TASTING: Pinot Noir and Merlot

Before you start the tasting:

1. Make sure you have the Tasting Checklist. If you don't have the checklist, please use the navigation bar at the top of this page to go to the class Introduction, where the download link is located.

2. Fill in the top portion of the Tasting Checklist. This information helps you remember the wines and also provides clues to how the wine will taste:
   - **Producer:** the name of the winery or chateau
   - **Growing Area:** the region where the grapes were grown; probably Beaujolais and California for these two wines
   - **Vintage:** the year the grapes were harvested
   - **Alcohol:** the alcohol content is given as a percentage
   - **Price:** the cost of the bottle or glass in a store or restaurant

3. Pull the corks from your two bottles, a Pinot Noir from Oregon or California and a Merlot from Washington or California. Pour each wine into a separate glass, filling each glass about 1/3 full.

4. To remember which glass is which, you might want to place the two glasses side-by-side, keeping the Pinot Noir on the left and the Merlot on the right. In each section of the tasting, we'll evaluate the Pinot Noir first and the Merlot second.

In this third tasting, you will continue to develop and refine your tasting abilities using the 4S approach. The contrast between these two wines is not as great as between the Beaujolais and the Cabernet Sauvignon of the previous tasting, so be prepared to look for more subtle differences.

Fill in all the sections of your Tasting Checklist, even if the section isn't covered in the tasting—since you are now familiar with the 4S approach, you can complete the tasting with fewer prompts. The remaining prompts will help you focus on the distinctions between the Pinot Noir and the Merlot.

SEE: CLARITY, COLOR, INTENSITY, LEGS

CLARITY

- What would you say is the clarity of each wine—brilliant; clear; any sediment in either?
- On your tasting checklist, circle the clarity that most closely matches your wines.

COLOR

- The color of Pinot Noir is typically ruby red to garnet; Merlot is usually ruby in color.
- Examine the color of your wines and note your checklist.

INTENSITY

- If a wine has a lot of color, we describe it as “dark.” If it does not have much color, we call it “pale”; if the wine is somewhere in between, we say its intensity is “medium”.
- Keep in mind that intensity of color is related to extract (grape solids): The darker the wine, the more extract in it.

Examining Intensity

Pinot Noir

1. Holding your glass at a 45° angle, examine its intensity. Is the Pinot pale, medium or dark?

2. Circle the best descriptor on your Tasting Checklist.

Merlot

1. Holding your glass at a 45° angle, examine its intensity. Is the Merlot pale, medium or dark?

2. Circle the best descriptor on your Tasting Checklist.

Comparison

- Which of the two wines has the more intense color?
- Red wines get their color from the grape skins, and because Pinot Noir grapes are lighter in color than Merlot, the Merlot should be darker than the Pinot Noir.
- Do you find this to be so?

LEGS

1. Swirl each wine, examine its legs and mark your checklist.

- There is a “normal” or “middle” range that the legs of most wines fall within - as your experience increases, you’ll find that you only need to take note of the legs when they are either exceptionally pronounced or unusually faint.

SNIFF: AROMA INTENSITY AND IDENTIFICATION

AROMA INTENSITY

1. Swirl your Pinot Noir, this time to release its aromas, and sniff.
2. Note on your checklist whether the aromas are faint, medium or powerful.
3. Repeat with the Merlot.

Identifying Aromas

Pinot Noir

1. Swirl, sniff and begin identifying the Pinor Noir's aromas.
2. Look for strawberry, raspberry, red cherry, earth and mushroom—the aromas most commonly associated with Pinot Noir (but use your tasting checklist as a guide to many more possible aromas).
3. When you identify an aroma, circle it on the checklist.
4. If you can't specifically name an aroma, it's fine to identify it by its general family (i.e., "Tree fruit" rather than "cherry").
5. Limit yourself to three or four sniffs.

Merlot

1. Swirl, sniff and begin identifying the Merlot's aromas.
2. Like Pinot Noir, Merlot has a set of aromas - blackberry, cherry, plum, olive/sage, earth/mushroom, chocolate which are characteristic of the variety. Again, refer to your checklist for more possible aromas.
3. Limit yourself to three or four sniffs.

Comparison

- In general, the predominant aromas of Pinot Noir are of red berries, such as strawberry and raspberry, whereas the aromas of Merlot lean more towards darker berries, such as blackberry, and fleshier tree fruits, such as black cherry and plum.
- Do you find this to be true of your wines? Look at your tasting checklist and take a last sniff of each if you'd like.
- Both Pinot Noir and Merlot have earth as a characteristic aroma. Can you detect a hint of it in one or both of your wines?

SIP: TASTE, BODY, FLAVOR

TASTE

1. Taste is comprised of sweet, sour and bitter (and their related mouthfeels)—we generally perceive them in this same order when we taste wine.
2. Since both of these wines are "dry"—that is, fermented until all sugar has been converted to alcohol—you will be tasting them for acidity and tannin.
3. Pinot Noir's acidity can range from medium to high; its tannins are usually light, and sometimes "silky."
4. Merlot's acidity ranges from low to medium, and its tannins are smooth, sometimes "velvety."

Tasting For Acidity And Tannin

Pinot Noir

1. Sip, swish and spit the Pinot Noir.
2. Check your mouth for the sensations of acidity. Do you detect any:
   - Mouthwatering or clean, refreshing sensations (medium acidity)?
   - Puckering or sharp sensations (high acidity)?
3. Take a note your tasting checklist. (Remember that Pinot Noir can have medium to high acidity.)
4. Sip, swish and spit again and check for the sensations of tannin. Do you detect any:
   - Dryness along the sides and back of the tongue?
   - Astringency?
   - "Furry" sensations?
5. Now evaluate the Pinot's tannins. Are they:
   - High, leaving a strong astringent, furry sensation in your mouth?
   - Light, leaving little impression in your mouth so the wine feels very smooth and silky?
6. Make a note on your checklist.

Tasting For Acidity And Tannin Cont.

Merlot

1. Sip, swish and spit the Merlot.

2. Check your mouth for the sensations of acidity. Do you detect any:

- Mouthwatering or clean, refreshing sensations?
- Puckering or sharp sensations?

3. Note your tasting checklist. (Remember that Merlot's acidity ranges from low to medium. At the low end, the acidity may not be very noticeable, especially if the level of tannin is high.)

4. Sip, swish and spit the Merlot again and check for the sensations of tannin. Do you detect any dry, astringent or "furry" sensations in your mouth?

5. Evaluate the Merlot's tannins. Are they rough, smooth or light?

6. Mark your checklist.

Comparison

- Which of the two wines has the more prominent tannins?
- Merlot's tannins are often described as "velvety" because, like velvet, they have a certain weight and texture to them.
- Pinot Noir's tannins have an almost weightless, gossamer quality to them, and for this reason are often described as "silky".
- How do the two wines compare in terms of acidity?
- Despite its lighter tannins, the Pinot Noir may seem firmer than the Merlot because of its higher acidity.

BODY

- A wine's body is directly related to extract, including sugar, acid and tannin.
- The more extracted and darker the wine, the more full-bodied you would expect it to be; similarly, the higher the alcohol content, the more full-bodied the wine will be.
- Because both wines are dry, sugar won't be a factor in your assessment of body; instead, pay attention to how each wine's alcohol and tannins contribute to its body.

Tasting For Body

Pinot Noir

1. Sip and swish your Pinot Noir, but don't swallow or spit.

2. With the wine in your mouth, assess its weight and thickness.

3. Swallow the sip and check the back of your throat for "heat" from alcohol.

4. Note your tasting checklist.

Merlot

1. Now, sip and swish your Merlot-don't swallow or spit-and feel its weight and thickness.

2. Swallow and check for any "heat" from alcohol.

3. Mark your checklist.

Comparison

- Which wine is more full-bodied? (Pinot Noir tends to be lighter-bodied than Merlot.)
- Is either wine "hot" from too much alcohol? Excess heat in a wine is considered a fault. (New World wines often have higher levels of alcohol than their Old World counterparts. If well made, however, their alcohol levels should still be in balance.)
- Do your evaluations of body agree with your observations about color intensity—in other words, is the more intensely colored wine also the more full-bodied?

FLAVOR

- The flavors in your mouth should echo - and may also elaborate on - the aromas you detected when you sniffed the wine.

Tasting For Flavor

Pinot Noir

1. Sip, swish and aerate your Pinot Noir.

2. Spit the wine and record the flavors you detect on your tasting checklist. Repeat as necessary.

3. Do the flavors match the aromas?

4. How intense are the flavors? Mark your checklist.

Merlot

1. Now sip, swish and aerate the Merlot.

2. Spit and record the flavors on your tasting checklist, repeating this step as necessary.

3. Do the flavors match the aromas?

4. How intense are the flavors? Mark your checklist.

COMPARISON

- Do the two wines have any flavors in common?
- Did you find, as we suggested earlier, that the Pinot Noir's flavors tend to be brighter and more berry-like, while the Merlot's are darker and more full, and more like tree fruit—black cherry and plum—than berries?
- Finally, did you detect that hint of earth in either or both wines?

SUMMARIZE: FINISH, BALANCE AND COMPLEXITY

FINISH

Finish refers to the length of time the flavors linger in the mouth after swallowing or spitting. The longer the finish, the better the wine.

1. Swirl, sniff and swallow the Pinot Noir, paying attention to how long the flavors linger in your mouth.

2. Note your tasting checklist and repeat the process with your Merlot.

BALANCE

A red wine that is in balance feels smooth and pleasing to the palate - not too “hard” from tannin and acidity, not too “soft” from sweetness and not too “hot” from alcohol.

1. Sip, swish and swallow your Pinot Noir, checking for excessive roughness, puckering or burning from too much tannin, acidity or alcohol.

2. Note the Pinot’s balance on your checklist and repeat the process with your Merlot.

COMPLEXITY

A wine is complex if it has many layers or nuances of flavor. The more complex a wine, the higher its quality. By contrast, a wine with few aromas and flavors is called “simple.”

Pinot Noir, in spite of its lighter body, can be more complex than Merlot, and is among the world’s most complex varieties. That said, the quality of the grapes and the skill of the winemaker inform the wine’s complexity and quality—so either wine could be more complex.

Examining Complexity

Pinot Noir

1. Take a last sip of the Pinot Noir, swish and swallow.

2. Do you notice many layers of aroma and flavor, or is the wine simple? Note your tasting checklist.

Merlot

1. Sip, swish and swallow your Merlot.

2. Assess its complexity and note your checklist.

Comparison

- Which wine do you find to be more complex—the Pinot Noir or the Merlot?

Pinot Noir is a more delicately flavored variety than Merlot, and for this reason, is only rarely blended with other varieties. Merlot is often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon and/or Cabernet Franc for the purpose of increasing its complexity.

FINAL EVALUATION

- Based on aftertaste, finish, balance and complexity, which would you say is the "higher quality" wine?
- If you had to choose between the two wines, which wine would you prefer?
- How would you describe each wine to a waiter or wine merchant?

Congratulations on completing the Class 3 Tasting!