

12 KNOW YOUR TINGLE FROM YOUR PUCKER

Understanding the difference between acidity and tannin is key to wine tasting, but most resources fail to differentiate these two textural sensations head-on. Let's get to it.

Acidity, perhaps the most important single component in wine, is the tingle you feel on your tongue and inner cheeks. Present in both red and white wine, it tends to be most apparent in zingy styles of white wine, such as Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling, but it is also an essential feature in food-friendly reds. It is the primary reason why we perceive some wines as fresh, lively, and vibrant, and it also provides an essential counterbalance to the sweetness of off-dry and dessert wines.

Like a lemon squeeze on a salmon fillet, acidity provides lift to food, heightening flavors and cutting through richness. It also invigorates the appetite and refreshes the mouth, preparing your mouth for the next bite. Because the term "acidity" conjures up something that necessitates a fistful of Tums or burns through laboratory floors, people like to euphemistically refer to it as a wine's crispness, tanginess, or, at the extreme, tartness. How much acidity you like in your wine is a personal preference, but too little is considered flabby and dull, while too much can rattle your teeth.

Tannin, on the other hand, is the dry, puckering sensation you feel in your mouth. In addition to being in tea and leather, tannin is a compound that resides in the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes. Because red wine, unlike white, spends more time in contact with its skins, tannin tends to show in certain red wines, especially thick-skinned types like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. In moderate proportions, tannin can provide a pleasantly dry feeling that gives a wine oomph and sometimes the ability to get better with age. It can also help impart that smooth, powdery, or velvety sensation that we feel in some reds. When excessive, it is lip-strippingly, gum-numbingly bitter, making a wine literally hard to swallow. The solution for highly tannic wines is to drink them with protein-rich foods such as cheeses and meats, which, like milk in tea, will tone down your perception of tannin.

Walnuts, Tea, Red Wine are all in the Thrill of Tannin. Puckering gripes on the Tongue and gums Mistress Tannin turns the scene Astringently yours ... but sometimes softer she envelopes with silken finesse, a Velvet Caress Leads an Oomph to dishes a gleability to wine lessening in time a fair felix this~ Leathery Dominatrix Whose Boot is so fine

ACIDITY VS. TANNIN FACE-OFF

SYMBOL	
ACIDITY: LEMON	TANNIN: TEA
MAKES A WINE...	
ACIDITY: FRESH, VIBRANT	TANNIN: DRY, PUCKERING
MANIFESTS IN MOUTH AS...	
ACIDITY: TINGLE	TANNIN: PUCKER
SALIVA	
ACIDITY: STIMULATES IT	TANNIN: STEALS IT
FUNCTION	
ACIDITY: HEIGHTENS FLAVOR, CUTS RICHNESS, BALANCES SWEETNESS, SOMETIMES ENABLES AGEABILITY	TANNIN: ADDS TEXTURE, CONTRIBUTES TO AGEABILITY
EASIER IDENTIFIED IN...	
ACIDITY: WHITE WINE	TANNIN: RED WINE
PARADIGMATIC WINE	
ACIDITY: SAUVIGNON BLANC	TANNIN: CABERNET SAUVIGNON
IN EXCESS	
ACIDITY: ELECTRICITY, BUZZING	TANNIN: SANDPAPER, DUSTY
METAPHORICAL DESTINATION	
ACIDITY: ELECTRIC TOWER	TANNIN: SAHARA DESERT
METAPHORICAL BEVERAGE	
ACIDITY: LEMONADE	TANNIN: OVERLY CONCENTRATED TEA, ESPRESSO
SADOMASOCHISTIC TERM	
ACIDITY: PRICKLY	TANNIN: CHAFING
FANCY WORD	
ACIDITY: ASTRINGENT	TANNIN: SCABROUS
INSIDER TERM	
ACIDITY: NERVY (FOR HOW IT JUMPS ON THE TONGUE)	TANNIN: GRIPPY (FOR HOW IT GRIPS THE PALATE)
ANTHROPOMORPHIC TERM	
ACIDITY: VIVACIOUS, SOUR	TANNIN: MUSCULAR, HARD
CAN BE MODERATED SOMEWHAT BY...	
ACIDITY: ACIDIC OR SALTY FOOD	TANNIN: FAT AND PROTEINS, DECANTING

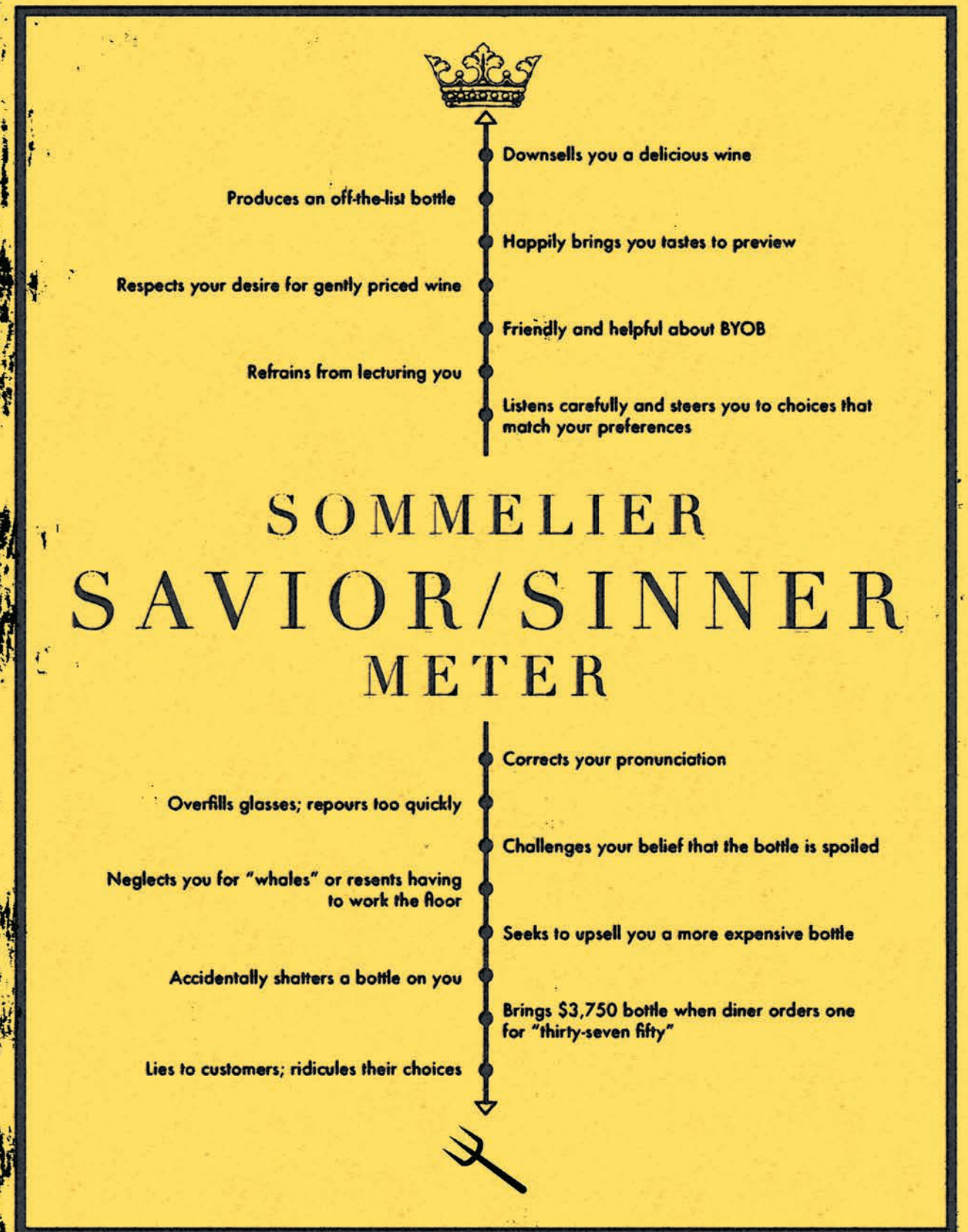
53 HANDLING THE GLASSHOLE SOMM

Almost everything a server does either builds trust or depletes it. Once in a while, that trust isn't just diminished, it is eviscerated. I am not talking about run-of-the-mill breaches in hospitality, such as when the server corrects your pronunciation or challenges your belief that a bottle is spoiled. Nor is it about an occasional act of carelessness, like the time a waiter allowed a bottle to slip from his hands on to the table's edge, where it shattered in a glittering star field onto my sweater.

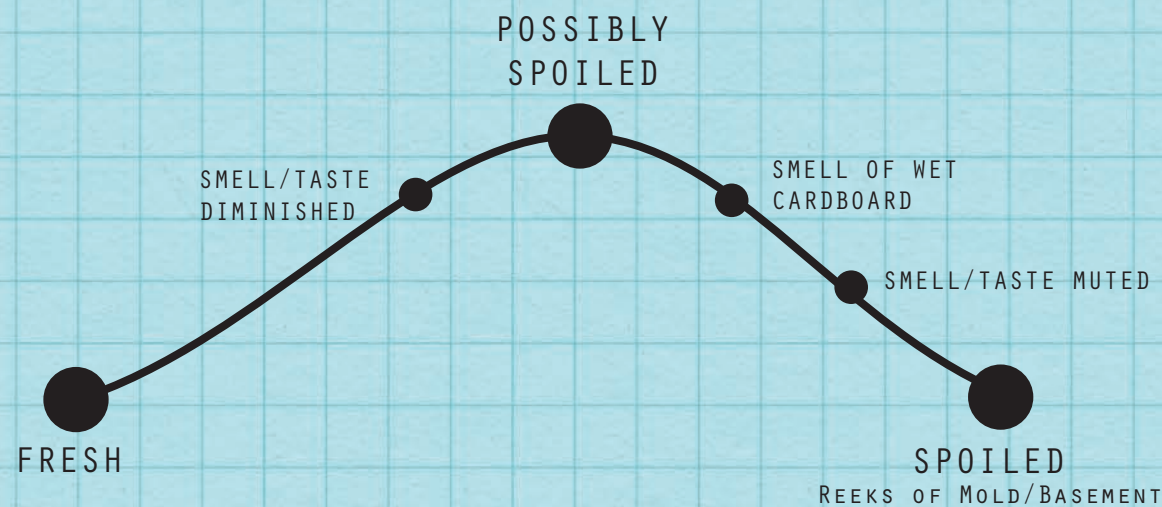
No, we are talking about the foreseeably distressing. Take, for example, the diner at Bobby Flay Steak in Atlantic City who thought he had ordered a \$37.50 bottle when his waitress told him it was "thirty-seven fifty." To the table's horror, it turned out to be a \$3,750 bottle of Screaming Eagle, the rare cult Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa. After days of bickering back and forth, the restaurant eventually lowered the charge to \$2,200, which is still a wicked price to pay for what sounds like an honest miscommunication. A savvy server would have asked for triple verification—or a signature in blood—before placing an order for such an outrageously expensive bottle.

And then there is the full-fledged glasshole. One need look no further than a recent piece in *The New York Times* in which a waiter at a Michelin three-star restaurant described how he and his fellow servers would play the "adjective game," competing to see who could sell diners wine with the "least helpful" descriptors possible; "haunted" was a favorite. In a follow-up article, a former waiter described how he and his co-workers were instructed to lie to a regular that he was getting his favorite Chardonnay by the glass when it was a totally different wine; the key, the waiter wrote, was to "sell people on your confidence."

If your sommelier seems to be a scoundrel of this sort, wrest back control and choose the wine yourself, but not before issuing a parting comment. Whether fussing over the perfect Windsor knot or Chanel jacket, sommeliers tend to be vain animals. At the same time, their job requires hauling wine, busing tables, and other dirty work that inevitably scuffs their footwear. So hit them where it hurts: ridicule their shoes.



CORK TAINT: A CONTINUUM



OTHER FLAWS

OTHER WORRISOME FLAWS ARE SIGNALLED BY A WHIFF OF:

- PRUNES, STEWED FRUIT: WINE IS “COOKED,” FROM EXPOSURE TO EXCESSIVE HEAT
- NUTTY, SHERRY-LIKE: WINE IS “OXIDIZED,” FROM EXPOSURE TO EXCESSIVE OXYGEN
- BAND-AIDS, UNPLEASANT BARNYARD: WINE IS “BRETTY,” FROM EXCESSIVE AMOUNTS OF THE YEAST *BRETTANOMYCES*)
- BURNT MATCHES/ROTTEN EGGS: SULFUR-RELATED FLAW.

ENEMY NUMBER ONE, HOWEVER, REMAINS THE MUSTY, MOLDY, SPIRIT-SLAYING STENCH OF CORK TAINT.

70 EMBRACE CORKED WINE

Once you happen upon a wine that is corked—I mean hurricane-savaged basement, wrestling-shoes-in-a-locker corked—fight the urge to whisk it away as if it were a fly in your soup. Counterintuitively, consider keeping it on the table, or have your server do so, because it is one of wine’s unsung learning opportunities.

This is because knowing when a wine is corked is fundamental to wine appreciation, so much so that it is largely why we are asked to test the wine we order in restaurants. As I explain in chapter 69, however, its identification can be frustratingly elusive to the uninitiated, in part because a wine can be only *partially* corked and also one afflicted with cork taint typically gets removed from the table so quickly that other diners do not get a chance to inhale its moldy charms for themselves.

So if you have a corked wine in your midst, treat it as if you have captured a rare Sierra Nevada red fox: approach with care, but take the time to get to know it. Pass a glass of it around your table for others to smell it; they may cringe at its malodorousness at first but will later appreciate that someone has *finally* shown them exactly what to smell for in judging cork taint. In fact, when I come across an obviously corked wine at my seminars, as happens occasionally, I experience not disappointment but elation, because passing it through the audience offers an olfactory lesson of a lifetime.

