

On the standardisation of wine tasting and education

By [Gildas L'Hostis](#)

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Wine has become a status symbol in recent years and as wine consumption grows globally, more and more people are keen on learning more about the world of wine. At the same time, the wine industry is becoming increasingly homogenised in terms of its offerings, thanks in no small part to Robert Parker and his recommendations. We are now seeing a kind of 'globalisation' (dare we say 'Parkerisation'?) of wine culture.



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Training programmes have emerged and some large entities such as the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) have begun offering standardised tasting programmes designed to be rolled out wherever demand surfaces. Codified and heavily-formatted tasting sheets have become the norm when it comes to learning about wine. The trend is clearly towards standardised learning methods and we are left wondering if there is any room for alternatives?

For now, programmes run by English-speaking wine organisations like WSET have become pre-dominant globally, using tasting scorecards with words and adjectives that are suggested beforehand, often with boxes to tick. As these corporations tend to operate under a franchise model, industrial-scale learning requires shared teaching resources worldwide. According to WSET, it is not run as a franchise model, but instead works with independent wine education providers who, once they become approved program providers, are able to offer its qualifications. It adds that they then run their businesses independently but do receive training from WSET certified educators.

For economic as well as pragmatic reasons, these entities must standardise their training programmes and, by extension, their tasting cards. The problem does not lie with the entities themselves: they are helping to spread knowledge about wine to mass markets, while meeting the demand from these markets. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that standardised wine tasting effectively forces students to think the same way – at least at the beginning of their wine journey. And that is detrimental to wine.

So who are the major players in wine training?

UK-based WSET is the largest company of its kind in the world and currently enrolls 40,000 students each year worldwide. It offers students wine knowledge in its 'basic programmes', sometimes in piecemeal fashion in a very short space of time. WSET has more training centres in China than in any other location in the world, except for the UK.

Another major player globally, especially in the US, is [Master Sommelier](#).



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On the whole, there is little competition globally and the companies offer wine classes to novices, as well as experts. As a result, more and more restaurants – particularly in Asia – are hiring sommeliers with qualifications from recognised entities like WSET.

Often, their goal is to train students quickly while emphasising pragmatism. As mentioned earlier, tasting cards are heavily-codified analytic sheets. Students need to be able to discern quickly between low, below average, above average, and high levels of acidity. For students, it is an arduous process as they race to assimilate as much knowledge as they can as quickly as possible.

Standardisation leads to a 'Pavlovian' way of learning, based on conditioning rather than thoughtful reflection. In the rush to format and limit the vocabulary, however, the wine tasting experience suffers.

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These major Anglophone entities are obviously not the only ones using analytical and highly-codified scorecards.

In certain instances, this type of teaching approach may be necessary (for oenology programmes, for example) but does everyone need to take the same approach? Doesn't the use of standardised and codified cards effectively muzzle students' range of expression? Does everyone really need to think alike or taste wines in an identical manner?

The manifest danger of wine-related courses in general – and this applies to large corporations as well as the small establishments that mimic their learning methods – is undoubtedly the way in which wine tastings are organised. Upon simple inspection of the seemingly mathematical tasting cards, it's readily apparent that the word 'pleasure' is not one of the boxes to be ticked. This all cruelly lacks emotion; expression is mainly based on strict linguistic discipline and behaviourist learning theory, whereby free will is an illusion and our behaviour is determined by the environment.

The phenomenon of standardising wine tasting internationally also prompts other questions related to the homogenisation of wine instruction tools. Can we reasonably expect, given differences in culture, language and appreciation of wine, to lay the foundations of standardised content that can be used from Bangkok to Paris, without stripping wines of their diversity and uniqueness? Does it make sense to insist that a uniform set of tasting rules be used, while continuing to expect the evaluation to mean something?

In order to create a standardised document, all linguistic ambiguity must be eliminated, which – by definition – is a fool's errand. If a Chinese student translates "dry", what is left for him in the end?

There are far too many cultural and educational singularities to make standardisation work. Each culture must be allowed, where possible, to create its own vocabulary based on its unique aspects. We should avoid – at all costs – applying a strict tasting framework across the board.

Can we offer an alternative to this type of learning method?

The short answer is, yes we probably can – even for students who are aiming to get into the wine business. The solution is not doing away with the analytical method or conventional tasting score card entirely but to set it aside initially, then perhaps use it in conjunction with other tools that offer greater freedom of expression.

Imposing universal standards should be banished; instead, 'guidance' should be the watchword while bearing in mind that 'anything goes' is not an option either. There are limits as to what can be expressed verbally and the emphasis should remain on the intrinsic qualities of the wine. This could be based on relatively simple methods such as a blank sheet of paper instead of a tasting scorecard, a method with which I am experimenting here in Lausanne.

In the first stages of learning, students must take the time to stop, analyse the wine, and in their own words provide their impressions, even if the assessments are sometimes rather simplistic. Trying to put the experience into their own words, rather than leaning on pre-formatted terminology, makes the experience more complex but brings them emotionally closer to the wine. The all-important second stage is based on dialogue and diverging opinions are common. It is entirely possible to build shared concepts, while respecting differences of opinion and keeping the dialogue open.

Students discovering wine for themselves

What is important is for students to start from their own experience, which means considering a more heuristic approach, allowing students to discover wine for themselves, as well as an aesthetic approach. Analogies should be used regularly: wine has never developed its own specific vocabulary, few words or phrases exist to describe it.

- Instead, wine experts describe wine by using analogies to the body, fabric, etc. During tastings, professors provide information about wines, serving as an intermediary between the wine (the winemaker and the terroir) and the students.
- Of course, the professors must use terms that the students will understand and, with that, there are linguistic limits in describing wine. The professors share their knowledge with students and allow them to enrich their vocabulary.
- Lastly, the professors must also - and this is crucial - accept and admit that they do not know everything in order to leave room for discussion, even if it may at times turn out to be sacrilegious.

The intrinsic qualities of a particular wine are not confined to its acidity or sugar content alone, but should also include the pleasure it provides. If teaching is solely based on a mathematical analysis of wine, we would be depriving students of the pleasure that comes with the tasting experience and – more importantly – the freedom that entails.

In conclusion, we can rejoice that more and more people around the world want to learn about wine. However, globalisation should not be synonymous with uniformity. Wine, through tastings, should be a window to the unique aspects of people and cultures.

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