

Introduction to Alcoholic Beverages

Alcoholic beverages have been made and consumed since before time was recorded for myriad reasons. Throughout history, alcoholic beverages have been popular for their taste, for their ability to make people feel happy and forget their troubles, and even because they were safer to drink than water.

In the last few centuries, alcoholic beverages have become more diverse, with a range of wine, beer, and spirits available. Of course, the prevalence of alcohol throughout the world has also raised legal, health, and other concerns, including debates over taxation, drinking and life expectancy, and how best to consume and enjoy each type of alcoholic beverage.

WINE

Wine is a beverage with the potential to provide great pleasure, and one that has been influenced by centuries of history, places, and people. When the right combination of grapevine selection, growing conditions, and winemaking occurs, excellent wines can be produced.

Wine is not a complex beverage. Most wines are made from a single product, grapes. Both of the ingredients required for the “recipe” to make wine—sugar and yeast—are found within the grape or adhering to its surface. The first wine probably made itself by following the natural process of rotting. From this simple beginning thousands of years ago, wine has now become a beverage with innumerable variations that is produced worldwide. The grape species *VITIS VINIFERA* is responsible for a majority of the world’s wine production. This grape species has the capacity to produce a broad range of wines with widely different colors, aromas, and taste sensations. There are tens of thousands of different wines produced from more than 2,500 different wine-grape varieties, but most commercial wine is made from less than 200 varieties, and 90 percent of commercial wine produced comes from fewer than 30 different varieties.

Marketing Wine

In spite of the wealth of grape varieties and wines produced from them, in the United States it sometimes seems that Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot are virtually the only varieties produced. This is one indication of how marketing has come to play an important role in the world of wine. In most years more wine is produced worldwide than is consumed. This makes the role of marketing and selling the wine a driving force in the wine business. In large wine-producing companies, it is sometimes the marketing arm that determines the style of wine produced, not the winemaker. In some markets, particularly the U.S. market, consumers want a product that always tastes the same. Variation or change is difficult for many consumers to accept. The result is wine that, like soft drinks, can be a homogeneous, even boring, product. The wine meets a narrow flavor profile that tends to favor consumer preferences for sweet beverages. Yet there are thousands of winemakers throughout the world that are making interesting, complex, and distinctive wines.

Learning to Appreciate Wine

For many people the world of wine is daunting—full of obscure language, complicated geography, subtle climate differences, elaborate techniques, and most of all, expert opinions that make it seem remote and inaccessible. The simple act of tasting wine can, in the wrong hands, become an elaborate ritual, a contest in which your knowledge and taste are on trial. This book provides you with an accessible guide to the world of wine so that you can learn to appreciate this most ancient beverage.

We will explore the world of wines by grape **VARIETY** rather than by country of origin and will guide you through the basic art and science of winemaking to help you understand how wine travels from the vineyard to the bottle to your glass. The seven primary grape varieties covered in this text are the international varietals that are most commonly available in the United States, the ones you are most likely to see on the grocery store or wine shop shelf. These include Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. Viticultural and vinicultural characteristics, such as ripeness, **ACIDITY**, level of oak, and so on, vary widely from one varietal to the next, giving each of these grape varieties its own unique profile. Why is Chardonnay the most popular and the most manipulated wine? Why is Cabernet Sauvignon perceived to be best for aging? What are the factors that make Sauvignon Blanc a great food wine? Armed with a knowledge of each grape variety's characteristics and production techniques, you will be able to answer these questions and choose wines from the wine list or shelf with greater confidence.

Tasting many different kinds of wines is part of the process of learning to appreciate wine.

TOM ZASADZINSKI/CAL POLY POMONA





Johnny Hugel of Hugel & Fils in the tasting room of the family winery in Alsace, France

In addition to these international grape varieties, less well-known grapes such as Grenache, Viognier, Malbec, Gewürztraminer, and Chenin Blanc, not to mention the indigenous varieties of Italy, Spain, and France, should also become part of your knowledge base. These varieties, which are often more popular elsewhere in the world or are used as blending grapes in conjunction with better-known varieties, can result in expressive wines that provide a broad range of profiles and work with an array of different foods.

Stylistically, there are some major differences between **OLD WORLD** wines and **NEW WORLD** wines. Learning to recognize these differences is an important part of learning to understand wines. Old World wine refers to wine produced in Europe, where wines have been made for hundreds of years. Old World winemaking tends to result in wines with less fruit, more acid, moderate to no oak, and less alcohol. New World wines generally refer to wines from countries with less winemaking experience. New World winemaking

tends to result in wines with a riper, fruit-forward style, less acid, more alcohol, and increased use of new oak. An awareness of the history, grape varieties, and substantially different **WINE STYLES** of various regions, and particularly of key winemaking countries, such as France, Italy, and Spain, are essential to developing a general understanding of wine.

Stylistic wines are created using a particular and distinct processing method. The most common stylistic wines are sparkling wines, fortified wines, and dessert wines. Less popular than table wines, they are nonetheless an important segment of the wine industry and are the perfect wines for the right place, time, and food.

Sample Different Wines

Jean Hugel, the patriarch of Hugel et Fils, a wine-producing family for more than 350 years in Alsace, France, provided excellent advice on learning to appreciate wine. He suggested that before reading anything about wine or listening to reviews or advice, you need to taste a different wine every day for a year. After sampling 365 different wines, you will know what you prefer and will be ready to form your own opinions about wines without depending on an expert to tell you what you should like. Of course, you need to try 365 different wines, not 365 Chardonnays and Cabernets, but as many different **VARIETALS**, styles, and blends as possible from different countries, regions, and producers.

After this exercise, you will have sampled only a tiny percentage of the world's wines but probably will have experienced more different wines than most people will try during their lifetime. You will also come to understand what we think is one of the greatest aspects of enjoying wine, learning about and appreciating the history and people of different cultures and countries. Wine can be a way of taking a life-fulfilling trip around the world without leaving home. And the experience may encourage you to travel to see for yourself wine in its own culture.

A Word of Caution

Be cautious of the wine media. The press can keep you informed of new or different wines in the marketplace or suggest wineries you might want to visit. It can also help you continue to expand your wine knowledge. But many critics also emphasize scoring wines on a 100-point scale. It is easy to fall into the trap of buying only the wines that receive high scores.

Do not only buy wines that receive high scores. Many wonderful wines that do not fit the profile of a particular evaluator are available. By being your own evaluator, you will learn to identify wines suitable to your individual taste that complement the foods you prefer.

BEER

Beer is the second broad category used to classify alcoholic beverages. Like wine, beer is a fermented beverage. Unlike wine, the sugar required for **FERMENTATION** in beer comes from grain rather than fruit. In one sense, the brewer has a tougher job than the winemaker. The grape is, in effect, wine-to-be, with no additional ingredients required. The brewer must add water and yeast to the grain in order to have the ingredients necessary for beer. And for contemporary beers, a brewer must include a fourth ingredient, **HOPS**, to create the finished product.

In the world of beer, the broadest way to classify styles is usually based on the fermentation method. **TOP-FERMENTING** beers include classic **ALE** styles as well as most wheat beers. The other broad category is the **BOTTOM-FERMENTING** beers, or **LAGERS**. In addition, there are a few styles that are hybrids of both fermentation methods.

Barley is the primary grain for most beer styles. Wheat beers use wheat as the sugar source for fermentation, although almost all wheat beers contain barley. Other grains, like rice, oats, and corn, may be used to supplement the sugars derived from barley. A few styles even contain fruit, but fruit is generally an addition to the beer rather than a primary source of fermentable sugar.

A brewpub is a good place to sample a range of beer styles.

OWEN WILLIAMS



Beer Styles

The vast majority of beers are based on the historic styles from present-day Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Any style of beer can be brewed anywhere in the world; however, a conscientious brewer recognizes the beer's historic lineage. Whenever you see a term with a "dash style" appended—for example, Pilsner-style—on a beer label, it implies that the beer is based on a traditional beer from another city, region, or country (in this case, classic Pilsner from the Czech Republic). Yet, with tens of thousands of beers available around the globe, even this nod to a beer's pedigree is no guarantee that the beer is representative of the original style.

As mentioned earlier, a winemaker aims to make the best possible wine from the grapes he or she is given each year. This year's Zinfandel may be as good as last year's Zinfandel, but it is likely there will be at least subtle differences between the two bottles because grape quality varies from year to year. By comparison, annual quality variations in grain are minimal. Therefore, a brewer's goal is to combine art, science, and common sense to make an ale or lager that tastes the same, year after year after year. With good-tasting water, relatively stable grain quality, specific yeast strains, and hops, the brewer creates a recipe that works for a particular beer style. The better the brewer, the more likely he or she can reproduce the same beer, batch after batch.

With wine, one winemaker's Chardonnay will taste different from another's Chardonnay. Likewise with beer, one brewer's pale ale will have its distinctive characteristics and will taste somewhat different—or significantly different—from another brewer's pale ale. Using water of varying mineral composition, different combinations of grains, the optional use of **ROASTED GRAINS** and crystallized grains, dozens of hops varieties, and numerous yeast strains, the number of variations available to the brewer is virtually limitless.

With the numerous possible combinations of ingredients, a brewer can develop a new style. It may become popular, and others may copy the style. If enough commercial brewers make the style, it might become a new classification that is formally recognized by the brewing world. This is one of the reasons tasting, learning, and studying beer is such a great lifelong learning experience—things change.

Selecting Your Preferred Style

With enough variety to taste a different beer every day for your entire life and not run out of options, where do you begin? Maybe begin with Jean Hugel's advice, modified for this beverage. Try 365 different beers from different regions, different producers, and different styles before making decisions about your favorite styles or favorite beer brands. Part of the enjoyment is to ferret out a preferred beer for each of your favorite foods, for every season of the year, and for any trip you take. Even when you cannot travel, beer can be a tour of the globe in a glass.

DISTILLED SPIRITS

The third classification of alcoholic beverages is **DISTILLED SPIRITS**. Spirits have long enjoyed popularity because they are relatively easy to produce, are easy to transport and store, and keep forever. Plus, they are available in a wide range of categories, styles, and flavor profiles.

All spirits are derived from plant materials, usually grains or fruits. To make a spirit of any kind, the distiller must start with a fermented beverage made from these raw ingredients. The alcohol in the fermented liquid is heated in a still, which separates the water in the fermented beverage from its alcohol and concentrates it. When **DISTILLATION** is complete, spirits are clear and generally

have high alcohol content. At this point, the distiller manipulates the spirit by any combination of redistilling, cutting with water, blending, aging, coloring, and adding flavors to create the desired beverage.

The base, type of yeast, water source, and flavorings that are used determine the final category and style of spirit that is created. Grain-based spirits encompass a wide range of beverages from whiskey, which is primarily made from barley, to gin and vodka. Rum uses sugar cane as its base, and tequila is made from agave. Fruit is the base for brandies, including Cognac and Armagnac from grapes, Calvados from apples, and Kirsch from cherries. Even the leftover bits from wine production, the pomace, can be used to make spirits such as grappa.

Liqueurs, the most diverse category of spirits, are made from distilled alcohol, usually in a pure form, which is sweetened and flavored with fruits, herbs, and other ingredients. They are frequently colored using natural products, for example, mint, which produces a green liquid. Finally, bitters are made from stems, roots, and other parts of plants that are less sweet than the fruits. These are considered digestive aids.

Learning to Appreciate Spirits

Spirits are a diverse category of alcoholic beverages, and are extremely versatile in terms of how they can be served. Because spirits can be derived from such a broad spectrum of plant materials and because alcohol is so easily manipulated during and after distilling, there is a great deal of variation in style from one spirit to the next. In addition, because alcohol itself is neutral in taste, it has the ability to take on the characteristic flavors of a wide range of added ingredients.

Once a distilled spirit is sold to a consumer, the possibilities for combining it with other alcoholic or nonalcoholic beverages abound. This versatility means that in the hands of a skilled bartender or consumer, the art of drink mixing can result in myriad new drink styles. Spirits can be served cold or hot, alone, with water or ice, or combined with almost any other flavoring or ingredient. Most often, they are cut with other beverages to dilute their intensity.

As with wine and beer, spirits are subject to consumer whims. For years, cocktails were the rage and lent social occasions an air of sophistication. Then they fell out of favor. Single **BARREL** and small batch bourbons, tequila, and scotch took the limelight, and sweet mixed drinks gained a following. Today there is a resurgence of interest in the art of the cocktail, and "classic" drinks are becoming popular once again.

You can learn to be a connoisseur of distilled beverages by exploring different styles and brands as well as selecting from hundreds of cocktails. Over time your palate will discern subtle differences in premium bourbons, tequilas, gins, brandies, and so on. You will also learn to appreciate the unique tastes of those spirits that are blended or combined with flavorings and sweeteners. As you will discover, there is a spirit to suit every occasion, mood, and time of day.

Cocktails have become popular among men and women of all ages.

WILFRED WONG

