

Balance, Body and Taste

by Paul Dunseath (AWO News # 24)

No matter how technically superior a wine may be in terms of alcohol, acid, sugar and tannin, it is of little use if it doesn't have an acceptable taste as well, so we should spend some time considering how to convert that often subjective consideration into an objective factor for the wines which we will be making.

We usually think of flavour as a simple, singular thing. We speak, for example, of vanilla flavour, or the flavour of strawberries. There are many foods, however, which have more than one flavour, and we talk therefore about the taste of curried chicken (with the myriad flavours of the particular curry blend, chicken, apples, raisins, and other ingredients), the taste of honey, of single malt Scotch, and of course of wine. If flavour is the soloist, taste is the choir, and it is the choir about which we will speak.

Continuing with the musical analogy, our wines should feature a good soloist backed by a strong accompaniment. Just as few singers sound their best without some form of backing, so few, if any, wines are able to stand on the basis of a single flavour. The great wines of Bordeaux, for example, most of which have a high percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, are usually described as spicy, herby and tannic, with scents and flavours variously described as that of cigar boxes, chocolate, fresh tobacco, cedar, and dry leaves! It is this depth and complexity of flavours that ultimately separates the finest Bordeaux from all of their imitators.

Yet, as anyone with a home music system (is there anyone who doesn't?) will know, there is more to it than that. Simply having a good soloist and backing does not make for good listening if the system isn't functioning properly and if, as a result, instead of being surrounded by sound we have everything coming out of one speaker; or if the "mono" button has been pushed, and the sound is flat and lifeless. It's important that the sound be properly balanced for us to experience maximum enjoyment.

So it is with wine. Experts tell us that all flavours are composed of four elements: sweet, sour, bitter and salty. This, then, is where it all comes together, for it is in the balance of these elements that we can begin to provide the proper backing to our soloist - flavour. And, without that proper backing, no amount of flavour can stand by itself without appearing one-dimensional and incomplete. Moreover the backing must continue throughout the tasting experience: greeting us with the first sip, supporting and complementing the flavour through the middle, then fading out slowly in the aftertaste. Many a promising wine is spoiled because of what tasters call "the hole in the middle", a point after the initial "rush" or "attack" of taste sensation when the flavour suddenly drops out, with only a weak reappearance in the aftertaste.

The featured soloist, flavour, is derived primarily from the fruit used in wine, and in part from the strain of yeast used, the acid/tannin/sugar balance, and the method by which the wine was made. It is

important that the yeast used be compatible with the type of wine being made, and that the production method is appropriate for the fruit and the intended end result.

When using fresh fruit (other than grapes), for example, prolonged fermentation on the pulp will produce a greater depth of flavour, but can also cause coarseness. Elderflowers or Rose petals, frequently added to "country" wines to improve bouquet, will instead result in a stale flavour if left in the wine much more than 24 hours. Heating fruit pulp improves juice extraction but may induce a flat, "cooked" taste, while allowing air to enter the wine will destroy the freshness of the wine and ultimately lead to a sherry-like taste. Finally, the length of skin contact in a fresh red grape wine directly affects the colour, body, maturation time and longevity of the finished product, as well as the astringency.

As the wine matures, whether in cask, carboy or bottle, other effects come into play. Products called "esters" are formed as a result of reactions between the alcohol and the several acids present in the wine. These are aromatic and add to the overall flavour profile. In addition, the long-chain tannin molecules break down into milder-tasting short-chain molecules and, if the wine has been put into a barrel, flavours from the barrel itself are introduced. As well, tannins and other polyphenols become progressively more insoluble over time, and settle out, causing even more softening of flavour (recently a friend of ours held a tasting featuring a 1923 Château Montrose, a 1925 Château Lafite Rothschild, and a 1929 Côte de Beaune; all three had thrown so much tannin that the inside of the bottles were coated from the bottoms to the corks; when the bottles were empty, they still appeared to be full). It is the result of these several changes that brings into being the "backing group", the underlying complexity that supports and enhances the wine's flavour, and it is for this reason that wines should be allowed adequate time to mature.

How will you know when that time has been reached? About the only way is to taste your better wines periodically - say every six months - until they appear to be at optimum drinkability (I know, I know; it's a dirty job, but someone has to do it).

Body, for its part, is the sense of fullness which a wine imparts. It is a complex thing, depending on fruit content, alcohol level, unfermented solutes such as proteins and other buffering agents, depth of flavour, and residual sugar, and is also to some extent subjective; yet it is of considerable import in the enjoyment of wine.

Our reflections on music serve to illustrate the concept. Both Shania Twain, with a small backing group, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, are "just right" for the music which has become their respective trademarks. Yet, they are very different. Is it volume? Yes and no. A CD of each can be played back at the same volume, but the choir has greater "body". A Dry Madeira and a Niersteiner differ somewhat in sweetness and in flavour, but even more so do they differ in body, although each is "just right" for its own use.

The term "body" probably originated in the Middle Ages when some winemakers literally added raw meat to their fermenting wines to increase its heaviness. This is not a practise that we recommend, but attention to the body of a wine is still of importance to the amateur. Even if flavour, acidity, tannin

and alcohol level are correct for the intended type of wine, the result can still be substantially different from commercial wine if the body is not right.

In a fresh grape wine one means of increasing body is to increase the period of skin contact during fermentation. Consequently, most white grape wines, having no skin contact period, are light in body; those with limited skin contact, such as California-style Chardonnays, have greater body; and red wines have still more, with those undergoing lengthy pulp fermentation having the most.

Wines made from other fruit frequently require amelioration to increase the body beyond that contributed by the original fruit alone. In particular, most wines produced from extracted fruit juices may be overly light in body without adjustment.

Fortunately the solution is fairly simple. What is needed is something high in protein or non-fermentable substances, but with either little flavour, or a flavour which is complementary to that of the wine. The most common adjuncts in current use are glucose chips (often found in recipes for heavy beers, for instance), and bananas, either fresh or dried.

When using fresh bananas (the ones turning black, and sold with the annotation "price reduced to clear" at the local supermarket are ideal), simply slice them and add to a fermenting must. Fifty grams of bananas per litre of wine (one half pound per gallon) is about right to improve the body of a table wine from light to medium. The bananas can be strained out in one to two weeks, by which time they should be spongy and soft. Alternatively, if the wine is particularly light in body (as, for example, a Rhubarb wine tends to be), the bananas can be pulped in a blender and left in until the first racking, at which time they will be left behind with the other fruit pulp. This results in a greater extraction of flavour, and is also suitable in the production of Sherries and Ports.

Bananas will also make a small contribution to the sugar content, which should be taken into account in calculating total S.G. drop; one pound of ripe bananas contains about two ounces of sugar (or 125 grams of sugar per kilogram of bananas).