



THE GUIDE TO

WINE FAULTS

Matthew Clark

Your guide to wine faults

How to spot faults and which steps to take to ensure the wine you serve to your customers is in the best possible condition.

Matthew Clark

We're a national alcohol and drinks wholesaler with over 200 years' experience. We've built up an unrivalled range of over 7,500 products that we supply to 1000's of the UK's very best bars, restaurants, pubs and hotels. But for us, it's not just moving boxes. It's delivering expertise in category development, product and staff training and marketing support. Sharing our knowledge, if you'd like it, to help you grow your business.

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Introduction

Are you sure that you could sniff out a flawed wine? If so, you're certainly in the minority and perhaps, shouldn't be reading this guide at all! Many are uncertain about discussing wine, with the product often mystified and complicated by well-intentioned experts. While this enchanting view of wine helps keep consumers engaged with the category, it can make all of us lack confidence in speaking out when we think a wine doesn't taste right.

Wine faults are relatively rare these days, the growing use of screwcaps and more venues taking care over wine storage has seen to that. Even when encountered, however, the most common flaws in wine are nothing to worry about. They usually will, of course, harm the taste of the wine, but most wine drinkers might struggle to detect a difference. Some nuances you identify, believed to be a wine flaw, may even be intentional.

Evaluating Wine

The first step to being able to spot wine faults is understanding what wines should taste like. Building an understanding is a long and arduous task involving tasting plenty of wine. Tasting and evaluating a range of wines is simply the only way to build up a memory bank of odours, tastes, and expectations. Building such a bank will not only enable you to spot wine faults more easily, but will allow you to make informed future judgements on what you will enjoy and what others may enjoy.

First, identify the grape variety, or varieties a glass of wine is made from along with its country of origin. Then tilt your glass (against a light background if possible) and look closer at the true colour of the wine. This closer look can reveal a lot about the character of the wine before we try it. Red wines get paler as they age. They also change colours from a purple hue when very young, through to a bright ruby-red, before taking on a more orangey-garnet colour and finally brown when they are very old. White wines range from watery-white, some have a greenish tinge, through to the yellow-golden colours that deepen as they age. Contact with wood in the winemaking process will also affect the colour of white wine; it will take on more golden tints with more oak influence.

Our sense of smell greatly affects what we taste, (think about your lack of taste when you have a cold) some argue that the 'nose' of a wine is the most significant judgement made when evaluating it. We want to swirl and sniff and take in the different characteristics the wine displays. We can describe what we smell in many ways, but the easiest way to break it down is into the following groups;

Fruit

Typically: citrus, tropical, red berry, blackberry, ripe

Floral

Typically: Elderflower, blossom, rose, violet

Spice

Typically: Sweet, pungent, peppery

Vegetal

Typically: Oak, herbaceous, fresh

Other

Typically: Animal, dairy, mineral, tobacco, chocolate

Take a sniff of the wine in your glass and consider what you can detect. Then swirl the wine around in your glass for a few seconds and take your nose right to the rim of the glass and smell again. Can you detect the difference in the intensity of what you smell? What we are doing here is aerating the wine, really allowing oxygen to release those aromas, it should make our job far easier in identifying different characteristics in the wine.

Now for what we all look forward to! Generally, the palate profile follows on from what we found on the nose. Take a sip of the wine and lean forward slightly, then (without dribbling) draw the wine and some air over your taste buds by doing 'the wine slurp' like a backwards whistle. This has the same effect as swirling the wine in the glass. It aerates the wine and draws it past our nasal passage, helping to release the flavours and aromas.

Concentrate on the following components that make up wine in order to evaluate it;

Sweetness:

How much sweetness/sugar can you detect in this wine? Note that it is very easy to confuse fruity, tropical ripe flavours in wine as sweetness: this is not the same thing. You will detect sweetness on the tip of your tongue.

All wines have acidity to cleanse the palate. Acidity is detected on the side of your tongue and gums, your mouth will 'water'. Even sticky, sweet dessert wines have high acidity levels to keep them balanced.

Flavour Characteristics

Think about the same categories you used for the 'nose'. What fruit, floral, spice, vegetal or any other flavours can you detect to describe this wine?

Are the flavours balanced with one another?

Does the flavour change and develop after you have swallowed the wine?

Body

Think about the texture of the wine, is it light, medium or full-bodied?

Other Characteristics

How else would you like to describe this wine? Tannic, acidity level, alcohol level, bubbly?

Conclusion

Do all the above factors come together to make a balanced wine?

How long does the wine flavour last in your mouth?

Do you think the wine is good value for money?



What are wine faults?

While every effort is made by the winemaker to create fit and healthy bottles of wines, sometimes, things go wrong and a bottle can be off its mark. Whilst not necessarily harmful to the consumer they may shy away from them in future if not identified as a fault rather than intended flavours.

Wines can develop faults at any stage of the journey from vineyard to glass. From taint associated with rot in grapes that are not sorted out at the triage table, to heat-related problems picked up when sitting on a hot dockside in a shipping container. Sometimes the consumer may perceive a fault which may be stylistically normal; such as the oxidative qualities of sherry or sediment thrown by an unfiltered wine.

In all cases, how the consumer is treated is of paramount importance, and understanding what the major faults are and how they might have occurred is handy information to have when addressing the, 'my wine is corked', situation. Fortunately, innovations such as screwcaps and a better understanding of how to look after wine, both in and out of the winery, mean that the percentage of wine bottles showing faults are very low these days. As always the key is to make sure the customer gets a fresh glass or bottle and continues to enjoy their time in your restaurant or bar.

The 6 Most Common Faults

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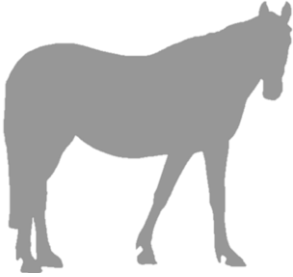
Oxidised Wine

Also known as: Maderised wine

This fault is a chemical change caused by too much oxygen exposure. Rusted metal is oxidized... it's that same process but in your wine. Oxidization is the most common wine fault and can occur throughout the wine making process and after bottling.

Oxidized wines lose their brightness, both in colour and in flavour. Bright reds turn to brick colour or brownish, and fresh tastes develop drier, more bitter characteristics. White wines are much more susceptible to oxidation than reds, because reds' higher tannin levels act as a buffer. If you really want to see what this looks like: open a new bottle, pour a glass and save that bottle for about a week. Congrats, your bottle is ruined. Drink some, compare it to that first glass you had and add the contrast to your memory bank.

Unfortunately, once a wine has oxidised, there is nothing you can do. You can however help minimise then chance of a wine oxidising by using a wine preserving tool on opened bottles. Keeping all wine, closed or open away from direct heat and bright light also helps.



Brettanomyces

Also known as: Brett

A 'fault' that some actually see as a stylistic option, Brettanomyces is a wild spoilage yeast. Brett is a bone of contention in the trade as to whether or not it is acceptable at all. Is it 'le gout de terroir', something that makes a wine characteristic of its region, a fault, or something we should have an acceptable level of tolerance towards?

You can spot Brett by giving a wine a sniff. The detection of this fault is all in finding farmyard odours. This could be a smell of dung, leather, sweat, ham, bacon, kidney, cheese, horse, or animals generally. The levels tend to vary, and some people are far more sensitive to it than others.

Whilst low-level influence adds some complexity and a savoury character to the wine that some find attractive, sometimes, too much farmyard is simply too much to take. A wine suffering heavily from this fault is past any repair and destined to be left undrunk.



Volatile Acidity

Also known as: VA, Vinegar

During fermentation, activity by yeast cells naturally produce a small amount of acetic acid. If, however, the wine is exposed to oxygen via open/traditional fermentation, then acetobacter bacteria will convert the ethanol (alcohol) into acetic acid. Sometimes this is intentional as a means to develop complexity in the wine.

With that in mind, very low levels of this do not affect the wine adversely but increasing concentration will leave an undesirable taste in your mouth. On tasting the wine you'll sense a 'vinegar' flavour that can vary from pickled onion to nail varnish, polish or glue. Wines made traditionally are more susceptible to Volatile Acidity. The wine may also appear a touch cloudy and have a prickly fizz or spritz about it.

You can't fix a wine that has 'vinegar taint' unfortunately. Winemakers, however, do take care to reduce the chance of it occurring by adding sulphates to limit the growth of bacteria. Additionally, winemakers may look to combine wines high in VA with low VA wines to produce a blend with acetic acid levels below what most people can detect - but we don't recommend you try that!



Sulphur Compounds

Also known as: Reduction

Sulphur in small amounts is naturally present in all wine and sulphur dioxide is a common additive used throughout the winemaking process. Primarily they are used to stop oxidation but also as an anti-microbial agent to prevent other wine faults... Ironically, sometimes things can go wrong in its deployment and high sulphur levels are pretty easy to notice.

A sniff of a wine suffering from reduction will detect the primary sulphur compounds that can give your wine some funk; they all manifest themselves in different flavours and smells. In its purest form think of the smell of struck match. To some, this is a pleasant aroma, to others not. Either way, if you notice rotten egg, burnt rubber or skunk in your wine, you probably have a sulphur problem on your hands.

Finally, we have a fault that can be fixed - sort of. The offending flavour can often be weakened through decanting or aeration. Decanting can reportedly help reduce the sulphites in wine by up 60%. Wine filtering and aeration products have also appeared on the market, along with drops containing hydrogen peroxide that aim to reduce sulphite levels.



Heat Damage

Also known as: Cooked wine

Heat damage can strike at any time. While in transit, while being stored, or when being displayed on a hot shelf behind a busy bar with lights shining down. In short, cooked or heat damaged wine is when the liquid has been ruined by exposure to too much heat. Imagine a pallet of wine cases cooking in the sun in the car park behind a wine shop on a hot summer day - you can assume the wine will suffer.

Once again the smell of the wine will give it away. Look for the wine revealing jammy smells: sort of sweet and fruity, but processed. Even before getting to this point, you may have already noticed the fault. Heat damage often compromises the seal of the bottle as the heated wine expands and forces the cork out. As such, this fault is often be accompanied by oxidation.

It's just as important to store your wine, as it is to serve it, at the optimum temperature. While different wine styles vary in the temperature they are best served at, all should be stored cold to ensure they keep well. You can't fix a heat damaged wine but storing your wine at a constant 12 degrees can prevent it.



2,4,6-Trichloroanisole (TCA)

Also known as: Cork taint, Corked wine

2,4,6-Trichloroanisole may not be the catchiest of names, but its familiar moniker of 'corked wine' is the most well know of faults. This term is often used broadly as a catch-all term for many of the flaws we've already discussed, a synonym for a wine with nasty smells or flavours. Despite this name, this particular fault is not related to the cork itself, even wines sealed with a screwcap can be 'corked'!

Cork taint results when a chemical contaminant finds its way into your bottle during production or storage, usually from the cork closure; generally this caused by two closely related chemicals 2,4,6 trichloroanisole, often called TCA, or 2,4,6 tribromoanisole, often referred to as TBA. These contaminants can affect all surfaces from oak barrels to processing lines at the winery. It occasionally leads to entire batches, rather than single bottles, being ruined.

You find this fault first in the nose; the wine will present a dank odour. A tainted bottle will taste like wet newspaper, mouldy cellar or smelly dog. Cork taint rates have been dropping since stricter quality controls have been implemented and it is estimated that TCA now affects less than 5% of wine. Some claim you can pour the wine into a bowl with a sheet of cling film to fix the fault. The TCA will be attracted to the polyethylene and pulled from your wine, probably not a technique to attempt table side!

The best (worst) of the rest



UV Light Damage

Also known as: Lightstrike

This fault is the damage caused by exposure to excessive UV radiation, most commonly from storing wine in the sun or near a window. Lightstrike is most common in delicate white wines or any wine that comes in a clear bottle. It can make the wine taste like a wet woolly jumper; we're sure you've tasted one of those before.. Nothing will fix this, but you can avoid it by storing your wine out of direct sunlight.



Tartrate Crystals

Also known as: Broken glass (mistakenly)

These crystals may be found on the cork or at the bottom of the bottle. They resemble small pieces of broken glass, which many confuse them for. They are harmless, forming in unfiltered wines that may have been kept for a few hours in cold conditions, perhaps whilst in transit. A simple fix is to decant the wine, not feasible with a guest but acceptable at home, the taste is not noticeably affected.



Secondary Fermentation

...unintentional, not Champagne!

In short, this is when you find tiny bubbles in your wine where there shouldn't be any, especially in an old bottle of red wine. This usually happens when the residual sugar in the bottled wine feeds on some yeast that wasn't filtered out before bottling. Look for the bubbles or listen for the psssst on opening. There can also be a bit of a zippy flavour. Not all secondary fermentation is an accident though. Some winemakers will use it to add a little kick to their wines, and some styles are naturally frizzante such as Vinho Verde or some Gruner Veltliners. It can also result in a visible yeast haze or deposit in the bottle. Make sure to do some research into the style to make sure it is not supposed to be there.



Storing Wine Correctly

Cold and dark cellars have made the perfect home for wine for centuries. Away from the treats of heat damage and harmful UV rays, wine can not only survive but age wonderfully. Of course, very few wines are suited to long term ageing in the bottle. Wine is meant to be drunk, at least in our opinion, so store it well so that it doesn't go to waste!

Getting the temperature right is the primary concern. Wine is very temperamental to not only heat but fluctuations in temperature. Numerous chemical reactions are at play inside the bottle, and heat will accelerate these. A wine stored at more than 20 degrees will see a rapid loss of quality, with fruity flavours the first to go. All wines should be stored at around 12 degrees, but anywhere from 8 to 20 degrees will suffice as long as it's relatively stable. Temperature fluctuations have the effect of drawing oxygen into the wine, its biggest killer.

Oxygen is also the reason wine is best stored on its side; the corks contact with the wine keeps it damp. Corks can dry out and allow oxygen into the bottle as they shrink. If stored in a warm environment, keeping your wines upright will compound the issue. This makes standing your wines under lights on your back bar a recipe for a faulty wine. Of course, screwcap wines can be stored any way up.

As discussed, strong direct sunlight or incandescent light can adversely react with wine and cause faults, with delicate, light-bodied white wines in clear or light green bottles the most at risk. Store wines in a cool, dry, dark place, if not a cellar or purpose designed wine fridge, then a cupboard away from heat sources will do! Humid locations dry out the cork and spoil the wine.

With your wines hidden away, you'll need a great wine list. Your menu is the most important tool to communicate your wine range and pricing to customers. Sure, it needs to be clearly visible and quickly and easily accessible, but also has to pull its weight. It's not just a menu, it's a tool for maximising your profits.

Menus should encourage the consumer to purchase the most profitable drinks, the wines they will enjoy that make you more profit. This can be achieved in many ways, from organising wines into styles to make the customer decision easier, to using a progressive pricing approach to wine that 'levels out' pricing across your range. Research has also shown that the consumer is more likely to spend more when pound signs are removed.

The image shows a wine menu with four numbered callouts:

- 1:** Points to the 'Sparkling' section header.
- 2:** Points to the 'Sparkling' item 'Charles Heidsieck Blanc de Blancs'.
- 3:** Points to the 'Whites' section header.
- 4:** Points to the 'Rich, Odd & Unlabeled' section header.

The menu is organized into several sections: Champagne, Sparkling, Whites, Rose, Red, Soft, Juicy & Fruity, Bold, Juicy & Fruity, and Rich, Odd & Unlabeled. Each item includes a name, price, and a detailed description.

Key points

- Wine faults are relatively rare but it's important to be aware of them.
- Most wine drinkers can struggle to detect a wine fault, or assume it's 'corked'.
- To detect faults, you must first build a 'memory bank' of wine aromas and flavours.
- Wines change colour with age, this isn't a fault but changes the wines character.
- Our sense of smell greatly affects what we taste.
- Aerating the wine with a swirl will reveal more intense aromas.
- Drawing air over wine while tasting it will release its flavours.
- Wines are characterised mainly by sweetness, flavour, aromas and body.
- Wines can develop faults at any stage of the journey from vineyard to glass.
- Some wine faults are intentional, used by the winemaker to add complexity.
- Storing wine correctly can minimise the risks of a wine fault occurring.
- Wine should be stored at around 12 degrees.
- Big variances in temperature can cause oxidation.
- Storing wines standing up can dry the cork and allow in air.
- Oxygen is the main killer of wines.
- Keep wines horizontal and in a dark environment.

Why Matthew Clark

Delivering your customers the perfect glass or bottle of wine every time is as important to us as it is to you. Our wine buying team are a part of what makes us unique - each responsible for their own part of the world enabling the best possible insight into what's available to suit our diverse customer base. As a dedicated wine supplier to the On-Trade, we have long-standing relationships with hundreds of winemakers globally.

Our buying team specially select the very best wines, those produced by small, family-owned wineries as well as many produced ethically along with top, consumer requested brands. In 2018 our 1400 wines won over 700 medals from the key wine awards bodies. Over half of the wines in our range are reserved exclusively for the UK On-Trade. Each wine and winemaker have a story to tell.

We offer a truly unique composite drinks supply solution making Matthew Clark an efficient, reliable and well tested service partner;

Visit <https://www.matthewclark.co.uk/contact> or call 0344 822 3910 for more information.



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