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basics in  
90 minutes

# *Quicklook at* **Wine**



## About Quicklook at Wine

**W**INE of has been popular for thousands of years. It is produced in many countries and drunk in even more. It comes in different colours, flavours, strengths and bottles, made with different techniques and enjoyed with or without food. We are spoilt for choice.

*Quicklook at Wine* helps you get to grips with this fascinating industry and its products. Wine expert Richard Avery takes you briefly and clearly through the story of wine, the amazing care taken in its production and the marriage of art, science and luck that is required for success. There are many different methods of producing wine. Some are much better than others. Learn how and why this is.

What makes red wine a different colour from white? What about rose? What is the significance of the use of different grapes? What can you tell about a wine by looking at the bottle in a shop? How should you assess a wine? What do experts look for at a tasting?

How do you tackle the wine waiter? How do you decide if a wine is not good enough? What are the best wine buying strategies? All of these questions and many more are tackled in this book.



Quicklook at

# *Wine*

Richard Avery



Quicklook  
books

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# *What is wine?*



**W**INE is the alcoholic beverage made from the fermented juice of any fruit.

The most common variety is “Grape Wine” and when speaking of “wine” alone it is widely accepted that you are referring to this. Any other wine has the relevant fruit in its name: Elderberry wine, Gooseberry wine etc. Technically speaking Cider is “Apple wine”. One could argue that alcohol free “wine” is simply grape juice, except that there has been a fermentation after which the alcohol has been removed. One expert always stated that the natural evolution of grape juice was to make vinegar; it is only by Man’s intervention that we are able to stop the fermentation, to make wine. This intervention is known as “vinification”. Of course Man also makes influential decisions in the vineyard, known as “viticulture”.

Wine is the result of simple processes of nature, where grape juice, yeasts and bacteria react and develop together. The intervention of a winemaker determines the quality and drinkability of the end result. In its early days, wine would have been defined more by the part it played in Man’s diet, as a means of storing the grape’s nutrients for the winter months. Over the years it has developed into a drink used primarily for recreational purposes, where quality and enjoyment are at a premium. Every bottle has required skilled productive effort by a number of people, often over a very long time.

Wine can be many things: a treat, an icebreaker at a social event, a way of showing off and/or an investment.



**T**HE wine making process has developed hugely, and the winemakers' influence has grown ever more significant. As wine is a living drink, so is vinification a living science. Winemakers are constantly learning, and their methods constantly changing. Winemaking is a magical marriage of advancing science with tried and tested tradition. The principle remains the same though: fermenting the sugars of a grape into alcohol.

First, you have to grow the grapes.

## **Viticulture**

It is said that great wines are made in the vineyard. The decisions made here shape the entire process that follows. More often than not the winemaker is in charge of the whole process. If not then communication between him and the vineyard manager is vital, especially when it comes to harvest. Once they have decided which grapes to grow then they must keep the vines healthy to maximise yields.

The one element in the whole process that is beyond human control is the weather. It is a variable that no amount of scientific research and development can fully contain. The key lies in its management. The location may provide some defence. This is crucial. Each variety has its own preferences. The vast majority of wines are made within a few degrees either side of 45 degrees latitude. This includes California and a swathe of Europe around the Mediterranean in the Northern hemisphere; Australia, South America, South Africa in the Southern Hemisphere. The reason is that higher latitudes are too cold for vines to survive the winter and lower latitudes too hot and humid.

Strategic positioning with regard to slopes and bodies of water can

help to moderate extreme temperatures and protect against high winds; judicious pruning can make or break yields, by managing the amount of sunlight and resulting photosynthesis. Irrigation, where allowed, can help to counter particularly hot, dry years. Soils with high gravel or slate distribution help retain heat in cooler climates and also allow for drainage after excessive rain. Clay soil will defend against dry weather by retaining water.

These are just some of the areas where even the smallest differences can have huge consequences. Ground and climatic factors go a long way to define the French term “terroir”. It is an area that contributes enormously to the romance of wine making. Those in charge of a vineyard are managing the operations of nature and the unpredictable.

Some vineyards are situated in the most beautiful areas in the world. The adaptability of the vine lends itself to a vast array of locations and when the vineyards are well maintained they can offer truly beautiful vistas, such as the gravity defying terraces that tower above the Douro River in Portugal. This maintenance includes old traditions, such as planting rose bushes at the end of rows of vines. Originally it was thought that the roses would catch any diseases before the vines and thus warn the viticulturists of any approaching dangers. Now they are purely decorative but the problems facing the viticulturists still exist. In nearly all cases they will seek prevention rather than cure.

Adverse weather can strike at any time and the vine is never one hundred percent safe. It is, perhaps, at its most vulnerable in Spring, when a hard hitting frost is capable of destroying entire crops. A winter frost is less severe. Several days of sub-zero temperatures would be needed to seriously damage the dormant vine. In the Northern hemisphere the dangers lie around March/April, even May in some years, when the buds begin to appear. If these buds freeze then the summer yield can be drastically reduced.

High winds are another danger. They can damage the vines, break stems, tear off leaves or inhibit a vine’s ability to pollinate, fertilise and thus bear fruit. Unsuccessful flowering can cause the berries to either fall off or fail to grow sufficiently. This can result in a reduced crop. A possible silver lining to this is that the concentration of the remaining



berries may be heightened.

The final villain of the piece is rainfall, or lack of. Too little water hinders the growth of the grape early on and results in over ripe, “cooked” grapes later on. Too much rain has wider consequences. Throughout the fruition process too much moisture increases the risks of disease and rot. Even if all these obstacles are safely crossed then rain has one more serious trick up its sleeve. Headaches and heart rates soar around harvest time as viticulturists and wine-makers gamble with the weather. Pick too early and the grapes may not get their fill of sun and fail to achieve maximum ripeness; too late and there is the risk of autumn showers. Not only do the vines take a big drink, diluting all they have to offer, but also any excess water on the harvested grapes will dilute the juice. Leave them on the vine to dry, and once again they face the risk of rot!

Once fit and ready for action, the grapes are harvested. This can be done by hand or machine. Hand picking is an expensive option but one which the producers of top wine still favour. When done by hand, the quality control process can begin straight away as only the healthiest bunches are selected. Picking by hand also minimises any damage.

More often than not grapes are harvested by a machine, which looks rather like a tractor on stilts! This straddles the rows of vines, shakes them vigorously and catches the grapes as they fall. Needless to say, some of the bunches get damaged. They must be transported to the winery – protected from sun or rain.

## **Vinification**

Once the grapes have been harvested successfully they are brought to the winery and put on a conveyor belt for sorting. Top quality wineries will do this by hand, with sorters standing either side of the conveyor belt, to optimise juice quality. Any rotten or damaged grapes are removed; likewise any unwanted flotsam and jetsam from the vineyard. Some stalks may be kept where necessary, for red wines only. They contain useful tannins that can sometimes benefit the structure of a wine, especially in hot years when the yield is particularly ripe and sugar levels are high.

The processes of making white wine and red wine now show a fundamental deviation. The crucial point of difference is the skins.

## White wines

White wine grapes will now be very lightly crushed and pressed, with the resulting juice run off into vats. Winemakers looking for a slightly fuller wine may leave the crushed grapes to soak for a while with the skins before separating the juice into vats. This will not be the case for any white wines made from red skinned grapes.

The “free running juice”, the juice that came directly from the crushing, will be the purest, fruit driven extract. What remains then undergoes gentle pressing to extract the remaining juice. The subsequent presses will be fuller and contain more skin extract, each with their own potential benefits for the final wine. For now they are fermented separately, to be used later for blending. The entire process from vineyard to vat will be executed as rapidly as possible and at very cool temperatures, minimising any risk of oxidation or premature fermentation.

## Red wines

Red wines depend more greatly on “skin contact”. Ninety five per cent of red wines are made from grapes that have red skins, but white juice. So the skins and, particularly, their rich nutrients, such as tannins, are essential in red wine making. To this end they are fermented with the juice, together forming “must”. Tannins provide structure for the wine, the backbone. They also possess good anti-oxidant qualities that not only assist fermentation but also give wine much of its health benefits. With the notable exception of Beaujolais, where the grapes are put into the vats whole, the grapes and stalks are, like white wines, crushed and pressed gently.

The crushing of the grapes has sadly been advanced by industry and is now performed by machine not man. Some port houses still crush by foot. It is a popular holiday job for students, because of the opportunities for informal quality control after a strenuous session of stamping has come to an end. There is a reason why this rather mocked method was introduced. The main benefit is that there is not enough direct pressure to crush either the pips or any stalks present in the must. Left intact these “foliage” tannins can be beneficial

## *About the author*

**R**ICHARD AVERY represents the fifth generation of a family business founded in 1793. After study at the University of Bordeaux he helped to set up and manage a wine company that challenged the local specialists, to the extent of successfully selling Australian Shiraz to the Bordelais.

A Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Vintners, Richard has acted as a member of the tasting panel for *Decanter* magazine, for whom he remains an occasional consultant.

Not content with one career, Richard is a successful stage and film actor, under the name Alex Avery. He has featured in films with Michael Caine, Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson and Johnny depp.

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## Quicklook at **Wine**

This book will help you savour your wine even more than before. We learn about the amazing care taken over its production and the marriage of art, science and luck needed for success. We consider the many variables – the location of the vineyards, the grapes grown, the way they are grown, picked, processed and blended. Then there is bottling and marketing – all vital parts of what is a big industry.

What can you learn by looking at a bottle in a shop? How do you assess it once you have bought it? What do experts look for at a tasting?

● These are all questions that *Quicklook at Wine* will answer.

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## About the author

Richard Avery is a member of the fifth generation of a family involved in the wine business since 1793. After qualifying at the University of



Bordeaux in 1995, Richard helped to set up a successful new wine business. He is a liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Vintners and often writes about wine.

Not content with one career, Richard is also a successful actor, having appeared in major roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company in the West End and in a number of feature films, under the name Alex Avery.

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