

Merlot Forum Workshop 14.7.09 : “Green Merlot?!”

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What does “green” mean in the wine language?

It is well known that in today’s marketplace, wine consumers expect well-balanced wines with clean flavours and a soft round palate profile. However, it seems that this is particularly difficult to achieve with Merlot in SA, and, if we believe our critics, SA Merlot wines are often characterised by excessive herbaceousness. These calls have become louder in the last few years, and we must face the fact that there might be a problem – a problem by the way that is not restricted to Merlot only. But Merlot seems to be such a sensitive cultivar that it might show the problem more prominently than other cultivars.

In order to tackle the problem I suggested to start with the analysis of so called “green” wines. But there I encountered the first problem: What does GREEN in wine actually mean?

The word green itself is not a good descriptor for a flavour or a taste. In fact, green is the name of a colour, i.e. describing a visual impact and not a sensation of nose and taste buds. Moreover, it implies the conclusion that the wine originates from green, unripe fruit. From a scientific point of view, this is incorrect and furthermore, it disqualifies the winemaking team behind the wine in a highly inexpert manner. The term green should therefore be abandoned in the description of a wine’s quality, as long as it doesn’t relate to its colour.

To find out, what wine tasters understand under the term green in connection with wine, we started a little survey amongst the members of the Merlot Forum SA. We asked them how they would define “green”. We had an interestingly good response with more than 20 replies, contributing many excellent descriptions for anything that refers to “green” in Merlot wines, which I would like to present herewith to everybody who is interested in the problem.

For the sake of simplicity, I pooled all descriptors into 2 main groups, namely flavours and mouth-feel factors, subdivided again into 5 subgroups as proposed below. Naturally, this mode of subdivision could – and should – be discussed, and I am looking forward to comments and tips for improvements.

Descriptors for “green” flavour and taste components in Wine

1. Flavours

1.1. **Fresh green flavours:**

Bell pepper/capsicum, green grass, green leaves, leafy

Fresh green flavours can generally be attributed to the presence of Methoxy Pyrazines (MP), which is actually not unpleasant on its own. But as we know, green flavours have become unwelcome in red wines. The reason might be that MP are an indicator for the ripeness of grapes, and experienced tasters might automatically link fresh green flavours in red wines with the perception of coarseness and astringency, which generally comes along with unripe fruit

1.2. Cooked vegetal flavours:

Asparagus, tin beans and other canned vegetable

Interesting enough, cooked vegetal flavours are regarded as reductive, usually H₂S related compounds, developing during the winemaking process. So they are actually NOT generic green flavours. But research has shown that their presence in wine reinforces the green sensorial perception of tannins on the palate.

1.3. Dried herbal flavours: Tea, hay, fynbos, also olives

1.4. Mint flavours: Eucalyptus, peppermint

Both (1.3. and 1.4.) have been mentioned several times, but generally as a neutral attribute. Only few people actually correlate them with “green” character of a wine

1.5. Fruit flavours

Quite a few comments referred to the fact that “green” wines often come along with a lack of fruit, leaving it open whether it is just masked by green components or whether it is a genuine lack of fruit.

2. Mouthfeel

Many commentators emphasize the role of the mouthfeel in describing GREEN wines. Here we got descriptors such as ‘biting into green banana, stalks or pips’. And the importance of the role of the tannins has been recognized with attributes such as aggressive, grippy, rough, puckering, hard, harsh, astringent, and also bitter. Furthermore it was mentioned, that “green” wines generally lack body and are often thin.

A more scientific approach of mouthfeel defines it as the summary of the impact of structure and texture. To describe this more precisely, I suggest subdividing the component “mouth-feel” into the different subcomponents that all contribute to the overall perception on the palate. It is generally accepted that mouthfeel is defined by the following balance:

$$\text{sweetness} \leftrightarrow \text{acidity} + \text{tannins}$$

This equation indicates an inverse relationship, i.e. an increase on one side decreases the perception of components on the other side, and vice versa. But this also implies that it is difficult to judge the different components individually. Nevertheless, it is a possible way to approach the problem, and moreover, the finer analysis of these components could give us possible indications on how to improve future wines for a better mouthfeel.

I therefore suggest the following tasting procedure for mouthfeel, assessing for 5 important, distinguishable components:

2.1. body/volume

This is a generally accepted way to describe the total of the tactile impact on the palate, expressed as anything between thin and full-bodied

2.2. Sweetness

Sweetness is the perception of the effect of the total of the polysaccharides, expressed as too sweet, balanced or too dry.

2.3. Acidity

Acidity is the perception of the combined effect of pH and acids, expressed as too much acidity, balanced or too little acidity

In the case of the tannins it has been proposed to distinguish 4 different sensorial perceptions, such as intensity, astringency, dryness and bitterness. But for our purpose, I trust it is sufficient to judge the tannins simply according their quality and their bitterness, both usually familiar descriptors for experienced wine tasters. This yields the last two descriptors:

2.4. Tannin quality

Tannin quality is judged as it is perceived on the palate, expressed as anything between 'insipid' over 'pleasant/balanced' till 'hard, astringent and aggressive'

2.5. Bitterness

Bitterness can easily be made out by specific taste buds on the back of the tongue (though their sensitivity is genetically predetermined and differs from person to person, and what's more, it decreases drastically with age!).

Proposed tasting scorecard for "Greenness" in wine

All these contributions from our members resulted actually in a new tasting sheet specifically designed for the sensorial assessment of "green" components in wine. It is basically subdivided into 3 groups, proposing a systematic approach in a given sequence.

In a very first step, one must decide whether one likes the wine or not and whether one thinks it is green or not, just with a quick sniff and sip, allowing the gut-feel to decide. Only when the scores for these two parameters are fixed, one is allowed to go into details, analysing for the different flavour and mouthfeel components, following the sequence of the tasting sheet. This sequence should be strictly followed for every wine, avoiding such the influence of possibly too much academic brainpower.

Attached: Proposed tasting scorecard for "Greenness" in wine

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ASSESSING FOR "GREEN" FACTORS

Taster:.....

1. Overall impression

Do you like the wine? Not at all-----it's o.k.-----good-----very good

"Greenness" not at all-----very green

2. Flavours:

Fresh green flavours
(bell pepper, green
grass and leaves) 0-----intense

Cooked vegetal flavours
(Beans, asparagus,
canned vegetable) 0-----intense

Dried herbs
(hay, tea, tobacco) 0-----intense

Mint flavours
(Eucalyptus, peppermint) 0-----intense

Fruit flavours
(berries, cherry, plum) 0-----intense

3. Mouthfeel: sweetness ↔ acidity + tannins

Body, volume thin-----full-bodied

Sweetness too dry-----balanced-----too sweet

Acidity too low-----balanced-----too high

Tannin : Quality: insipid-----pleasant-----hard
balanced astringent
aggressive

Tannin : Bitterness faint-----intense