



BEGINNER COMMONLY ENCOUNTERED WINE FAULTS



Material contained in this document applies to multiple course levels. Reference your syllabus to determine specific areas of study.

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The situation is common. The wine you have ordered arrives at your table, the bottle is opened, a taste is poured and the wine smells wrong. You are not sure what is behind the malodorous scent, but you are quite sure it smells of moldy attic. You are desperate to send it back, but nervous the "attic" excuse will come off as uninformed and incorrect. Don't worry because there is a method to decoding wine faults so that no one should have to suffer through the unpleasantness of a flawed wine.

Taste, however, is the most arbitrary dimension of wine and it can be affected by everything from your morning coffee to the waiter's hand soap. The flavors of a wine, what you taste, are probably not that much different from what the next person might taste. Therefore, below are listed the most encountered faults among all wines. Each one affects different facets of a wine's structure, but all of them take away from the intended experience of the winemaker and the true expression (read: flavor) of the grapes.

TRICHLOROANISOLE ("TCA")

This wine fault is actually the one of the most common. Caused by chlorine-contaminated cork bark or wood, which in turn leads to what we know as "cork taint" or "corked" wines. Affected wines smell of moldy or wet cardboard, musty air, etc., lack fruit intensity on the palate and are destined to grow more intensely foul-smelling as the problem persists.

BRETTANOMYCES ("BRETT")

Caused by the spoilage yeast *Brettanomyces*, "Brett" - as this fault is most often called - leads affected wines to smell like a host of unpleasant descriptors (barnyard, sweaty saddle, chicken coop and wet dog are some of the more colorful ways it's been characterized). In low concentrations, Brett can be interpreted by some tasters as pleasant, but if it overwhelms, ask to try a different wine as additional bottles of the same wine are likely to be affected.

VOLATILE ACIDITY ("VA")

The result of the overproduction of acetic acid and ethyl acetate in wine, this fairly common wine fault causes its vinous victims to smell of aromas including nail polish remover, vinegar and paint thinner. In its most intense incarnations, wines with excessive VA come across simply as vinegar both in aroma and taste. This can also be a widespread problem among bottles of the same wine, generally if one bottle out of a case shows this then they all will.



OXIDATION

Occasionally described as maderized, this fault occurs in table wines that have been needlessly exposed to oxygen through poor handling or rapid temperature changes (most often heat-related) during their life in the winery or in the bottle. Affected wines will turn brown in color, a defect most apparent in whites, and taste stale, flat or generally lifeless.

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MERCAPTANS

Caused by the improper handling of sulphur compounds in the winery, this fault results in wines that smell unappetizingly like skunks or rotten eggs. Easily one of the most unpleasant wine faults in terms of off-scents it produces, mercaptans is thankfully encountered rather infrequently.

CLOUDINESS / HAZINESS

Cloudiness in a wine is a visual flaw that most often does not indicate a serious problem unless the cloudiness is excessive. Unfiltered wines are known for being a bit more opaque than their crystal-clear, filtered cousins, though this is not technically a flaw; if your wine resembles a something seriously murky, however, it could be mycoderma, a yeast-related fault that can affect not only clarity but taste as well.



TARTRATE CRYSTALS

Perhaps the most visually shocking of all wine faults, tartrate crystals resemble tiny shards of glass in the bottom of some white wine bottles - but are in fact harmless. Known to present in wines that have not been cold stabilized (as is often the case with many European whites), tartrate crystals are formed from solidified potassium or calcium (cream of tartar) and present no threat to the flavor of the wine.

HERBACIOUSNESS ("GREEN FLAVORS")

Not to be confused with herbaciousness as aroma or flavor in a wine. This is an overabundance of methoxypyrozone that produce a cooked green pepper or highly vegetal aroma. It is found predominantly in red wines where early picking or harvesting in wet conditions is commonly practiced.

BUBBLES

Occasionally you will find yourself uncorking a so-called "still wine" that boasts a few or a lot of bubbles in its midst. When seen in young white wines, particularly off-dry versions such as Vinho Verde, Mosel Riesling, etc., this is often intentional, as a touch of CO₂ is known to make these wines taste light and refreshing. In an older red, however, bubbles signal an unintentional secondary fermentation in the bottle, and are most definitely a fault.