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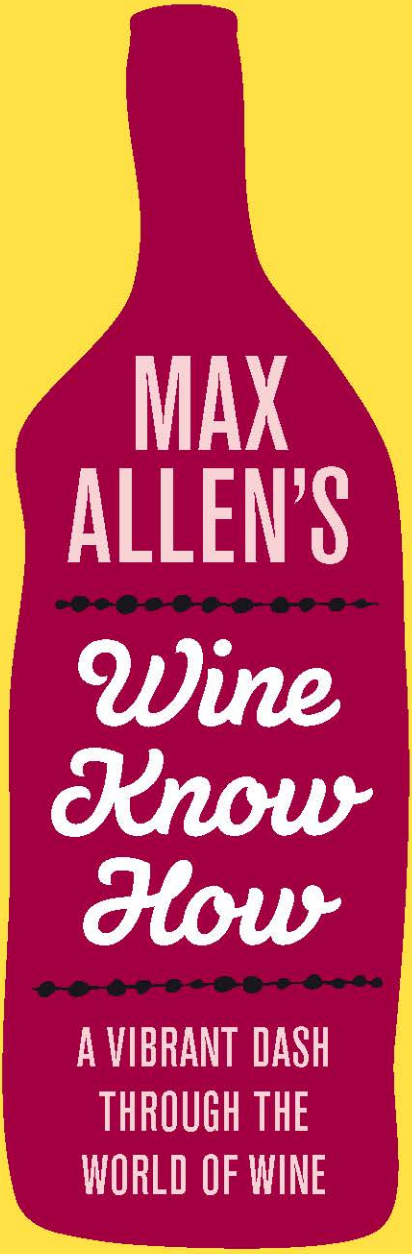
Max Allen's Wine Know How

Written by Max Allen

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MAX
ALLEN'S
Wine
Know
How
A VIBRANT DASH
THROUGH THE
WORLD OF WINE

An SBS book

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INTRODUCTION

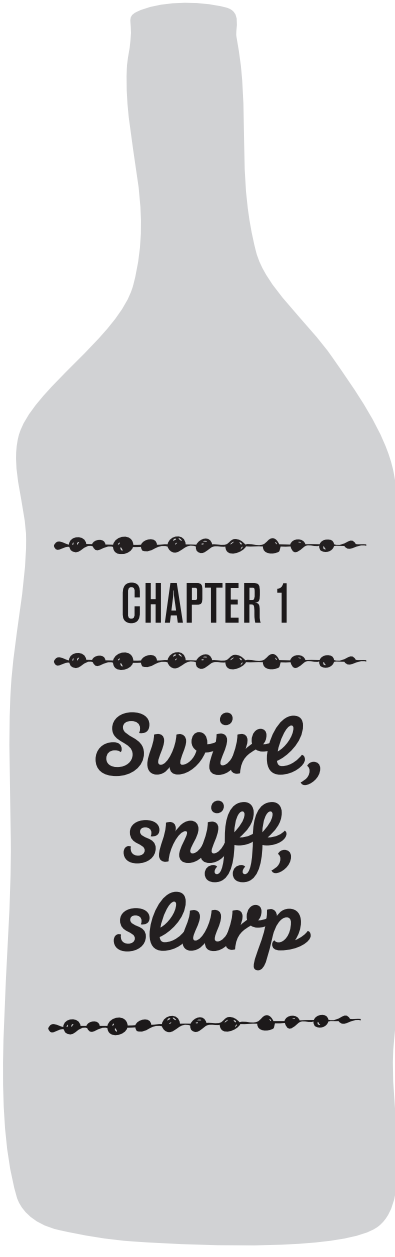


This book is for anyone who likes to drink wine and wants to know more about it.

This book is for anyone who has picked up a bottle of wine, looked at the gobbledegook on the label and thought: 'But what does *that* mean?'

This book is for anyone who wants some advice when they walk into a wine shop or cellar door or restaurant but is too timid to ask.

The dictionary defines wine as 'the fermented juice of the grape used as a beverage'. This book is for anyone who knows that wine is much, much more than that.



CHAPTER 1

Swirl, sniff, slurp

Getting started

THE BEST GLASSES

A good wine glass is your best drinking buddy: its shape and size can have a huge effect on how you enjoy the wine. Five things to bear in mind when buying glasses:

1. You get the most satisfying smells and flavours out of a wine glass with a tulip-shaped bowl, which concentrates the aromas wafting up from the wine towards your nose.
2. A glass with a long stem keeps your hands from warming the wine.
3. Clear, blemish-free glass allows you to fully appreciate the wine's colour.
4. Fine, thin glass is more pleasant to drink from than chunky, thick glass.

5. Ideally, your glasses are sturdy enough to go in the dishwasher. If you do have to hand-wash, make sure the glasses are well rinsed and free of detergent before using them again.

Look, you *could* go mad and buy all sorts of different-shaped glasses – there are even glasses designed for specific grape varieties, believe it or not – but you only really need three different shapes: glasses with big bowls for whites and reds; smaller bowl glasses for sweet and fortified wines; and tall, skinny flutes for keeping the bubbles in a glass of sparkling wine.

HOW TO TASTE WINE FOR MAXIMUM ENJOYMENT

1. Pour

Only pour until the glass is a third or a half full; you're going to be doing some vigorous swirling in a second, and you don't want to end up wearing the wine.

2. Swirl

Swirl the wine around to look at its colour, and to release the wine's delicious smells ...

The 'legs' myth

If a wine has thick 'tears' – or 'legs' – running down the inside of the glass after you've swirled it, this is *not* necessarily an indication of quality. It simply means the wine is high in alcohol and/or sweetness.

3. Sniff

... Now stick your nose in and sniff. Does it smell good to you? Smell like you want to drink it? (Wine nerds call the wine's smell its 'nose'.)

4. Slurp

Now, take a sip of the wine, chew it around in your mouth for a couple of seconds, letting it reach every part of your tongue. Think about how sweet or tart it is at the front of your mouth; whether you can feel acidity, bitterness or grip on the sides of your tongue; how much it fills the mouth with flavour. And then, when you've swallowed, think about the aftertaste (called the

'finish') does the wine hang around pleasantly at the back of the throat? Or seem to disappear abruptly into thin air?

5. Spit or swallow?

If trying lots of wines at once, at an in-store tasting, say, or a winery cellar door, spitting is a good idea if you want to keep yourself nice. Otherwise I'm a big advocate of swallowing.

6. Remember

You've just taken a flavour-snapshot of the wine's smells, textures and tastes that you'll hopefully remember when the bottle's empty. But if you come across a wine you particularly like, it's also worth writing a reminder to yourself. Just scribble the name on the back of a napkin, or your hand, even, so when you wake up the next day you don't have to go through that scenario so familiar to wine merchants everywhere: 'Um, I had this wine last night, right. I can't remember what it was but it was red ... I think ...'

What makes a good wine?

Get into the habit of spending a second or two paying close attention to the smells, flavours and tastes each time you try a new wine, and I guarantee you'll soon be enjoying every single glass a whole lot more, because:

- You'll come to recognise a good wine from a bad one.
- Concentrating a bit harder will reveal a whole new world of subtle, thrilling, even downright sexy flavours you've possibly been missing in your wines until now.
- You will, most importantly, discover for yourself which wines you like – and which wines you don't. Wine is a very subjective thing; just because someone says a certain bottle is great, that doesn't mean *you* are going to enjoy it – even if you can recognise its quality. If you get to know your own preferences, it's easier to hack through the forest of wine reviews and identify those that sound like they're describing your favourite style.

How to spot a good wine

A good wine …

- **is appealing**: good wine should smell and taste fresh, yummy and enticing;
- **is concentrated**: whether it's light and delicate or rich and full bodied, the wine should sit confidently and pleasingly on your tongue;
- **is complex**: good wine has more than one flavour, to keep you engaged and excited until the last drop;
- **is balanced**: no one element (fruit, alcohol, acid, oak) should stick out too much – they should all be in harmony;
- **lingers**: the flavour haunts the back of your throat, urging you to have another sip.

How to spot a bad wine

A bad wine …

- **is dirty and bland**: it smells unpleasant or boring or of not very much at all;
- **is thin and dilute**: it hardly registers on your tongue;
- **is simple**: bad wine only has one, rather weak, flavour;
- **is unbalanced**: bad wine is overly sharp, or too woody, or has an alcohol burn;
- **is mean**: the taste disappears at the back of your throat, and leaves you feeling short-changed.

What's wrong with my wine?

Things can go wrong with wine at any stage, from when the grapes are picked to when the bottle is opened. The symptoms and causes of the most common flaws are listed below. If you find them dominating the enjoyment of your wine, you have every right to complain, send back the bottle to the waiter, or ask for an exchange from the shop where you bought it (see page 88).

✕ **Problem**: Dull, brown colour.
Reason: The wine has come into contact with too much oxygen, has oxidised and is on its way to becoming vinegar.

- **Problem**: Musty, mouldy smells.
  Reason: This is occasionally caused by the wine being stored in dirty old barrels, but most often a musty smell is caused by cork taint. Cork is prone to all kinds of contamination which can, in turn, taint the wine, making it taste 'corked' – flat, dull, even quite rank – like mouldy cardboard.

- **Problem**: Smells like rotten eggs or burnt matches.
  Reason: The rotten egg smell is caused by hydrogen sulfide, which can form in a wine during fermentation. It is usually easily dealt with by the winemaker, but occasionally creeps into the bottle. Burnt match smells are due to excessive sulfur dioxide, which is a preservative added to most wines.

✕ **Problem**: Vinegary or solvent smells.
Reason: Too much volatile acidity, known as VA. Volatile acids, such as acetic (vinegar) acid, are the ones we can smell. A little VA can add complexity and lift the aromas of a wine; a lot can make it smell like vinegar or nail polish remover.

✕ **Problem**: Tiny, crunchy crystals in the bottle.
Reason: You can come across these in sweet white wines and older red wine. They are *not a fault,* but natural tartrate crystals that can develop when the wine ages or gets too cold. They do not affect the wine's taste or quality.