



... WHEN THE CONVERSATION IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WINE

SPRING 2014

The Mad Scientist

...HITS IT RIGHT ON THE NOSE

If you were able to attend our last barrel tasting in November, then, hopefully, you made it over to our Signature Aroma Table and played around with all the wonderful wine fragrances. If you missed this great event (and we're sorry you did!) you might be asking, "What the heck is an Aroma Table?" Glad you asked! The Aroma Table is an interactive, smell-able display of over 40 pure wine aromas. It is Winemaker Chris' specialty, something he developed to help Middle Ridge fans learn to identify the different aromas in wine. We sensed there was more to know about this unique teaching tool, and Chris was happy to share his great whiffs of knowledge.

Q: *Where did you get the idea for your Signature Aroma Table?*

Chris: The inspiration came from a couple courses Melody and I took at UC-Davis – "Introduction to Sensory Evaluation of Wine" and "Descriptive Analysis of Red and White Table Wine." They are fantastic two-day seminars that I strongly recommend to everyone. In the second course, we were introduced to over 200 aroma standards that mimic what you smell in wine. It was so much fun that I wanted to share the experience with our club members and friends. Making the aroma standards is a lot of work, though, so I make just a few dozen for our events.

Q: *How do you make the aroma standards?*

Chris: I start with a cheap wine that has little aroma of its own and pour it into small bottles. A single ingredient is added to each bottle based on the "recipes" developed at UC-Davis. The alcohol in the base wine volatilizes – turns into vapor – the ingredients that are added to it. So, for instance, I'll add something like juice from a fresh grapefruit in a bottle of white wine, or pureed bell pepper in a bottle with red wine. As the ingredient sits in the wine for a couple days, the aromas really start to pop. Once the aromas are fully extracted, I strain any solids out of the sample and it's ready to go!

Q: *It's strange to think of smelling something like bell pepper in wine. How do wines get these aromas?*

Chris: So many things contribute to the aromas. It starts in the vineyards with the soil and climate. For example, the smell of olives is very common in Temecula Valley Cabernet Sauvignon – it's just something about the area.

And then there's the fermentation process. All kinds of things can happen there. For starters, there are hundreds of strains of yeast that can be used, and each lends a different aroma. The barrel in which a wine is aged affects the aromas, too. Winemakers love to play around with all these things.

Q: *The Aroma Table is very popular. Why do you think that is?*

Chris: People really have fun with it because it's interactive and they get immediate feedback. They start by getting a glass of Middle Ridge wine, but I always suggest they smell a few of the aroma standards before sniffing their glass of Middle Ridge. They'll go back and forth, sniffing the aroma standards and comparing them to their own glass of wine. And then, before you know it, they have an "Aha!" moment and are amazed that they've been able to identify some of the aromas in the wine they're drinking.

Q: *Does that mean anyone can develop a good "wine nose?"*

Chris: Absolutely! I always encourage people to smell things whenever possible – smell the produce at the grocery store, sniff the herbs while you're cooking, smell the flowers in the garden. It's important to exercise the nose as much as possible. Keep working at it!



Barrels

...THE WINEMAKER'S SPICE BOX

One of the biggest influences on the aroma and character of a wine is the wooden barrel in which it is aged. And like so many aspects of the winemaking process, there are a number of variables a winemaker considers when choosing a barrel. In other words, a wine barrel is never "just" a barrel but a powerful tool in the winemaker's arsenal.

A Little History

Over the centuries, many types of wood were used for aging and storing wine – palm wood, pine, chestnut, acacia, and redwood. While experimenting with different woods, winemakers discovered that barrels made from oak coaxed out a complexity of texture, flavor and aroma that the others did not.

The aromas and flavors released by oak can vary depending on the type of oak (such as French or American), whether and to what degree the barrels have been toasted (charred by burning the interior), and how long the wine remains in the barrel. As Winemaker Chris always says, "Barrels are like a spice box. I use them to season wine in much the same way that I use spices to season food when I'm cooking."

French Oak vs. American Oak

Winemakers usually have a strong preference for the kind of oak used to make their barrels, and Chris is no exception. "All of my wine is aged in French oak," says Chris. "I like the way it works in subtle ways to enhance the natural fruit aromas of the wine. There is more of a finesse with French oak. American oak, on the other hand, tends to overpower the wine with honey and butterscotch aromas. It also produces more intense 'oaky' aromas and flavors in a shorter period of time."

Some of the difference has to do with the tightness of the wood grain. Because American oak has a wider grain, more of its wood character is imparted to the wine. The tighter grain of the French oak slows the introduction of wood character to the wine. It also slows the oxidation process (oxygen enters through the walls of the barrel), allowing the fruit aromas to develop into more complex ones as the wine ages.

Toasting Levels

Many wonderful aromas and flavors also come from the toasting of a barrel. The most familiar are vanilla, tobacco, caramel, coconut, cinnamon, clove, smoke, chocolate, toffee, and almond. Toasting is done by holding the barrel over a large flame and rotating it until the desired toast

is achieved. The process caramelizes the natural sugars in the wood without burning the wood. In many cases, the internal temperature during toasting can be between 700 and 1000 degrees Fahrenheit. The caramelized sugars work their way into the barrel and eventually impart their aromas and flavors to the wine.

Winemakers choose from five different toasting levels – light, light+, medium, medium+, and heavy – and each results in a different aroma and flavor profile. "A light toast gives a spicier aroma," says Chris. "And a heavy toast makes a more charred or burned aroma. So if you smell smoked bacon in a wine, it was probably aged in a heavy toast barrel. My preference is a medium or medium+ toast. They highlight the fruit's natural aromas better than the others, and that's always been my goal – to respect the aromas and flavors of each grape varietal."

Middle Ridge Signature Aroma Table



Table a couple years ago. I started with five samples of wine aged in French oak – one of each of the toasting levels. It was so popular I added samples of American oak the following year. I enjoy helping people understand what it is that makes them like a particular wine. That way, they can make choices they're happy with whether they're at a restaurant, a grocery store, or a party."



Epic Wine Fails

...WHEN AROMAS TURN INTO ODORS

KEEPING WINE HAPPY AT HOME

In the 2005 movie, *Prime*, Meryl Streep's character Lisa Metzger, an otherwise highly intelligent psychoanalyst, maintains a quirky tendency to refrigerate her red wine. Fortunately, most people in the real world know this is not the way to treat those precious bottles, but there does seem to be some confusion as to the best way to keep wine from spoiling.

Winemaker Chris maintains that the best place for wine is a "cool, dark place that doesn't change temperature a lot." So forget about the ever popular top-of-the-refrigerator wine display! Sure, it looks nice, but not only are the bottles exposed to light, the vibration of the refrigerator motor wrecks the wine by continually agitating the sediment inside. Instead, find a place in an out of the way cabinet and lay the bottles on their sides. And speaking of the fridge, skip the inclination to store white wine inside it. Continual super-cold storage can create unappetizing crystals floating around the bottom of the bottles, and who wants that? Instead, Chris suggests cooling white wine six to 24 hours before drinking it, or chilling it quickly in the freezer.



There isn't a wine drinker around who hasn't, unfortunately, come across a glass of funky smelling wine. Sometimes the odor is so strong you immediately know the wine has gone bad. Other times, the scent is more subtle and you're not sure if you got a bad bottle or if it's just the way that particular wine smells. A little training goes a long way, so Winemaker Chris always includes some typical wine defects on the Middle Ridge Signature Aroma Table.

The most common defect is corked wine, otherwise known as cork taint, which causes the wine to smell stale and musty, like wet rags. "Cork taint comes from using natural cork," explains Chris. "It's unavoidable. There's a naturally occurring fungus that lives in cork and, although manufacturers wash the cork to kill the fungus, the process doesn't have perfect results. The fungus still ends up in a small percent of the corks." And watch out if you come across wine that gives off a scent like a wet horse blanket or a wet dog. This is another fungus infection called *brettanomyces*. It's more common in beer but sometimes happens in wine, too.

Another wine defect comes from improperly stored wine. "This causes the wine to become oxidized," says Chris. "You can recognize this just by looking at the wine – it just isn't pretty. It gets a brownish hue, and the wine smells old, tired and vinegary, like cooking sherry."

It doesn't stop there, however. There are a whole slew of things that can go wrong with wine. Here are some other unpleasant odors to watch out for:

- A fingernail polish remover smell signifies there was a fermentation problem in the winemaking process.



- A yogurt smell means the wine wasn't filtered well before bottling and bacteria are building up.

- An odor like "mouse den or foxy" – a term used by Chris – also signifies bacteria spoilage.
- A band-aid smell indicates there was a *brettanomyces* infection interacting with other compounds used in the winemaking process.

In other words, when it comes to wine your nose knows if something isn't right. That's why it's so important to give that glass a sniff before sipping.

So what should you do if you're at a restaurant and the wine aroma isn't up to snuff? "Definitely send it back!" says Chris. "No winemaker wants you to think they make stinky wine. And there's no need to be embarrassed by asking for a new bottle. The restaurant will return the bottle to the winery, so there's no loss on their part. You deserve to sit back, relax and enjoy a great bottle of wine!"



On the Town



SOMMELIER CHALLENGE Platinum Award for Pomiscuous Fall 2013



Our newest sparkling cocktail, Pomiscuous, won a prestigious Platinum Award at the Sommelier Challenge, and we're thrilled our bottle-conditioned cocktail did so well in its first competition. The judges took to its delicious combination of Barbera wine grape juice co-fermented with pomegranate juice, hibiscus flowers, bay leaves and black peppercorns, and topped with a dose of brandy. In fact, it created such a buzz at the wine competition that the extra bottles were enjoyed by the staff that day and never made it to a special pouring at The Vault, a San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival event. We'll sip to that!

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Come taste Middle Ridge wines at Crush & Brew in Old Town Temecula, which serves as our tasting room, and at special events in Idyllwild.



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SAN DIEGO BAY WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL Gale Gand's Birthday Brunch with Friends November 2013



As usual, everyone at Middle Ridge enjoyed a fantastic time at the festival which was capped with Chef Gale Gand's Birthday Brunch. Gale, an acclaimed pastry chef, restaurateur, and cookbook author, is known for hosting the first ever all-dessert show for the Food Network. The party also featured The Hearty Boys, aka Dan Smith and Steve McDonagh, trendsetting Chicago caterers and restaurateurs, authors and Food Network stars.



Winemaker Chris enjoyed wishing Gale a very happy birthday on what was also the festival's 10th anniversary. Bottles of The Mule, one of our sparkling cocktails, were popped in honor of the occasion. We also wish Gale, Dan and Steve well on their new joint venture – SpritzBurger – in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago.

L.A. TALK RADIO Chords & Vines Show Dec. 2013, Jan. 2014, & Feb. 2014



Winemaker Chris had a great time participating in Chords & Vines shows where hosts Joe Mullenix and Kat Ellis showcase Temecula-area musicians and a wine expert who pairs the music with local wine.

One show highlighted renowned percussionist Jackie Bertone who has performed with famous artists that include The Beach Boys, Tower of Power, Jimmy Buffet and The Wilsons (formerly Wilson-Phillips). Jackie and Chris were neighbors years ago, and the friends hadn't seen each other in over 25 years. Chris' appearance was kept a secret to surprise Jackie, who

was thrilled and, according to Kat Ellis, "It seemed like time had not passed as everyone just seemed to pick up where they left off."

You can listen to past Chords & Vines shows at www.latalradio.com/Chords.php. The episodes with Middle Ridge Winery aired on December 15th, January 26th and February 2nd.