

# ENJOYING WINE: A LIFE-LONG LEARNING PURSUIT

With so many choices, how do you find a wine you like? “Taste, taste, taste,” say the experts.

STORY: MARY ANN DESANTIS PHOTOS: TONY DESANTIS

**Y**ou’ve enjoyed the same wine for years but all of sudden the latest vintage tastes totally different... and you realize it may be time to find a new favorite. The wine’s flavors may have changed dramatically because something affected the terroir where the grapes were grown; or possibly your taste in wine has evolved and changed. And then, some of us just get bored with a particular wine and want to find something else. Whatever the reason, the pursuit of a new favorite begins again.

The first step when tasting wine is to keep an open mind. For years, especially after seeing the movie “Sideways,” which nearly decimated the market for Merlot because the movie’s main character compared it to swill, I did not drink Merlot — mostly to avoid the chuckles from “serious” wine geeks. However, at a wine tasting I discovered Merlot actually worked better with my palate than more highly tannic wines. Some of my favorite Merlots are just as complex and flavorful as Cabernets and Syrahs.

Learning about wine also involves tasting many different varietals. Remember that your spouse or best friend probably has an entirely different palate and preference for wines than you, and that is okay. Don’t let anyone tell you what you are drinking and enjoying is bad because it’s never been reviewed by *Wine Spectator* or wine critic Robert Parker. In fact, Parker gave up a law career after his curiosity about wine was sparked when

he was visiting his future wife in Alsace, France. He may have a favorite wine at home but he objectively reviews a lot of different varietals. He’s even been brave enough to drink and then write positively about a microbrew beer from Delaware fermented with Syrah grapes. A lot of Syrah lovers may call that blasphemous but, nevertheless, Parker didn’t let anyone influence his choice of drinks.

All of the wine shops in our area offer inexpensive wine tastings. For \$5 or \$10, you get a glass and the opportunity to try many different kinds of wines. Remember, though, tastings aren’t bars with unlimited pours. The one-ounce pours are enough to learn about different varietals and to find wines that suit your taste.

On the other end of the spectrum, trying a classic, high quality, and expensive wine is also a learning experience. Very few of us can or want to spend \$100 on a bottle of wine, but an opportunity to taste a classic wine gives you a chance to see how wines stack up to one by which all others are judged. For instance, I’ve heard about Opus One for years but never had a chance to enjoy a glass until I attended a wine connoisseurs’ dinner at Palm Tree Grille & Bar in Mount Dora. The wine pairing dinners, according to restaurateur Joe Sabatini, are a chance for wine lovers to experience wines they might not otherwise get to try.

“In the last three years since we’ve changed the restaurant’s concept to include a wine theme, it’s been like

going to college,” says Sabatini.

His wine connoisseur dinners are indeed learning experiences. Usually a winemaker or winery representative is on hand to talk about the wines between courses. J. France Posener from Opus One shared stories about the winery’s amazing history that began as a partnership between California’s Robert Mondavi and France’s Baron Philippe de Rothschild.

“The idea had never been done before — a Frenchman and an American working together to create a wine,” she explains. “The first Opus One vintage was produced in 1979 and in 1984, the wine was released in only five states. Today, Opus One is sold in 70 countries worldwide, and it’s the only winery to have offices in Bordeaux, France.”

I was thrilled to taste a Bordeaux-type blend from Napa, Calif., that indeed compared favorably and even outshined some of the renowned French equivalents. The next time I try a French Bordeaux, I will have a new standard by which to compare it — one that comes from California.



**ABOUT THE WRITER**

Living in Italy was the catalyst for Mary Ann DeSantis to understand more about wine, and she now enjoys sharing what she’s learned. Since 2010, *Saluté* has covered topics for oenophiles of all levels — from novice wine drinkers to experienced connoisseurs. The column received a 2013 Florida Magazine

Association Bronze Award for Best Department and a 2012 Florida Press Club Excellence in Journalism Award for Commentary.

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— JOE SABATINI  
PALM TREE GRILLE & BAR



Joe Sabatini and J. France Posener

