

Wine Tasting tour with Charles

Charles is everything you would expect from a French gentleman. Perfect manners, soft spoken, the hint of a mischievous smile in his eye. Think the Pope meets Dr. No. In calm, precise English, fluent Spanish, and sharp, witty French, he ushers us to our rooms and immediately proceeds to introduce us to the basics of wine tasting.

This is not my first time. I've been around. I've had my fair share of tastings, wine courses and pairings. But I listen to Charles' every word like a novice. I love the concept of "chewing" the wine so that it coats your mouth. He debunks a couple of myths for us. No, the legs on your glass don't mean a thing. No, you don't pair cheese with red.

We play a fun game with a set of scent vials: violet, black currant, grapefruit, butter, toasted bread. You can smell all of those and many more in wine. The scents are incredibly hard to identify by themselves. Our olfactory memory doesn't work that way. You know you've smelled that before, but you can't put a name to it. However, once you know what's in the bottle, you have an aha! moment. Of course it was aniseed.

I know better than to swallow the wine. This is going to be a long day and 24 wines await. You smell. You chew. You taste. You spit. It's a tour de force out there, and you want to pace yourself for the delights to come.

The Big Varietal Obsession

You should be aware that the American obsession with varietals is completely alien to Europeans, and almost anathema in France. You don't buy a 100% Merlot or Cab. It would be akin to ordering a salad 100% lettuce or listening to a concert for solo clarinet. Could be nice, but you'd be missing out on a lot. Nearly all French wines are blends. Most of the time, the varietals in the blend are not even listed on the label. You trust your winemaker, you trust your AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, Controlled Designation of Origin). You drink and say thanks.

Armed with this knowledge, we set off to meet our winemakers.

On Tour

First stop is Clos de Caveau in Vaqueyras, a charming family winery that looks like an understated farm in the vineyards. They make amazing reds with designer labels, including the one we had for our introductory class with Charles. They're new school Côtes du Rhone (more on that on a second) and we love them. A good start.

Château Saint Estève d'Uchaux, on the other hand, occupies the luxurious manor where the owners used to live. Wonderful reds and rosés all around, but then we are blown away by Cuvée Thérèse 2012. A white aged in oak that makes you rethink whatever you know about white wine. A white so rich that it could withstand a stake. MP grabs a bottle because, OMG.

Next stop is Châteuneuf-du-Pape, the town where the popes of Avignon had their summer residence. We're there to visit Ogier, a big, modern winery.

Ogier has a cellar displaying all the possible sizes of oak barrels. From the 225-liter barrique to the 10,000-liter foudre. Different sizes, different ratio of wood surface exposed to wine, different flavours and tannin concentration.

On our way to the shop, a little garden showcases the four types of soil in provence: river rocks, sandstone, limestone, and sand. Welcome to France's **kingdom of the terroir**.

This is a religious war. A large part of French winemakers believe that the soil the vines grow in completely determines how wine will be. That means a certain wine can only be produced by a specific winery, from grapes growing on a specific side of a hill. A French hill. Sorry, Australia.

To prove this point, Ogier offers a box with four wines, made of the same grapes, the same year, using the same techniques, but each of them coming from grapes grown in different soils. Point made: the wines are - slightly- different.

However, some people in the world think wine can be figured out. They believe that by carefully controlling irrigation, temperature, sun exposure, humidity, and nutrients in the soil, you can fine-tune the grapes and obtain every flavour in their wines, just like a computer generated shade of colour.

I was one of those people. Until now.

But before my conversion, a stop in Chocolaterie Castelain. Awarded best chocolate in France by Gourmet Magazine, they offer chocolate-and-wine pairings. It goes like this: You taste the wine. Then you eat half of the chocolate. Your eyes water with sheer pleasure. Then you eat the other half and sip some more wine along with it. You blend the flavours in your mouth. Let out a tear.

Milk chocolate filled with verbena and apricot washed down with a fruity white. Calvados-scented dark chocolate along with a juicy, sweet red. You get the picture. We die and go to choc heaven.

The chocolate experience involves some wine swallowing, so we face our last stop at Les Caves Saints Charles in high spirits.

In the cellar of an old town house, to the tune of Gregorian chants, our host Guy Bremond has us sit on a wooden pew in front of an altar displaying six bottles of wine.

“Will you say mass?” asks Charles, only half jokingly.

Guy (pronounced ghee) is your guy. Your wine guy. A professional sommeiller, he knows wine like Bruce Lee knew Kung Fu. He doesn't like pompous, overpriced, unreliable Bordeaux. He doesn't like Rioja. I like him immediately.

Guy travels to the US during low season with a chef friend and a truckload of French wine. If you put together a party of 16, they prepare a gourmet dinner and wine pairing in the comfort of your own home, hands free.

He talks with barely contained passion about old school Côte du Rhone, the oak-aged, dark red powerhouses you can only properly drink along with a hearty venison stew, sitting by the fire on a winter night, your dog farting by your side. A hundred years ago, he says, all wines in the valley were like those. Then the Americans came.

Robert Parker is to blame. Wine Spectator's resident guru spurred the trend towards easy to drink, fruity, spicy reds that slowly but relentlessly displaced the old school ones. Family feuds abound in the Rhone valley. The producers who turned to the bright, more profitable side of wine are despised by the loyal traditionalists. Fifty years from now, Guy says, those dark old wines will disappear.

I never believed in old school. I never gave a used cork for the terroir. But when I take a sip of “the beast,” Domaine Lucien Barrot et Fils, and feel the darkness wrap me up in its woody, spicy, leathery embrace, I understand. I'll cry bitter tears the day those wines are extinct.

