Chapter 1

Wine 101

In This Chapter

- What wine is
- Million-dollar words like *fermentation* and *sulfites*
- What red wine has that white wine doesn't
- Why color matters
- Differences between table wine, sparkling wine, and fortified wine

We know plenty of people who enjoy drinking wine but don't know much about it. (Been there, done that ourselves.) Knowing a lot of information about wine definitely isn't a prerequisite to enjoying it. But familiarity with certain aspects of wine can make choosing wines a lot easier, enhance your enjoyment of wine, and increase your comfort level. You can learn as much or as little as you like. The journey begins here.

How Wine Happens

Wine is, essentially, nothing but liquid, fermented fruit. The recipe for turning fruit into wine goes something like this:

1. **Pick a large quantity of ripe grapes from grapevines.**

   You could substitute raspberries or any other fruit, but 99.9 percent of all the wine in the world is made from grapes, because they make the best wines.

2. **Put the grapes into a clean container that doesn't leak.**
3. **Crush the grapes somehow to release their juice.**

   Once upon a time, feet performed this step.

4. **Wait.**

In its most basic form, winemaking is that simple. After the grapes are crushed, *yeasts* (tiny one-celled organisms that exist naturally in the vineyard and, therefore, on the grapes) come into contact with the sugar in the grapes' juice and gradually convert that sugar into alcohol. Yeasts also produce

carbon dioxide, which evaporates into the air. When the yeasts are done working, your grape juice is wine. The sugar that was in the juice is no longer there — alcohol is present instead. (The riper and sweeter the grapes, the more alcohol the wine will have.) This process is called *fermentation*.

What could be more natural?

Fermentation is a totally natural process that doesn't require man's participation at all, except to put the grapes into a container and release the juice from the grapes. Fermentation occurs in fresh apple cider left too long in your refrigerator, without any help from you. In fact we read that milk, which contains a different sort of sugar than grapes do, develops a small amount of alcohol if left on the kitchen table all day long.

Speaking of milk, Louis Pasteur is the man credited with discovering fermentation in the nineteenth century. That's discovering, not inventing. Some of those apples in the Garden of Eden probably fermented long before Pasteur came along. (Well, we don't think it could have been much of an Eden without wine!)

Modern wrinkles in winemaking

Now if every winemaker actually made wine in as crude a manner as we just described, we'd be drinking some pretty rough stuff that would hardly inspire us to write a wine book.

But today's winemakers have a bag of tricks as big as a sumo wrestler's appetite. That's one reason why no two wines ever taste exactly the same.

The men and women who make wine can control the type of container they use for the fermentation process (stainless steel and oak are the two main materials), as well as the size of the container and the temperature of the juice during fermentation — and every one of these choices can make a big difference in the taste of the wine. After fermentation, they can choose how long to let the wine *mature* (a stage when the wine sort of gets its act together) and in what kind of container. Fermentation can last three days or three months, and the wine can then mature for a couple of weeks or a couple of years or anything in between. If you have trouble making decisions, don't ever become a winemaker.

The main ingredient

Obviously, one of the biggest factors in making one wine different from the next is the nature of the raw material, the grape juice. Besides the fact that riper, sweeter grapes make a more alcoholic wine, different *varieties* of grapes (Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, or Merlot, for example) make different

wines. Grapes are the main ingredient in wine, and everything the winemaker does, he does to the particular grape juice he has. Chapter 3 covers specific grapes and the kinds of wine they make.

Local flavor

Grapes, the raw material of wine, don't grow in a void. Where they grow — the soil and climate of each wine region, as well as the traditions and goals of the people who grow the grapes and make the wine — affects the nature of the ripe grapes, and the taste of the wine made from those grapes. That's why so much of the information there is to learn about wine revolves around the countries and the regions where wine is made. In the five chapters that comprise Parts III and IV of this book, we cover all the world's major wine regions and their wines.

What Color Is Your Appetite?

Your inner child will be happy to know that when it comes to wine, it's okay to like some colors more than others. You can't get away with saying "I don't like green food!" much beyond your sixth birthday, but you can express a general preference for white, red, or pink wine for all your adult years.

(Not exactly) white wine

Whoever coined the term "white wine" must have been colorblind. All you have to do is look at it to see that it's not white, it's yellow. But we've all gotten used to the expression by now, and so *white wine* it is.

White wine is wine without any red color (or pink color, which is in the red family). This means that *White Zinfandel,* a popular pink wine, isn't white wine. But yellow wines, golden wines, and wines that are as pale as water are all white wines.

Wine becomes white wine in one of two ways. First, white wine can be made from white grapes — which, by the way, aren't white. (Did you see that one coming?) *White* grapes are greenish, greenish yellow, golden yellow, or sometimes even pinkish yellow. Basically, white grapes include all the grape types that are not dark red or dark bluish. If you make a wine from white grapes, it's a white wine.

The second way a wine can become white is a little more complicated. The process involves using red grapes — but only the *juice* of red grapes, not the grape skins. The juice of most red grapes has no red pigmentation — only the skins do — and so a wine made with only the juice of red grapes can be a

white wine. In practice, though, very few white wines come from red grapes. (Champagne is one exception; Chapter 14 addresses the use of red grapes to make Champagne.)

In case you're wondering, the skins are removed from the grapes by either *pressing* large quantities of grapes so that the juice flows out and the skins stay behind — sort of like squeezing the pulp out of grapes, the way kids do in the cafeteria — or by *crushing* the grapes in a machine that has rollers to break the skins so that the juice can drain away.

Is white always right?

You can drink white wine anytime you like — which for most people means as a drink without food or with lighter foods. Chapter 19 covers the dynamics of pairing wines with food.

The skinny on sulfites

Sulfur dioxide, a compound formed from sulfur and oxygen, occurs naturally during fermentation in very small quantities. Winemakers add it, too. Sulfur dioxide is to wine what aspirin and vitamin E are to humans — a wonder drug that cures all sorts of afflictions and prevents others. Sulfur dioxide is an antibacterial, preventing the wine from turning to vinegar. It inhibits yeasts, preventing sweet wines from refermenting in the bottle. It's an antioxidant, keeping the wine fresh and untainted by the demon oxygen. Despite these magical properties, winemakers try to use as little sulfur dioxide as possible because many of them share a belief that the less you add to wine, the better (just as many people prefer to ingest as little medication as possible).

Now here's a bit of irony for you:

Today — when winemaking is so advanced that winemakers need to rely on sulfur dioxide's help less than ever before — most wine labels in America state "Contains Sulfites" (meaning sulfur dioxide). That's because Congress passed a law in 1988 requiring that phrase on the label. So now many wine drinkers understandably think that there's *more* sulfur in the wine than there used to be; but, in reality, sulfur dioxide use is probably at an all-time low.

Approximately 5 percent of asthmatics are extremely sensitive to sulfites. To protect them, Congress mandated that any wine containing more than 10 parts per million of sulfites carry the "Contains Sulfites" phrase on its label. Considering that about 10 to 20 parts per million occur naturally in wine, that covers just about every wine. (The exception is organic wines, which are intentionally made without the addition of sulfites; some of them are low enough in sulfites that they don't have to use the mandated phrase.)

Actual sulfite levels in wine range from about 30 to 150 parts per million (about the same as in dried apricots); the legal max in the United States is 350. White dessert wines have the most sulfur — followed by medium-sweet white wines and blush wines — because those types of wine need the most protection. Dry white wines generally have less, and dry reds have the least.

White wine styles: There's no such thing as plain white wine

White wines fall into four general taste categories, not counting sparkling wine or the really sweet white wine that you drink with dessert (see Chapter 15 for more on those). If the words we use to describe these taste categories sound weird, take heart — they're all explained in Chapter 2. We also explain the styles in plentiful detail in our book, *Wine Style* (Wiley). Here are the four broad categories:

- Some white wines are *fresh, unoaked whites* — crisp and light, with no sweetness and no oaky character. (Turn to Chapter 3 for the lowdown on oak.) Most Italian white wines, like Soave and Pinot Grigio, and some French whites, like Sancerre and some Chablis wines, fall into this category.
- Some white wines are *earthy whites* — dry, fuller-bodied, unoaked or lightly oaked, with a lot of earthy character. Some French wines, such as Mâcon or whites from the Côtes du Rhône region (covered in Chapter 9) have this taste profile.
- Some white wines are *aromatic whites,* characterized by intense aromas and flavors that come from their particular grape variety, whether they're *off-dry* (that is, not bone-dry) or dry. Examples include a lot of German wines, and wines from flavorful grape varieties such as Riesling or Viognier.
- Finally, some white wines are rich, oaky whites — dry or fairly dry, and full-bodied with pronounced oaky character. Most Chardonnays and many French wines — like many of those from the Burgundy region of France — fall into this group.

White wines are often considered *apéritif* wines, meaning wines consumed before dinner, in place of cocktails, or at parties. (If you ask the officials who busy themselves defining such things, an apéritif wine is a wine that has flavors added to it, as vermouth does. But unless you're in the business of writing wine labels for a living, don't worry about that. In common parlance, an apéritif wine is just what we said.)

A lot of people like to drink white wines when the weather is hot because they're more refreshing than red wines, and they're usually drunk chilled (the wines, not the people).

We serve white wines cool, but not ice-cold. Sometimes restaurants serve white wines too cold, and we actually have to wait a while for the wine to warm up before we drink it. If you like your wine cold, fine; but try drinking your favorite white wine a little less cold sometime, and we bet you'll discover it has more flavor that way. In Chapter 8, we recommend specific serving temperatures for various types of wine.

For suggestions of foods to eat with white wine, turn to Chapter 19; for really detailed information about white wine and food (and white wine itself, for that matter), refer to our book *White Wine For Dummies* (Wiley).

Red, red wine

In this case, the name is correct. Red wines really are red. They can be purple red, ruby red, or garnet, but they're red.

Red wines are made from grapes that are red or bluish in color. So guess what wine people call these grapes? Black grapes! We suppose that's because black is the opposite of white.

The most obvious difference between red wine and white wine is color. The red color occurs when the colorless juice of red grapes stays in contact with the dark grape skins during fermentation and absorbs the skins' color. Along with color, the grape skins give the wine *tannin,* a substance that's an important part of the way a red wine tastes. (See Chapter 2 for more about tannin.) The presence of tannin in red wines is actually the most important taste difference between red wines and white wines.

Red wines vary quite a lot in style. This is partly because winemakers have so many ways of adjusting their red-winemaking to achieve the kind of wine they want. For example, if winemakers leave the juice in contact with the skins for a long time, the wine becomes more *tannic* (firmer in the mouth, like strong tea; tannic wines can make you pucker). If winemakers drain the juice off the skins sooner, the wine is softer and less tannic.

Red wine styles: There's no such thing as just plain red wine, either

Here are four red wine styles:

- *Soft, fruity reds* are relatively light-bodied, with a lot of fruitiness and little tannin (like Beaujolais Nouveau wine from France, some Valpolicellas from Italy, and many under-$10 U.S. wines).
- *Mild-mannered reds* are medium-bodied with subtle, un-fruity flavors (like less expensive wines from Bordeaux, in France, and some inexpensive Italian reds).
- *Spicy reds* are flavorful, fruity wines with spicy accents and some tannin (such as some Malbecs from France or Argentina, and Dolcettos from Italy).
- *Powerful reds* are full-bodied and tannic (such as the most expensive California Cabernets; Barolo, from Italy; the most expensive Australian reds; and lots of other expensive reds).

Red wine sensitivities

Some people complain that they can't drink red wines without getting a headache or feeling ill. Usually, they blame the sulfites in the wine. We're not doctors or scientists, but we can tell you that red wines contain far less sulfur than white wines. That's because the tannin in red wines acts as a preservative, making sulfur dioxide less necessary. Red wines do contain histamine-like compounds and other substances derived from the grape skins that could be the culprits. Whatever the source of the discomfort, it's probably not sulfites.

Red wine tends to be consumed more often as part of a meal than as a drink on its own.

Thanks to the wide range of red wine styles, you can find red wines to go with just about every type of food and every occasion when you want to drink wine (except the times when you want to drink a wine with bubbles, because most bubbly wines are white or pink). In Chapter 19, we give you some tips on matching red wine with food. You can also consult our book about red wine, *Red Wine For Dummies* (Wiley).

One sure way to spoil the fun in drinking most red wines is to drink them too cold. Those tannins can taste really bitter when the wine is cold — just as in a cold glass of very strong tea. On the other hand, many restaurants serve red wines too warm. (Where do they store them? Next to the boiler?) If the bottle feels cool to your hand, that's a good temperature. For more about serving wine at the right temperature, see Chapter 8.

A rose is a rose, but a rosé is "white"

Rosé wines are pink wines. Rosé wines are made from red grapes, but they don't end up red because the grape juice stays in contact with the red skins for a very short time — only a few hours, compared to days or weeks for red wines. Because this *skin contact* (the period when the juice and the skins intermingle) is brief, rosé wines absorb very little tannin from the skins. Therefore, you can chill rosé wines and drink them as you would white wines.

Of course, not all rosé wines are called rosés. (That would be too simple.) Many rosé wines today are called *blush* wines — a term invented by wine marketers to avoid the word *rosé,* because back in the '80s, pink wines weren't very popular. Lest someone figures out that *blush* is a synonym for *rosé,* the labels call these wines *white.* But even a child can see that White Zinfandel is really pink.

The blush wines that call themselves *white* are fairly sweet. Wines labeled *rosé* can be sweetish, too, but some wonderful rosés from Europe (and a few from America, too) are *dry* (not sweet). Some hard-core wine lovers hardly ever drink rosé wine, but many wine drinkers are discovering what a pleasure a good rosé wine can be, especially in warm weather.

Which type when?

Your choice of a white wine, red wine, or rosé wine will vary with the season, the occasion, and the type of food that you're eating (not to mention your personal taste!). Choosing a color usually is the starting point for selecting a specific wine in a wine shop or in a restaurant. As we explain in Chapters 6 and 7, most stores and most restaurant wine lists arrange wines by color before making other distinctions, such as grape varieties, wine regions, or taste categories.

Although certain foods can straddle the line between white wine and red wine compatibility — grilled salmon, for example, can be delicious with a rich white wine or a fruity red — your preference for red, white, or pink wine will often be your first consideration in pairing wine with food, too.

Pairing food and wine is one of the most fun aspects of wine, because the possible combinations are almost limitless. (We get you started with the pairing principles and a few specific suggestions in Chapter 19.) Best of all, your personal taste rules!

Other Ways of Categorizing Wine

We sometimes play a game with our friends: "Which wine," we ask them, "would you want to have with you if you were stranded on a desert island?" In other words, which wine could you drink for the rest of your life without getting tired of it? Our own answer is always Champagne, with a capital *C* (more on the capitalization later in this section).

In a way, it's an odd choice because, as much as we love Champagne, we don't drink it *every day* under normal circumstances. We welcome guests with it, we celebrate with it after our team wins a Sunday football game, and we toast our cats with it on their birthdays. We don't need much of an excuse to drink Champagne, but it's not the type of wine we drink every night.

What we drink every night is regular wine — red, white, or pink — without bubbles. There are various names for these wines. In America, they're called *table* wines, and in Europe they're called *light* wines. Sometimes we refer to them as *still* wines, because they don't have bubbles moving around in them.

Ten occasions to drink rosé (and defy the snobs)

1. When she's having fish and he's having meat (or vice versa)
2. When a red wine just seems too heavy
3. With lunch — hamburgers, grilled cheese sandwiches, and so on
4. On picnics on warm, sunny days
5. To wean your son/daughter, mate, friend (yourself?) off cola
6. On warm evenings
7. To celebrate the arrival of spring or summer
8. With ham (hot or cold) or other pork dishes
9. When you feel like putting ice cubes in your wine
10. On Valentine's Day (or any other pink occasion)

In the following sections, we explain the differences between three categories of wines: table wines, dessert wines, and sparkling wines.

Table wine

Table wine, or light wine, is fermented grape juice whose alcohol content falls within a certain range. Furthermore, table wine is not bubbly. (Some table wines have a very slight carbonation, but not enough to disqualify them as table wines.) According to U.S. standards of identification, table wines may have an alcohol content no higher than 14 percent; in Europe, light wine must contain from 8.5 percent to 14 percent alcohol by volume (with a few exceptions). So unless a wine has more than 14 percent alcohol or has bubbles, it's a table wine or a light wine in the eyes of the law.

The regulations-makers didn't get the number 14 by drawing it from a hat. Historically, most wines contained less than 14 percent alcohol — either because there wasn't enough sugar in the juice to attain a higher alcohol level, or because the yeasts died off when the alcohol reached 14 percent, halting the fermentation. That number, therefore, became the legal borderline between wines that have no alcohol added to them (table wines) and wines that may have alcohol added to them (see "Dessert wine," in the next section).

Today, however, the issue isn't as clear-cut as it was when the laws were written. Many grapes are now grown in warm climates where they become so ripe, and have so much natural sugar, that their juice attains more than 14 percent alcohol when it's fermented. The use of gonzo yeast strains that continue working even when the alcohol exceeds 14 percent is another factor. Many red Zinfandels, Cabernets, and Chardonnays from California now have

14.5 or even 15.5 percent alcohol. Wine drinkers still consider them table wines, but legally they don't qualify. (Technically, they're dessert wines, and are taxed at a higher rate.) Which is just to say that laws and reality don't always keep pace.

Here's our own, real-world definition of table wines: They are the normal, non-bubbly wines that most people drink most of the time.

Dessert wine

Many wines have more than 14 percent alcohol because the winemaker added alcohol during or after the fermentation. That's an unusual way of making wine, but some parts of the world, like the Sherry region in Spain and the Port region in Portugal, have made quite a specialty of it. We discuss those wines in Chapter 15.

Dessert wine is the legal U.S. terminology for these wines, probably because they're usually sweet and often enjoyed after dinner. We find that term misleading, because dessert wines are not *always* sweet and not *always* consumed after dinner. (Dry Sherry is categorized as a dessert wine, for example, but it's dry, and we drink it before dinner.)

In Europe, this category of wines is called *liqueur wines,* which carries the same connotation of sweetness. We prefer the term *fortified,* which suggests that the wine has been strengthened with additional alcohol. But until we get elected to run things, the term will have to be *dessert wine* or *liqueur wine.*

How to (sort of) learn the alcohol content of a wine

Regulations require wineries to state a wine's alcohol percentage on the label (again, with some minor exceptions). It can be expressed in *degrees,* like 12.5 degrees, or as a percentage, like 12.5 percent. If a wine carries the words "Table Wine" on its label in the United States, but not the alcohol percentage, it should have less than 14 percent alcohol by law.

For wines sold within the United States — whether the wine is American or imported — there's a big catch, however. The labels are allowed to lie. U.S. regulations give wineries a 1.5 percent leeway in the accuracy of the alcohol level. If the label states 12.5 percent, the actual alcohol level can be as high as 14 percent or as low as 11 percent. The leeway does not entitle the wineries to exceed the 14 percent maximum, however.

If the alcohol percentage is stated as a number that's neither a full number nor a half-number — 12.8 or 13.2, for example, instead of 12.5 or 13 — odds are it's precise.

Sparkling wine (and a highly personal spelling lesson)

Sparkling wines are wines that contain carbon dioxide bubbles. Carbon dioxide gas is a natural byproduct of fermentation, and winemakers sometimes decide to trap it in the wine. Just about every country that makes wine also makes sparkling wine. In Chapter 14, we discuss how sparkling wine is made and describe the major sparkling wines of the world.

In the United States, Canada, and Europe, *sparkling wine* is the official name for the category of wines with bubbles. Isn't it nice when everyone agrees?

Champagne (with a capital *C*) is the most famous sparkling wine — and probably the most famous *wine,* for that matter. Champagne is a specific type of sparkling wine (made from certain grape varieties and produced in a certain way) that comes from a region in France called Champagne. It is the undisputed Grand Champion of Bubblies.

Unfortunately for the people of Champagne, France, their wine is so famous that the name *champagne* has been borrowed again and again by producers elsewhere, until the word has become synonymous with practically the whole category of sparkling wines. For example, until a recent agreement between the United States and the European Union, U.S. winemakers could legally call any sparkling wine *champagne* — even with a capital *C*, if they wanted — as long as the carbonation was not added artificially. Even now, those American wineries that were already using that name may continue to do so. (They do have to add a qualifying geographic term such as *American* or *Californian* before the word Champagne, however.)

Popular white wines

These types of white wine are available almost everywhere in the United States. We describe these wines in Parts III and IV of this book.

- **Chardonnay:** Can come from California, Australia, France, or almost any other place
- **Sauvignon Blanc:** Can come from California, France, New Zealand, South Africa, and other places
- **Riesling:** Can come from Germany, California, New York, Washington, France, Austria, Australia, and other places
- **Pinot Grigio** or **Pinot Gris:** Can come from Italy, France, Oregon, California, and other places
- **Soave:** Comes from Italy

Popular red wines

You find descriptions and explanations of these popular and widely available red wines all through this book.

- **Cabernet Sauvignon:** Can come from California, Australia, France, and other places
- **Merlot:** Can come from California, France, Washington, New York, Chile, and other places
- **Pinot Noir:** Can come from California, France, Oregon, New Zealand, and other places
- **Beaujolais:** Comes from France
- **Lambrusco:** Usually comes from Italy
- **Chianti:** Comes from Italy
- **Zinfandel:** Usually comes from California
- **Côtes du Rhône:** Comes from France
- **Bordeaux:** Comes from France

For the French, limiting the use of the name *champagne* to the wines of the Champagne region is a *cause célèbre.* European Union regulations not only prevent any other member country from calling its sparkling wines *champagne* but also prohibit the use of terms that even *suggest* the word *champagne,* such as fine print on the label saying that a wine was made by using the "champagne method." What's more, bottles of sparkling wine from countries outside the European Union that use the word champagne on the label are banned from sale in Europe. The French are that serious.

To us, this seems perfectly fair. You'll never catch us using the word *champagne* as a generic term for wine with bubbles. We have too much respect for the people and the traditions of Champagne, France, where the best sparkling wines in the world are made. That's why we stress the capital "C" when we say Champagne. *Those* are the wines we want on our desert island, not just any sparkling wine from anywhere that calls itself champagne.

When someone tries to impress you by serving a "Champagne" that's not French, don't rush to be impressed. Most respectable sparkling wine companies in America won't call their wines champagne out of respect for their French counterparts. (Of course, many of California's top sparkling wine companies are actually owned by the French — so it's no surprise that *they* won't call their wines champagne — but many other companies won't use the term, either.)