra fiver may just end as an extra tenner on the palate. Trade up: it is, at the very least, some compensation for the £2.23 taken up in alcohol duty. Value is a trajectory, after all: from a £12 bottle that levy is a higher toll than when taken from one at £17.

The Value of Provenance & Vice Versa (or Punting on Provenance):

Which is why it's always a good idea to consider lesser-known, underrated wine-producing regions. These can be the source of tremendous value and potential, given what they're up against in the UK market (France, Italy, Spain, California...) This is to say that in vying for your attention, they're competing with the familiar and the renowned, so they need to get their act right. Think of them as 'on audition', effectively, and though this will not necessarily equate to entry-level prices, it often provides noticeably more 'bang' for your budget. (Conversely, it's not uncommon for many producers, appellations and regions, owing to history, reputation, pedigree etc., to command a premium that is not always manifest in the mouth.)

Start with popular 'international' varietals. The Heumann Winery in Villany, Hungary, for example, offers a stunning example of northern-Rhone styled Syrah; rich, layered, peppery, bursting with cherry fruit, dark fruit and spice, and at **£17.99**/bottle. Elsewhere, the price of a St. Joseph at this level can easily weigh in by more than a third and though ultimately a different wine, to the Syrah-lover, Heumann delivers a much.

Similarly does the Dagon winery of the Dealu Mare DOC in Romania introduce a Left Bank-inspired Bordeaux blend that is not only of fruit sourced from very historic vineyards, aged for 15 months in oak and with good cellaring potential, it is, at **£15.45**/bottle, ridiculously good value.

Be Curious: The further bonus, then, is how popular varieties from less popular wine producing regions can serve as a springboard into exploring their indigenous species. Which can offer plenty. Back to Heumann Winery's Syrah then, and to Hungary's ubiquitous 'Kekfrankos' varietal (a.k.a. 'Blaufrankisch'), in this case yielding a medium-bodied red with lots of blueberry, cherry and black fruit - happy to take on a Right Bank blend or Cahors.

Particularly when matching with food, the discovery of suitable, regional substitutes for international varieties is without doubt one of the great joys of going off-piste. Whether it's a Nerello Mascalese for Beaujolais or a dry Furmint for Bourgogne Blanc, you'll find the culinary rewards pairing well with the satisfaction found in broadening your viticultural knowledge.

Context: In other words, what's the occasion; what is most appropriate? A 15% Napa Cab for summer aperitif? Not likely. Often your choice will be closely aligned with food pairing, remembering that wines can either compliment or be congruous; so, it's important you grasp some fundamentals regarding weight, fat content, acidity, tannins, and flavour intensity.

Vintage Kit: Generally speaking, the vintage year matters less with wines from regions where the weather patterns are more predictable (Central Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Australia, California, Southern Italy...) and/or when buying wines from large-volume producers where there is considerable intervention in the winemaking process.

When trading up to more premium, age-worthy wines, however, awareness of vintage variation gains more relevance - particularly to those classic, Old World regions where growing-season conditions are more erratic: Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rhone, Champagne, Sauternes, Piedmont, Rioja, Germany...

Good vintage years provide finer wines with more balanced, integrated levels of acidity and tannin, giving them the longevity required for developing greater complexities. So, familiarise yourself with the 'good years' when going up-market: greater investment obliges greater research.

Similarly, as premium producers of the New World continue in their pursuit of 'terroir wines', vintage quality increases in importance, particularly for the more cool-climate/single-vineyard growers/producers in such areas as the Sonoma Coast, parts of Santa Barbara County, Mendocino County, Oregon, Washington State, New Zealand, Chile...Here, top-end producers will employ traditional methods common to the historic regions mentioned above, seeking to maximise the potentials in climate and soil for the creation of properly age-worthy wines. Similarly, then, should you research the virtues and shortcomings of their own growing seasons when investing.

Organic/Biodynamic: These days, such credentials are far more *de rigueur*, but do continue to look out for them, given what they contribute to the quality of what you'll be imbibing. Simply put, organic farming and vinification practices make better tasting wine, addressing everything from the use of pesticides/anti-fungal sprays in the vineyards to irrigation methods to the use of sulphites in the winery. Everything from what goes into you, to what goes into the environment. As it is perhaps too great a topic to explore in-depth here and now, we'll limit it to what are the most common credentials and where to find them. (More detailed info can be found here: <https://wanderlustwine.co.uk/wine-organics/sustainable-wine/>)

Firstly, there is a difference in both definition and labelling practice between Europe and the US. Old World wines can be considered as 'organic' if made from organically farmed fruit, all organic additives, no GMOs and a 150ppm (parts per million) limit to sulphite additions. With this you will find an 'Organic Farming Europe' logo as issued by ECOCERT.

In the States, American wines must contain no added sulphites and with a minimum content of 95% organic contents. A label can then display the USDA organic seal. Where there are sulphites added, the label is permitted to declare 'made with organic grapes.'

As for *biodynamics* (a far more extensive practice involving vineyard ecosystems), any winery working with Demeter-certified vineyards will of course advertise the logo in its labelling. It is a certification used in over fifty countries.

Finally, should there be a wine that interests you where no credentials seem evident on the label, you may still want to research the producer's

methodology independently: what is often a costly process involved in getting certified is one not always afforded by smaller, artisanal wineries. Organic, sustainable and biodynamic ethics are things none of them would fail to loudly declare, certificate or not.

Hopefully, these few pointers will guide you to a more considered approach to picking out that next bottle, albeit there will always be some that miss the mark. Practice makes *almost* perfect, though, and wine making has never been - will never be - an exact science (we wouldn't want it to be!) Most important is to continue to explore and learn, whereby to develop the confidence to take more informed decisions – and chances.