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WINE CLUB NOTES



Anna Maria Knapp

The Nose Knows

So that winemakers have more time for analysis, they taste with their noses first and with their tongues second, segmenting and thus prolonging what would normally be a faster simultaneous impression. Before tasting a wine, a winemaker will bring the glass to his or her nose. Some will cock their heads to the right or left and expose only one nostril to the aromas while others will aim the nose straight into the glass, exposing both nostrils. Being fully aware that smell intensifies taste is an argument for both sniffing and sipping. And given the prices of good wine, we have yet another reason to experience as much of it as we can.

To understand the considerable contribution that the nose makes to taste sensation, all we need do is hold our noses closed while we eat or drink. Taste sensations are then seriously diminished, as they are when we have colds and our noses are plugged. Clearly, both nose and mouth together are necessary for the most intense sensations of taste. But gifted 20-year old winemaker Victor Palencia at Willow Crest Winery in Washington has had to over-develop his nose in order to satisfy the law, which emphatically states that he may not taste wine for another year until he turns 21. "I have a really sensitive nose," he told Timothy Egan of the New York Times. "It's like a blind person who learns to listen really well... Of course I taste the wine. I have to," he admitted to Egan. Victor Palencia's predicament is a reminder that the rush to swallow may be an incomplete way to analyze or appreciate wine.

The average person has about 10,000 taste buds on the tongue, and they're replaced every

two weeks, amazingly enough. Older people have fewer than younger ones, because replacement capacity diminishes with age, so older people tolerate more salt and pepper in foods or more tannins and acid in wine. Younger people tend to be more sensitive to these and other sharper flavors. At the same time that we bite and chew, the food releases chemicals that travel up into the nose and trigger olfactory receptors, which in turn send taste messages to the brain, just as the taste buds in the mouth are doing. I read somewhere that women have a more highly developed sense of smell, something to do with survival, smelling smoke in the forest so they can flee with their babies. Women also buy more wine than men. Are they better able to appreciate it? I know. I know. I'm out on a limb.

Besides sticking their noses into the glass, winemakers will also slurp the wine in their mouths, holding the length of the tongue against the roof of the mouth, freeing the sides of the tongue. Taste buds that focus on the four flavors, sweet, salt, sour, and bitter, are located on different parts of the tongue. Sweet and salt receptors are located at the tip of the tongue, with salt occupying a larger portion of the area. Sour receptors are at the sides of the tongue, and bitter at the back. By adjusting the tongue in this way, they can evaluate sour flavors.

While most of us don't want to stick our noses in the glass and then slurp in the noisy bizarre way that winemakers do, at least in the privacy of our homes with the shades drawn, we might more fully pursue the art of tasting. ■