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LIBATIONS



A GUIDED TOUR FOR THE PALATE

A sensible, savvy sommelier swirls us through a tasting of fireside reds

ARE YOU FALLING IN LOVE with wine, and thinking about taking your relationship to the next level? One option is to romance your palate with a so-called directed tasting led by a wine expert. That's what a group of us did recently as we swirled, sniffed, and slurped our way through five "fireside reds." Set in a private wine cellar with a cozy tasting area, this carefree event proved to be everything you could hope for in an evening of adult education: informative, lively and very well lubricated.

Our guide was Britta Giese, a sommelier at Sooke Harbour House who also runs her own wine consulting company. "I want you to truly explore wine, to taste and experience it deeply," she explained once everyone was seated. We started off via Spain with a glass of the 2005 Castillo de Almansa, an attractive everyday wine that was well priced at \$12.99. Our noses deep in the glass, we were seeking olfactory input for our brains to interpret. Next came the first sips, and members of our group could taste everything from dried cherries and stewed plums to hints of black pepper.

The aromas and flavours were far from universally agreed upon — a bit of anarchy that pleased Britta, who

a decadent delight...

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wanted us to learn to trust our own palates. She explained that people not only smell and taste things differently, but have unique mental associations that further create differing reactions to the same wine. “If some ‘expert’ tries to tell you that your comments are wrong, I suggest you just walk away,” she said with empowering firmness.

As well as flavours, we were also asked to note the level of acid in the wine, the amount of tannins (the mouth-puckering substance that red wines absorb from grape skins), the alcohol level, and how much “fruit” was present in the glass. Most important, were these elements in harmony? It didn’t end there. Was the wine light, medium, or full-bodied? And did the wine’s flavours persist and evolve after swallowing, or was there a “short finish” indicating it was plonk and not a posh Pomerol?

Our heads were buzzing with questions instead of alcohol as we tackled our second wine, also from Spain. The 2001 Vina Albali, made entirely from Tempranillo grapes and selling for \$21.99, was tasty and light-bodied; its combination of black cherry, cedar, and spice was popular but not compelling. Things got more interesting with the 2005 Reserve Syrah from the Okanagan’s Nichol Vineyards. The bouquet elicited comments like “earthy,” “Dijon mustard” and “cabbage,” while the flavours were dominated by dried cherry and cocoa. “It’s over-priced,” declared one participant, and Britta agreed that \$37.99 was too steep, even though the wine was classy and had cellaring potential.

Well into the tasting, Britta said that a key to enjoying wine involved “place and context.” For example, if you are lucky enough to be touring in Tuscany, a simple table wine

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might seem to sing from the glass because it's accompanied by olives and artisan foccacia bread in a rose-draped garden; bring that same bottle home with undue reverence and the seductive song you heard in Siena may be just a croak when you uncork the wine in your own backyard. And don't let the poetry of a wine's flavour blind you to its physical properties. Tannins, for example, soften and complement animal protein: that's why a bruising California Cabernet paired with a juicy steak almost always guarantees a satisfying dinner.

Then it was on to wine number four, the 2006 Pertaringa "Understudy" (\$26.99), an Australian powerhouse. This was 80 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon topped up with an exotic grape named Petit Verdot, known for its spiciness and

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rusticity. There were cinnamon, coffee, tobacco, and dried apricot on the nose, with vivid flavours of blackcurrant and blackberry in that fruit-forward style you expect from Aussie wines. Yummy!

So far, everything had been poured from the bottle. Attention now shifted to the handsome glass decanter,

centerpiece of the narrow wooden table we were seated around. Our group was to analyze this "mystery wine" all on our own. Britta didn't want any guesses, just pure description, and we stumbled through moderately well. What we were savouring turned out to be a \$70 Gigondas, a prestigious Rhone wine from southeastern France. The 2006 Chateau de Saint Cosme "Valbelle" was a traditional blend of Grenache and Syrah that had classic notes of fennel, thyme and dried sage: this herby character, which the French call *garrigue*, expresses the region's dusty landscape. Elegantly earthy, harmonious, and with an extremely long finish, this was a sophisticated yet approachable wine and a rewarding end to an evening that had combined notable pleasure with the mental challenges of being "in the moment" as we delved deeply into the mysteries of aroma and taste.

"Be as precise as you can, and smell *everything*," Britta suggested as we were leaving. "Your brain will grow with every challenge you give it. The more you pay attention to the aromas around you, the easier it will be for you to understand and enjoy the wines you drink."

For a tasting, Giese charges from \$25-\$50 per person, depending on the value of the wines being poured. She also provides all necessary glassware. Those interested in more information can contact her at: www.britta@wineconsulting.com. **VB**



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