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# ALL ABOUT WINE TASTING

The 5 S's: A Systematic  
Approach to Making the  
Most of Your Experience.

**By Patrick Bartlett**









**W**ine tasting is one of the great pleasures in life. The United States has numerous wine-growing regions, which provide a great opportunity for sampling a wide variety of locally-grown wines. Most areas have wineries of all sizes, ranging from quite large to very boutique. But this gives you more options to discover what you like.

Planning a day of tasting is the easy part. At first, choosing which wineries to visit can be a challenge, but you'll soon discover which ones are your favorites.

As wine professionals it is the job of the tasting room staff to introduce you to their brand and make sure you have a great experience. Here's a secret: winery employees love it when a wine lover visits and really digs into their wines, asking questions and showing a willingness to learn. When this happens, they love to reciprocate. There is almost always a secret stash under the counter—reserve wines, newly released wines, wines that have just won big awards, basically special wines that can be shared if the taster shows true appreciation.

Two things to consider when planning your perfect experience: first, taste during a weekday if you can get the time off. Many areas have large populations nearby, with thousands of people within driving distance. Weekend visitors can overwhelm tasting rooms, and the staff can barely keep the pours coming, let alone stop and truly interact with guests. Often the smaller wineries aren't as crowded, but even they can be overwhelmed. Tasting during the week, if possible, will result in a much more enjoyable experience—calmer, more interactive, and very memorable.

Second, demonstrate to the tasting room staff that you know how to break down a wine by systematically tasting, or to put it another way, taste like a pro. The moment you truly start interacting with the wine with basic tasting knowledge, the staff is going to identify you as one who might enjoy the wonders of the secret stash. Follow the guidelines below and watch how your tasting experience is enriched, both for you and for the staff serving you.

One caution: Do not act like a wine snob. The joke in the industry is when you act like one, you probably don't know much about wine. Showing true appreciation and curiosity about the wines being poured will go a thousand miles with the staff. They live for visitors with this energy.

With this in mind, here's a guide to help you get the biggest bang for your buck.

**SIGHT.** Examining the color offers many clues to a wine. Tip the glass slightly to gain a better view. Light colors (both white and red) generally indicate lighter wines; richer, darker colors usually indicate heavier wines. The shades of color also offer clues. If the wine appears vibrant and on the more purple side, it's probably a younger wine. If the color is more brick colored, it probably has more age.

You should also look to see how intense the transition is from the core (deeper hues) to the rim (often lighter hues); this is another important age clue. Wines with less variation

between the core and rim are generally younger, and greater variation is a factor of aging.

Suggestion: View the wine over a white surface if you can. It helps to really see the color and core-to-rim variations. Also, tilt the wine in the glass to allow it more surface demonstration.

**SWIRL.** After examining the color of the wine, it's time to aerate the wine by giving it a vigorous swirl in the glass. You might want to practice this at home, so you don't swirl the wine right out of the glass onto the tasting room counter, yourself, and those nearby. Aerating the wine opens it up and radically increases the aromas. A demonstration of this is to take a good smell before you swirl and notice the difference after. Swirling also creates legs that form on the sides of the glass. This is a viscosity clue that hints at two things: sugar and alcohol.

Warning! Legs do not indicate quality, contrary to 1980s Chardonnay folklore where tasters would marvel at the legs and think that the more pronounced they were, the higher the quality of the wine. Most of us have probably bought into this myth at some time in our wine tasting life.

**SMELL.** Olfactory senses are among the most important and subjective elements in tasting. Smell is where you pick up the essence of the wine and start gaining confirmation gathered from sight and swirling color clues. Take your glass, bury your nose into it, and take a deep sniff. Note your first impressions. Did you get pronounced fruit, spice, was it grapey, were there notes of earth, flowers, leather, coffee? Does it smell bright, or rich? Does it offer complex scents that feel fresh, or maybe dusty like a cellar, or a cigar box? Hang onto those impressions because the next step—sip—is going to put it all together for you.

It is generally believed that women have a more refined sense of smell than men. There are many theories for this, but it is mostly thought to be based on hormones with women of reproductive age. Clinical tests have determined this group of women to have extremely higher levels of smell sensitivity. Another element is the idea of tasters versus super-tasters, and again there is generally a higher percentage of women who test as super-tasters. I guess we men just need to work a little harder and sniff our wines a little longer.

**SIP.** Now that you've seen, swirled and sniffed, it's time to sip. That first sip is so important. Sip, swish and swirl in your mouth (think of it like using mouthwash, only not as vigorous). Does the taste confirm the smell? Is it sweet? Dry (less sweet)? Does it make you want to pucker (acid)? Does it make you feel like you have cotton in your mouth (tannic levels)? Do you feel heat in the back of your throat? More heat means more alcohol. Do you sense more fruit? More spice? Earth notes like minerals, dust, leather? These are all clues.

Is the wine bad? When you buy wine at a restaurant it is customary for the server to give the customer a small







sip before serving the table. This is not to determine if you like the wine, but rather to determine if the wine is flawed. The most common flaw is what we called corked wine. Corked wine is caused by corks that are tainted with a chemical compound called TCA (trichloroanisole). When the wine is corked it slowly strips the wine of flavor and leaves it smelling like a dirty sock and tasting flat. Approximately 5 to 10 percent of wines are thought to be corked to some degree, and many people don't know it, drink the wine anyway, and then decide they don't like it.

**SWALLOW.** For professional tasters who often taste many wines at the same sitting, swallowing isn't an option, but when you're tasting for fun, swallow. If you need to spit, it's probably a safe bet you don't like the wine you're tasting, and there are always spit buckets provided. Don't despair. No one will be offended and there are many more to try.

When tasting, the tasting room staff is instructed to pour tasting size pours. A tasting pour is usually about 1.5 oz. Think of it as trying on clothes. You may plan to wear them for special occasions, but for the moment you're briefly trying them on for fit and style. Trust me: once you've worked yourself through one or two wineries, you'll see how those 1.5-ounce pours add up.

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Varietal Focus

# SYRAH

A star of California's Central Coast wine region, this varietal is the perfect partner for Italian food.

By Patrick Bartlett

**Without wine, any fine Italian meal is incomplete.** One of the world's noble red wines especially loves to dance with Italian cuisine. What is this wine? Syrah—also known by its other name, Shiraz.

In Europe it is most commonly known as Syrah, with the best example for this noble grape found in the Rhône region of France. Down under, the grape is generally referred to as Shiraz. The Aussies adopted the older name for the grape, named for the famed ancient city of Shiraz, in Persia (present-day Iran). The city of Shiraz was famed for its hanging rose gardens and, of course, its wine. Many believe this is the birthplace of the grape, but many wine historians dispute this as legend.

California wineries use either name. One of the most noted regions for Syrah in the Golden State is Paso Robles, just north of San Luis Obispo in the state's arid Central Coast. It's one of California's warmest Mediterranean coastal climate zones.

All wine grapes need a combination of warm and cool temperatures to develop the right balance of sugar and acid that results in great wine. Syrah grapes love Paso Robles, thanks to the arid climate of the region and the Pacific Ocean's cool breezes that flow inland through the coastal foothills. Every summer afternoon, the hot valley temperatures fall when the maritime breezes rise.

Paso winemakers usually prefer a style of Syrah that is big, full, round and spicy. One of the distinguishing characteristics

of a full-bodied Syrah is campfire smoke, and a savory element thanks to alluring notes of bacon, and a mouthful of juicy fruit. For Italian culinary traditions, a Paso Syrah is an excellent wine for bigger, more robust meat dishes, as well as a variety of cheeses.

Many Italian food options sing beautifully with a Paso Syrah, starting with three robust meats.

**Italian-Style Braised Beef:** Any Italian cook knows that the beauty of braised meat is found in its simplicity, with guaranteed crowd-pleasing results. To prepare it Italian-style, take a nice pot roast or brisket, season with salt and pepper, and pan sear the roast in olive oil. When seared, settle the meat in your favorite roasting pan along with garlic, shallots, crushed tomatoes, rosemary and thyme, beef broth and red wine. You can also add Cipollini onions and baby carrots to add extra depth. Braise it to falling-off-the-bone tenderness.

**Sicilian Spiced Duck:** Trim the extra fat from the duck breasts. Crisscross cut the remaining fat, but be careful not to cut through to the meat. Rub the breasts with olive oil, orange zest and a spice blend of crushed fennel with smoked and sweet paprika, a dash of cinnamon, and crushed red pepper. Season with salt and pepper. Pan sear until reaching the internal temperature of 135°F to 140°F for the recommended medium rare finish. Drizzle with a cherry reduction sauce when serving, if you like.



**Rack of Lamb:** Lamb is one of the most Syrah-friendly of all meats, making it the perfect pairing in many parts of the world, including Australia and the French Rhône region. Take a trimmed rack of lamb and do a simple rubdown with olive oil. Coat the rack sparingly with salt and cracked pepper along with a mix of minced fresh rosemary and thyme. Grill the rack on a very hot (450°F) grill. The high heat sears the meat and creates a nice smoky flavor. Lamb, like duck, is best served medium-rare, so the same rule of about 135°F to 140°F internal temperature is a good rule of thumb. Add a side of roasted vegetables and crusty Italian bread—you'll have a feast.

All three of these dishes are rustic, simple to prepare, and pair well with a Paso Syrah. They create harmony with the wine, bringing out the big round fruit, spice and smoky elements of these expressive flavor-packed wines.

If an Italian meat and cheese board is on the menu, Syrah is a perfect choice with Italy's wide assortment of cured meats like prosciutto, speck and bresaola. Syrah loves dry, salty cheese like pecorino, but another wonderful cheese option would be scamorza, a Southern Italian cheese made with stretched cheese curd. It's similar to mozzarella, but it's a stronger cheese than its milder cousin, and is often smoked. The smoked version is excellent with Syrah. Add some caper berries, assorted olives, tapenade and violá!

If you're visiting Central California, don't miss wine tasting in Paso Robles. With more than 200 wineries, it is a wonderful destination for wine lovers. Three iconic wineries producing world class Syrahs are Justin, Turley and Daou, which are widely distributed and have very dedicated wine collectors celebrating the quality and consistency of the wines. But if you visit the region, you're sure to find many other options that will become favorites. For more on Paso Robles, visit [pasowine.com](http://pasowine.com) to discover all you need to know about the area, wineries, lodging and dining.

Happy wine tasting and Italian eating!  
Salut!

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