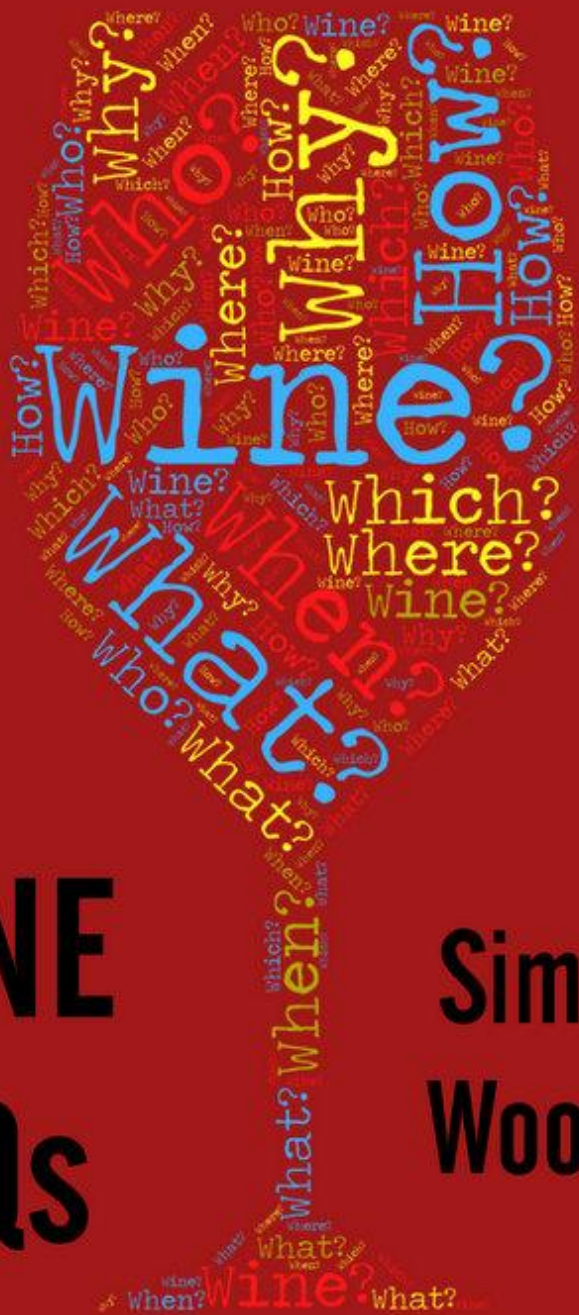


101

WINE FAQs

Simon
Woods



The answers to the questions that people ask about wine

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“I don’t know if this is a stupid question but...”

I conduct dozens of wine tastings each year, and people say I’m very good at them. But I haven’t always been...

No one actually fell asleep at any of my early attempts to pass on my knowledge about wine, but I certainly induced more than a few yawns. It wasn’t a shortage of information that was the problem. In fact it was the opposite. I had so much to tell people and I did my darnedest to pack as much as possible into the time available.

However, I soon discovered that the specialised language of wine isn’t universally spoken. I’m so thankful to those people who stuck their hands up and said, “I don’t know if this is a stupid question but what did you mean when you said...”

The first few times, it stopped me in my tracks. Didn’t everyone know what a grape variety was? Or what ‘cuvée’ meant? Or that keeping bottles upright by the kitchen stove was a bad idea?

But then it dawned on me. I might have had lots of information to present, but it wasn’t necessarily what people – normal people, not those who spend a lot of time spitting into buckets – wanted to know. I was answering questions that they were not asking.

So from then onwards, I've made a point of encouraging my audiences to ask questions. Occasionally some of them ARE a bit stupid: 'In the 1980s, I used to buy a wine when I was on holiday on Spain that had a brown label – what would it have been?' Or: 'Is wine in big bottles stronger than wine in smaller ones?'

But most of the time, the questions come from a desire to know just a little more. So over the past 20 years, I've been compiling a list of those questions, and this book is my attempt to answer 101 of the most popular, interesting and useful ones that have cropped up.

With some questions, this is straightforward. With others, the question may be simple, but the answer could very well run to a doctoral thesis. So if there are some answers here where you think I've only skimmed the surface, get in touch on Twitter or Facebook and I'll see if I can point you in the direction of more information.

Contact me too if there are questions that you think I've missed out. If there are enough of them, I may just have to write a sequel...

Simon Woods
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5 | what's your favourite wine?

I've lost count of the number of times I've been asked this. Now, I usually turn the question back to the questioner and ask them things like what's their favourite song, or their favourite food, or their favourite item of clothing. All things like this depend on the circumstances – where you are, whom you're with, what sort of mood you're in, and so on. So when it comes to wine, I want a whole smorgasbord, wardrobe, playlist of the stuff - confining me to just one type would be to miss out on so much of the pleasure of the subject.

So that's my diplomatic answer. The real answer is good red Burgundy...

10 | how is rosé wine made?

There are two main ways. Firstly, you can blend red and white wines. Do you see anything problematic with that? Does that sounds offensive to you? Is that a major wine crime? Nay, nay and thrice nay is my answer, but for some reason, producers in certain parts of Europe disapprove of this way of making rosé and would like to ban it.

For method two, let's skip back to that bit about making tea in Chapter 7. Do you have any friends who are what I call 10-second-teabag people, as in they won't drink any cuppa that's been brewed for longer? The result is pale and – to me at least – not all that interesting, but that's how they like it. Rosé can be made in a very similar way,

with the skins macerating in the grape juice for just a few hours until the desired colour is achieved.

18| are small independent wine producers going to survive in the next ten years?

The full question continued ‘...or are we going to suffer from mass-produced supermarket wines which are generally sh**?’

It’s not going to be an either/or situation. Mass-produced supermarket wines are with us for the long haul. There will always be enough people who want a glass of wine/a slice of bread/a frozen chip without bothering too much about its origin and flavour. Sad but true, get used to it.

But independent wine producers are also not going away fast. However, whether it’s going to be the SAME producers who survive from generation to generation is a different matter. Some of them will, but will remain small concerns, others will grow and merge with others and become larger businesses, while yet others will become complacent and go bust – with the void they leave then being filled by starry-eyed newcomers...

24| what effect is global warming having on wine?

A few points:-

- Alcohol levels are rising.
 - Harvests are getting earlier, in some cases a month earlier than they were 50 years ago.
 - Ways of managing vineyards are changing, as farmers attempt to slow down the rate at which the grapes mature.
 - Rainfall is more erratic – droughts then storms then back to droughts.
 - In these conditions, soil erosion can be a problem in steeper vineyards.
 - There's less water available for irrigation, so several producers will have to either relocate vineyards or be more inventive/frugal with the resources they have.
 - Vineyards in some very hot regions are becoming unviable – there's just not enough rainfall to sustain them.
-
- Many well-known regions may have to start looking at alternative grape varieties if they want to keep producing good wine.
 - Places once considered unsuitable for vines are developing rapidly – the UK is a classic example.
 - There may even be a need to rethink locations of forests for making oak barrels.

25 | what's the difference between different grape varieties?

First of all, let's establish what a grape variety is. Do you remember all that stuff from school about biological classification? Just to jog your memory, Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus and Species. *Vitis*, the grapevine genus, is part of the Vitaceae family, and is split into several dozen species.

By far the most important of these is *vitis vinifera*. Maybe once upon a time there was just one strain of *vinifera*. However, over the course of several millennia through a combination of natural means – cross-fertilisation, adaptation and mutation – and human influence – cultivating, breeding and crossing – we have arrived at the stage today where there are literally thousands of different varieties (if that was a bit too scientific, think of Grannie Smith, Cox's Orange Pippin, Braeburn and Gala – all different varieties but all still apples).

Some grape varieties have been around so long that they're referred to as Founder Grape Varieties. These include Pinot, Cabernet Franc, Nebbiolo, Muscat, Savagnin (of which Gewürztraminer is a mutation) and Gouais Blanc. You may not have heard of Gouais Blanc but you will be familiar with some of its many offspring, such as Chardonnay, Gamay and Riesling.

Wine can be made from other *vitis* species, and North Americans in particular will be familiar with Catawba and Concord, both varieties of *vitis Labrusca*. There are also

hybrid grapes, created by crossing *vitis vinifera* with other *vitis* species. These include Seyval Blanc, which is used for Sauvignon-esque whites in England for example, and Vidal, one of the main grapes used for Canadian Icewine.

However the greatest contribution of non-*vinifera* vines to the wine world is providing rootstocks for grafting. More of which in the next chapter.

37 | why should I bother with any wine that's not on special offer?

Again, no reason. If wine is something that “bothers” you, just carry on with the banal, perpetually discounted, industrially produced and normally over-priced stuff that you currently buy, and leave the good stuff to those of us who like to drink something with a bit of personality.

(Having said that, I do sometimes buy from the January sales that good wine merchants have, where quantities available are usually minuscule, and I also take advantage of those “25% off 6 bottles” offers that supermarkets often run.)

49 | why are some wines labelled by origin and others by grape variety?

Once upon a time, people didn't travel and wine didn't travel. Or at least not much further than the neighbouring village. So the situation arose where you had two adjacent villages, both making wines from the same mix of local grapes. Hardly anyone was bothered what those grapes were: they were just the varieties that had grown well there for generations – the ones that didn't would have been abandoned long ago. How did you differentiate between the wines from the two villages? By calling them by those villages' names. Hence the traditional European/Old World way of labelling wines geographically. When New World producers began to plant vineyards, they didn't have those centuries of experience to show which grapes performed well in which vineyards. Many took a scattergun approach, planting cuttings from vineyards throughout Europe, and France in particular. Not all of them proved suitable, but many thrived, and the result was wineries with a large selection of both reds and whites. How were you to differentiate between wines grown in the same locality, but that were quite different in style? By grape variety.

I often get the line, "Why don't the French put grape varieties on their labels." So I ask them whether they mind not having grapes listed on bottles of port, Champagne and Rioja. They usually go quiet. Those coming at the topic from an Old World point of view often trot out the line about how all Australian wines (or those of any other non-European country) taste the same. So you put two

Chardonnays in front of them, one from Tasmania, one from McLaren Vale. Grudgingly, they modify their view to MOST Australian wines tasting the same...

In an ideal world, modern wines would be labelled to include both geographical and varietal information, along with a back label that gives some sort of guidance as to the style of the wine. Plus of course the name of the producer, which is arguably more important than both.

59 | this wine is tart - why?

It's acidity that's making your mouth pucker and your buttocks clench. And while all wines are acidic – for the chemically inclined, they fall between 2.9 and 4 on the pH scale – there are some where that acidity pokes out more than in others, especially whites.

In general, the lower the pH, the tarter the wine will appear. However, it's not an absolute rule of thumb. Think of the acidity as a skeleton. The more flesh there is on that skeleton, in the form of flavour, alcohol and sugar, the less bony the wine will appear. And with wine as with people, everyone has their different idea of what is the right amount of flesh on that skeleton.

If you're not a fan of acidity, if you're not one of those people who chew their lemons when you have a gin and tonic, there are some steps you can take to avoid the incidence of pucker.

1) Stick to wines from warmer countries, as they generally have lower acidity levels (see chapter 21 for why).

2) Don't overchill your wines, as this heightens the acidity.

3) Save wines that you find a little sharp for mealtimes – which is often when they were intended to be drunk.

4) Choose lower acid grapes such as Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio and Viognier rather than Riesling and Chenin Blanc.

61 | do critics prefer certain wines to punters?

What good critics have in comparison with normal wine drinkers is deeper and broader experience. They can look at a young wine and judge it not only on how it tastes today but on what's going to happen to it in the future. They can think of how a wine that by itself is a bit tart and/or tannic would taste delicious with some food. And they're not seduced by gym bunny wines, wines that wave their immediate charms – ripeness, sweetness, oak, alcohol – in your face but don't have much personality beyond that.

Which is why every few months, there's a story of someone taking a popular cheap wine and a rare expensive wine – usually a young one – down to the railway station to do a comparative tasting. Invariably, the cheap one comes out on top. And this shouldn't come as any surprise – Dan Brown books, One Direction albums and Adam Sandler films seldom make the critics' choices, but that doesn't seem to affect their popularity.

The important thing for wine critics is not to lose touch with what normal people are drinking. If we can point those people who are interested – and not everyone is – in

the direction of something similar but more inspiring, then that's a job well done.

72 | at what temperature should wine be served?

Simple. Not too hot, not too cold. Too hot, and the wine will lose its freshness. Too cold and not only will the flavours be muted, but any tannin in the wine will poke out like an unwanted pustule on prom night.

Giving a precise figure is a bit pointless. You pour a wine at 12°C in a room at 21°C and put it into the hand of someone whose body temperature is 37°C. What temperature will it be after ten minutes? Hmm...

Most white wines are served too cold. An hour or two in the fridge is OK, a day is too long (unless the wine is dreadful and you want to eradicate its personality). And many reds are served too warm because someone's heard they should be at "room temperature". Where's the room, Rome or Helsinki? And are we in the era of central heating and air-conditioning or of coal fires and woolly underwear? So don't be afraid to serve your reds straight from that cool corner where you store your wines – if they're a bit on the chilly side to start with, warm rooms and warm hands will soon change that.

79 | can I add things to my wine?

No. Haven't you seen those back-label stickers saying, "Anyone caught adding anything whatsoever to this wine will be fed only fish fingers for a year"?

There is of course nothing to stop you adding anything to a wine. In fact, while I'd keep the additives out of upper-tier bottles, many cheap wines are all the better for a bit of hacking. A bit of ice to chill it down (and mute the flavours), some fruit juice and spirits to give flavour and oomph, herbs and/or spices à la mulled wine, some soda water to make it into a long drink, some lemonade for sweetness and fizz, and so on. Don't be afraid to experiment. But if I see you doing it with a bottle of something really decent, I'll sit on your prize Pomeranian.

87 | I get embarrassed trying to pronounce all those foreign names – anything I can do?

Yes. Get over it. There are words and phrases and people that we all struggle with. Food enthusiasts have had to come to terms with gnocchi, paella and bouillabaisse. Sports fans have wrestled with Wojciech Szczesny, Giannis Antetokounmpo and Kim Clijsters. Film devotees have struggled (and won) when faced with Shia LaBeouf, Saoirse Ronan and Chiwetel Ejiofor. Tourists manage to emerge unfazed from encounters with Leicester Square, Yosemite

and Llangollen. And elsewhere in the drinks world, spirits lovers have recovered from their initial forays into Islay whisky, Cognac and Daiquiris of various types.

So what's the point fretting over Cahors, Cuvée and Carignan? Just open your mouth and set off. If you come across someone who recoils in horror when you say Ryes-ling rather than Reece-ling, they're probably not the sort of person you want to know anyway. And if they're a waiter, just ask them how to pronounce "gratuity".

94 | how many glasses of wine can I drink if I'm going to be driving?

Hmm... That's a bit like asking how much over the speed limit I can drive before I'm going to get caught. There are too many variables at play here to give a simple answer. How big is the glass, how strong is the wine, how long before driving will you be drinking, what size and sex are you, what state is your liver in, what is your metabolism like, what else have you been drinking and eating?

Actually, strike that, there is a simple answer. Get a taxi, get a bus or train, have soft drinks (see Chapter 43), just don't be an idiot.