BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

March 2022

CLASS E7 – DRY RED CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Presented by Angela Holmes (Nanaimo Chapter)

CLASS E7 - DRY RED CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Wines in this class must contain at least 85% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wine Characteristics

Primary Characteristics (derived from the fruit:) black currant, black plum, black cherry, blueberry, black pepper, menthol, green pepper, green herbs, black olive.
Secondary Characteristics (derived from wine making): Baking spices, cedar, cigar box, vanilla, toast.
Tertiary Characteristics (derived from bottle age): Cooked black fruit, dried black fruit, dried herbs, leather.

Technical Characteristics

Alcohol: 11% - l6%
Colour: Medium to deep red to garnet
Sugar: 0.0% - 1%
Specific Gravity: 0.990 - 0.995
Acidity: 5.0g/L - 6.7g/L
pH: 3.4 – 4.0

WINES FOR TASTING

The wines that have been chosen for this tasting are meant to demonstrate different quality levels as well as different growing regions and climates. Complexity and finish are important factors. Keep in mind that although a wine presents as austere, if it shows balance, complexity, concentration and has a long finish, it could be young and warrants consideration for high scores.

The assigned learning element of this tasting is to examine both the holistic approach and the technical 20 point system in judging. Assess the wine holistically. Use a “gut feel” and give it a medal status. Then go through the 20 point technical assessment and see if you come up with the same rating. If it matches, it is likely a reasonable score. There can however be variances, high or low. You might come up with a bronze with the holistic approach and score a silver with the 20 point system. Look at why this happened. Maybe the wine opened up and the wine warrants a silver or maybe you assessed the finish too high and the wine warrants a bronze.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the most widely planted vitis vinifera grape variety globally and is one of the best known. It’s indigenous home is in Bordeaux, France where it is used primarily in blends to make some of the most sought after and expensive wines in existence. From there, it has spread to almost all the warmer wine growing regions that exist. There are many reasons for it’s popularity. It adapts well to warm climates, can produce heavy crop loads, has high levels of phenolics (tannins, acid, flavour compounds), has an affinity to oak and has a distinctive flavour and aroma profile regardless of quality or where it is grown.

Cabernet Sauvignon is often used as a blender with other grape varieties, the classic example being Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot in Bordeaux (Bordeaux blend). In Italy, it plays well with Sangiovese, Merlot and Cabernet Franc making what is referred to as a Supertuscan. In Australia it's common to see a blend with Shiraz. In many other countries such as Canada, USA, Argentina, Israel etc., blends of Cabernet Sauvignon and other Bordeaux varieties are referred to as a Meritage (Merit + Heritage) and are controlled by the Meritage Alliance (for a small fee of course).

Single varietal wines produced with this noble grape are also common and can be extremely high quality, particularly in warmer climates when crop loads are restricted (Napa Valley comes to mind). Cabernet Sauvignon can also be made into good quality, medium tier and bulk wine. Some top regions for growing are the Medoc and Pessac Leognan regions in Bordeaux, France, California (Napa Valley, Sonoma and Santa Cruz Mountains), Washington State, Bolgheri in Tuscany, Italy, Coonawarra and Margaret River in Australia, Stellenbosch in South Africa and the Okanagan Valley in Canada. Chile has also recently had success in producing some age worthy and affordable wines. However, the largest increase in Cabernet Sauvignon production recently has been in China where over 60,000 ha are planted. There has yet to be any significant amount of quality wines produced out of China although this can be expected in the coming years.

There are some distinctive attributes of the Cabernet Sauvignon grape that sets it apart from other varieties. The vines tend to bud late in the season but they ripen very slowly. It is preferable, weather conditions permitting, to harvest late in the season. It is this long period on the vine that allows the grapes to take on different, unique, characteristics. Fresh ripe black current aromas and flavours are found in wines from moderate climates (Bordeaux). This shifts to black cherry and black current jam in warm climates (Napa). Spicy cedar wood and mint notes are common, not just from oak treatment, but from the grapes themselves in cooler climates. Menthol and eucalyptus aromas are found in many Australian Cabernets, particularly in the Coonawarra region. It is theorized that this can comes from proximity to eucalyptus trees. This can complement the black fruit nicely unless the fruit is under-ripe due to growing in adverse environments or being harvested too early at which point these "green" flavours take over and the wine is out of balance. If not fully ripened, the wine will take on stemmy or unpleasant green pepper notes.

Cabernet Sauvignon berries are unique in that the berries are small and have very thick, dark blue skins. This creates a dark blue tinge to the young wine as well as a depth of colour that can stand out in a blind tasting. A Cabernet Sauvignon should rarely be pale or shy in colour.

The thickness of the skins and small size create a high ratio of skins and pips to flesh/juice of the berries. The skins and pips are the source of tannins creating high levels in the wine. If the grapes are unripe at harvest, the tannins will be aggressive, unpleasant and stemmy. If they are over ripe, the tannins will be less preceptive and the wine will present as overly jammy and without the structure needed to create a balanced wine. The high level of tannins in these wines creates some difficulty in assessing quality. The tannin level can seem aggressive and out of balance in a young wine of very high quality. The trick is to be able to determine if the wine has enough other positive attributes such as acid, fruit profile andoak influence that will allow the wine to age and the tannins to integrate enough to create a well balanced wine.

The high concentration of skin and seeds to pulp (juice) also creates a high concentration of phenolics (pigment, tannins and flavours) relative to many other grape varieties. If unripe, the wine's flavour profile will be more in the spectrum of harsh green pepper, white pepper, unripe

berries. If phenolic ripeness (physiological ripeness) is achieved, the young wine will show fresh black fruit and hints of green pepper and capsicum.

The green notes (green pepper, uncooked asparagus, grass) found in Cabernet Sauvignon are derived from compounds called methoxypyrazines (commonly called pyrazines). These compounds can complement other aspects of the wine if they are ripe. If the fruit is harvested before physiological ripeness, the pyrazines will dominate the flavour profile and aroma of the wine. It can be tricky when judging a wine with this flavour profile as it does not appeal to some people. It has to be assessed for balance in relation to the other flavours (fruit, spice, oak).

Another aspect of Cabernet Sauvignon that makes it unique is its parentage. DNA profiling done out of the University of California have determined that Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc are the direct parents. This contributes to what one should expect when tasting Cabernet Sauvignon. It is common to have subtle grassy green pepper notes as well an aromatic perfume (violets, cherry) in this wine as well as spicy peppery notes that are derived from its parentage.

Wine making can have a significant impact in the style of wine derived from Cabernet Sauvignon. The high concentrations of phenolics encourages the wine maker to favour longer maceration times in order to extract as much from the skins and pips as possible. This can be very successful in working with ripe fruit which can producing a red wine that can withstand years of aging and the benefits of flavour transitions that go along with time. Harsh tannins soften and become intricately integrated. If unripe and left on the skins for too long, the only things remaining will be acid and grip. The trick for winemakers is to know how much extraction to expect from the quality of grapes that they are working with.

Use of oak during wine making is also a factor to be considered. Cabernet Sauvignon grapes have a wonderful affinity for French Oak. French oak barrels have a much tighter grain and are less dense than some other barrels (American for example.) This imparts subtle baking spice aromas and flavours to the wine and the tannins tend to be silkier and finer which works well with the highly tannic Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. These components can blend wonderfully with the classic black current, black cherry menthol flavours of the fruit. Oak chips and staves are also used successfully for more bulk produced wines and can help to add complexity. However, there has been a tendency towards overuse of these tools in combination with overripe grapes to mask unpleasant flavours.

Age is the last factor to consider in Cabernet Sauvignon. The tannins, acid, colour and concentration of flavour which are the result of good viticulture can produce wine that can age for decades. The bright fruit notes transition into cooked then dried fruit, the cedar transitions to cigar box and leather, and the tannins soften and integrate

FOOD PAIRINGS

Steak, roast beef, braised beef, game etc.. Cabernet Sauvignon (and other high acid and high tannin grapes) pair well with red meat. The tannins interact and bind with the fat molecules which help to release the flavours in your mouth. The high acid levels in the wine have been shown to help the acids in your stomach break down the protein in the meat. A fun pairing for summer is to find a young, inexpensive Cabernet Sauvignon wine, chill it slightly and pair it with BBQ burgers on the patio.