

Wine Connoisseur

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THE WINE GLASS EFFECT: REALITY OR MYTH?



When was the last time you went to your favorite restaurant, ordered wine to compliment the meal, and remarked how good it was? The evening was made even more special by that wine selection. You can't wait to purchase the wine, so you track it down and prepare to open that memory again only to find that it tastes different. What changed, you wonder? Not to worry, this is all too common. Wine enjoyment has a lot to do with psychology; we can be made to feel good about a particular wine based on ambience, suggestions and, yes, even the price.

If you assume the above is true, does the same rule apply to what you drink the wine from? Does it matter if you drink your wine from an expensive glass, a coffee mug, or a Mason jar? There are as many opinions on this as there are containers to drink from. There has been endless discussion about which glass to use with which wine. Here is what we know: almost every shape and style of glass can change your perception of the taste and aroma of a wine. Having said that, I decided to explore this phenomenon in an attempt to validate the premise or debunk the myth.

Let's begin by examining the theory behind why the style, composition, and shape of what you drink wine from matters. In a previous column I discussed the proper method of tasting wine (Sabrosol, Winter 2004). I suggested that a wide, bowl-style glass

would allow you to swirl the wine to maximize the release of the aromas. So, here we would agree that shape is important. Wine glasses come in many shapes: champagne flutes, white wine glasses, red wine glasses and, within those categories, different style glasses to accommodate different varietals. I would be the first to agree that I like my red wine served in a large bowl glass because it allows the wine to breathe and I can swirl it more easily. However, I do apply this preference more often to expensive wines and am not so particular when it comes to table wines.

Now, let's examine wine glass shape and composition. For an expert opinion we called on Riedel (rhymes with needle) Crystal of Austria, founded in 1756 and considered the premier manufacturer of wine glasses. They have always catered to the fine wine connoisseur. Riedel's wine glasses come in many shapes and sizes, each shape designed to enhance a wine's flavor and bouquet. For example, the champagne flute is shaped specifically to maximize the bubbles found in sparkling wines. When champagne is poured into this style glass, the CO₂ gas dissolved in the liquid rubs against the seemingly smooth inside surface, causing the gas to burst into bubbles.

The composition of Riedel glasses is 24% lead crystal. Klaus Riedel spent a great deal of time experimenting on delivering

wine to the mouth. As a result of his testing, the company now claims that even tiny variations in the glass have a distinct affect on the wine's complexity. However, many in the food and wine industry dispute these findings.

The real question is, "Will any of this enhance my enjoyment of the wine?" Here is where the controversy begins. There are as many opinions on this as there are wine glasses. If you are fortunate enough to attend a seminar given by Georg Riedel, you will most certainly come away a convert. Similar to attending a motivational seminar, the effort here is to make you a believer. Major research centers in Europe and the United States, however, suggest that Riedel's claims are scientifically nonsense. So the question remains, does the vessel you drink the wine from make a difference? I can only give you my personal opinion based on the research I have done. I am convinced that the shape of the glass certainly makes a difference in the enjoyment of wine. Do I agree that whose glass it is contributes to the enjoyment? I will leave that up to the reader to determine.

My experience in tasting wine and teaching about wine does not make my preference any more accurate than yours. I will suggest that you give a lot of thought to this issue before you invest in expensive stemware. To quote Georg Riedel, "People who drink from Riedel drink better wine." I certainly agree with that premise because if you're paying \$90.00 each for glassware, you are inclined to be drinking more expensive wine! In conclusion, I have always told you that when it comes to wine, taste is an individual thing. This should also apply to your choice of glasses.

Now, about decanting a wine. When and why is it necessary? Here is the "skinny": As wine ages, some sediment (solid particles that fall to the bottom) will settle in the bottle. For this reason it is best to stand the bottle upright at least a couple of hours prior to pouring it into a decanter. Decanting does allow the wine to aerate much better than just opening the bottle. This will reduce the tannins a bit. So what wine should you decant? Mostly older reds, the type of wine that develops sediment, such as: Barolo, Rhone wines, Petite Syrah, and some California Cabernets. White wine rarely needs to be decanted.

Now for the process: Place a flashlight upright on the table with the beam aimed at the ceiling. Holding the neck of the bottle over the beam, slowly begin to pour the wine into a decanter; as you pour, watch for dark particles or cloudy, unclear wine in the neck. When that appears, stop! You have successfully decanted your wine.

In the next issue we will get back to exploring some specific wines to assist you in drinking the best values in wine available today. Cheers!

Great wines need to be aged.
Great wineries need to be visited.



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