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Purchasing, Storing, and Tasting Illinois Wine

Hopefully you're interested in this book because you want to taste Illinois wine during your tour of Illinois. To describe wines as you enjoy them, you need to develop vocabulary. Most of the vocabulary of wine consists of adjectives and nouns describing odors. Many of the nouns are, in fact, common: *blackberry*, *violets*, *amber* (*white*), and so on.

Adjectives used to describe wines tend to be of sensations, tastes, or smells, since appreciating wines is one of the most satisfying sensory activities. Some drinkers find it difficult to identify wine aromas. It seems difficult to home in on the exact smells a wine may impart. You may ask yourself, What is that somewhat tangy smell—lemon? Tomatoes? You can tell there is something beyond the smell of alcohol but it's mysterious—maybe mushrooms? Identifying exact smells can be one of the most frustrating aspects of wine tasting as you begin your journey. It also tends to be one of the most potentially intimidating. If everyone else in the tasting room identifies honeysuckle in the white wine, but to you it “smells like wine,” you may think your future as a wine enthusiast is doomed.

Fear not. Wine tasting, identifying the hundreds of potential smells a wine can emit, begins with developing your olfactory memory. You should start to associate wine smells with things they remind you of, someone you know, or a previous experience. Try to focus on what you remember when you think of that person or event. For example, if you eat lots of red meat, notice how the meat smells a bit like iron. Red meat indeed has iron-containing compounds, so there's no surprise that you can identify that smell when you eat the meat. If you try to concentrate as you smell things, and make associations, you should be able to become an expert wine smeller!

When you are smelling wines, some aromas fall into “main categories,” into which fall subcategories and special aromas. For example, in the “woody” category, you may be able to distinguish burnt wood from resinous wood. You may be able to further distinguish cedar and oak in the resinous wood, or coffee in the burnt wood.

You may want to get a copy of the “tasting wheel,” first developed at the University of California, Davis. It can help you find adjectives and nouns to associate with smells. Illinois wine, as we've seen, tends to be produced from hybrid grapes. This means in terms of tasting they will mainly contain a mixture of smells from the *Vitis vinifera* grape that bore the hybrid. Hybrids thrive in Illinois, and in much of the Midwest, because they bring the hearty, resistant characteristics of *Vitis labrusca* (mostly) to mix with the flavor characteristic of *Vitis vinifera* (Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, and so on). The grape chapter of this book contains most of the grapes used in Illinois, along with some aroma characteristics. Remember, the flavors listed here are only a few common traits that many wine drinkers can discern in the wines. You may be able to identify an entirely different set of smells and tastes. That remains one of the most pleasant aspects of wine tasting: “owning” a wine by defining its taste for yourself.

A WORD ABOUT PURCHASING ILLINOIS WINES

We're entering into a legal area that for many is difficult to comprehend. Strict laws governing the transport and sale of wines, especially over state lines, have been with us since the end of Prohibition. Many Chicagoans wonder why Illinois wines are not more easily available in the biggest market for wine in the whole state.

In 2008 new legislation modified the way wines can be shipped. The Internet has opened up wine sales and therefore has made wine laws that restrict the sale and transport of wine across state lines impractical. New legislation allows Illinois winemakers to ship wines to other states.

Shipping and distributing wines can be very expensive. It requires a special license, which allows a winery to ship twelve cases of wine per adult resident per year. The license cost depends on the size of the winery. There is also an exception for smaller wineries to self-distribute wines. Before applying for the license, the winery must prove it has been granted federal label/bottle approval and that it has a bonded warehouse space. Of course this is above and beyond the various manufacturer applications involved in producing alcohol. Given the myriad forms involved, some Illinois wineries have decided that it is not cost-effective to

distribute their wines unless the market gives more of a guarantee of being favorable to Illinois wine. Small wineries in many cases have decided not to ship but to sell wines only on the premises.

In Chicago there are other distribution laws that make it very difficult, and costly, to penetrate the Chicago market. Certain distributors have been able to have very broad interests in distributing liquor in the city.

However, shipping and delivering Illinois wine to Chicago may be getting somewhat easier. *Midwest Wine Press* reported in 2012 that despite weak demand, a few Chicago outlets have Illinois wine. Macy's on State Street carries twenty regional wines. Also, Mariano's Fresh Market carries fourteen regional wines.¹¹ Also, several restaurants in the Chicago area are beginning to offer Illinois wines to diners along with wines from other parts of the country and world.

This increased availability could be part of the "locavore" movement, where locally produced foods and consumables have a privileged reputation with certain consumers. It may also be a product of image. Illinois wine has lagged behind California, Oregon, Washington state, and others. Marketing has much to do with the popularity of products. Still, there is hope that as Illinois wines gain in reputation they will also be easier to find.

Illinois wine styles are changing. I mentioned earlier that some ambitious winemakers are purposely moving away from what they call their grandfathers' sweet wines for which Illinois was known and instead are focusing on international dry wine styles.

So the best way to get Illinois wine is to go to a winery yourself. Short of that, ask the winery to ship to you. That could prove costly, but if you are determined it could be a great option. Or you can try to find these wines in your local area restaurants and stores.

Already now, certain larger wineries in Illinois provide delivery services. Others make their wines available in retail stores, usually near the location of the winery. Some state directly that they can no longer ship wine, presumably because the costs associated with shipping and delivery have become prohibitive.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR WINE

You've purchased your Illinois wine and would now like to keep it around to share with friends the next time they come over. You need some guidelines for storing wines. First, remember that Illinois wines, at least in the early years of the new millennium, are not made for extremely long cellaring after you buy them. In general, hybrid grapes are usually used to make wines for consumption not long after they are produced. That's ideal because Illinois wines are indeed often meant to be consumed young.

Below are a few tips for how to treat your wines as well as possible from the time you bring them home to when you drink and share with friends.

- Keep your wines at constant temperature.
- Don't put wine near a furnace or an air conditioning unit.
- Keep wines out of the kitchen, unless you use a special temperature-controlled unit for wines. You can store wines in the fridge for brief periods of time, especially white wines. Kitchen (and bathroom) temperatures fluctuate too much because of hot water faucets and appliances, so keeping wines in the kitchen may damage them.
- Do put your wines in a cool, dry basement. If your basement floods, forget it.
- Do store wine somewhere in the inside of the house, ideally in the corner of a room, against an internal wall, away from windows, where there is too much exposure to temperature fluctuations.
- Wines closed with real corks should be stored on their sides.

It's now time to taste your Illinois wine. You've treated it well and invited your friends, and you're ready to serve. What elements of the wine will you look for? There are five taste categories that come through tongues: saltiness, sweetness, sourness, bitterness, and *umami*. (Umami is a Japanese concept to describe the taste of glutamate, an amino acid found in many foods. We can find it in mushrooms or in tomatoes.)

¹ Michael Sean Comerford, "Regional Wine Fighting Its Way into Chicago," *Midwest Wine Press*, October 25, 2012, midwestwinepress.com/2012/10/25/chicago-wine-sales-market.

According to the Court of the Master Sommeliers, wines can be identified by color, smell, and taste. Those, then, are the components we'll want to try to find in the wines.

- *See*: Look for the color, and look for off signs such as rings. For example, in general, Chancellor, Cabernet Franc, and Chambourcin will be a denser red as compared to Pinot Noir, a more cherry-red color. Whites can vary from almost clear to golden yellow (the latter for Rieslings). Dessert wines may even be orange or a burnt-brown color, almost like caramel. Old wines can be identified by brown or orange tints in red wines, darker yellow or brown in white wines.
- *Swirl*: This is where you swish the liquid in your glass so the wine gets in contact with even more oxygen. This allows you to really taste as much of the flavor as possible.
- *Smell*: We know this is most important. Really get your nose in the glass; really work with it to see what's there.
- *Savor*: This is where you can actually drink the wine. Taste for things like acidity level, especially for a white, and for tannins if you have a red.²

WINE AND FOOD PAIRINGS

One of the most pleasant aspects of sharing wines with friends involves drinking it with a meal. Illinois wines come in so many varieties that you are certain to find ones that work well with virtually any meals. Most wineries in Illinois provide hints on how their wines pair with food. Ask for suggestions if you have a particular dinner in mind.

In general, when selecting pairings, you should take into consideration the weight of the food. A heavy wine will kill a light dish, and a light wine will die in the presence of a heavy dish. A Chancellor (medium heavy) with creamsauced fish (light) would not work well; neither would a Vignoles (light) with a steak (heavy).

You will also want to take into consideration the spiciness or sweetness of the food or wine. A very sweet wine (late harvest, port, dessert) will kill savory food and should be saved for after dinner. Those wines will be ideal with salty cheeses such as blue, but they also go very well with cakes and desserts. Likewise, a spicy dish will work only with certain types of wines (sweeter wines work well, for example). Some foods usually don't go well with wine: dishes made with vinegar, such as salad dressing for example, but they are relatively few. In general, sparkling wines go well with salty or creamy food.

Stronger meats such as grilled red meats tend to go well with heavier red wines such as Chambourcin, and the like. Fish tends to go well with lighter white wines. Pork, veal and chicken adapt to the type of sauce in which they are prepared. In general, you'll want to pair the wine to the sauce rather than the meat.

Cheese of all types tends to go well with wine. Which ones depend on the wines. For example, try a goat cheese with a light Chardonnay, and a blue cheese with a port-style wine. Port wines are fortified with brandy, added to stop the fermentation from completely converting the sugar to alcohol. These wines are therefore sweeter than most wines and higher in alcohol (usually about 18–20 percent, rather than 7–14 percent for table wines). These sweet wines counteract the tanginess of the blue cheese. Now we get to what for some is the best part: dessert! Illinois wines tend to go very well with certain types of dessert. Many Illinois winemakers produce dessert wines that are ideally suited to sweet treats. Dessert wines have higher levels of sugar in the wine and are specifically produced to capitalize on their sweetness. You may see some of the following when you are looking for dessert wines:

- *Late harvest*: This means the grapes were allowed to remain on the vines after the normal harvest date for that particular year. That would mean the grapes had more time to create sugar and are therefore sweeter than they normally would be. This sweetness transfers to the bottle. These wines are more difficult to make because they involve a risk. If the weather turns bad before the winemaker can harvest, he or she may lose those grapes. Late harvest wines have become popular in Illinois because many of the hybrid grapes used lend themselves very well to this style.

² Reproduced in part from Clara Orban, *Wine Lessons: Ten Questions to Guide Your Appreciation of Wine* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2012), 183–84.

- *Port*: As we mentioned above, portstyle wines are fortified by adding brandy to the fermentation, which kills the yeasts before the sugar can completely convert to alcohol. Since brandy is so much more alcoholic than wine, that means fortified wines tend to be sweeter and higher in alcohol. As we said, port-style wines tend to go well with blue cheese, but they are also ideal with chocolate—dark, milk, and white.
- *Ice wines*: This unique style originated in Germany, another very cold climate for growing grapes that, nonetheless, has been doing so successfully for millennia. Grapes for ice wines are allowed to remain on the vines until the first frost. They are picked frozen, and as they melt, the water, which was frozen, will leak out, concentrating the sugary juice in the liquid that remains to be processed. These wines tend to be sweet and excellent with all kinds of pastries and almond cookies, for example, where the slight bitterness of the almonds contrasts perfectly with the wine’s sweetness.
- *Sparkling wines*: One of the exciting developments in Illinois is the increasing interest in producing sparkling wines. With their higher acidity levels, many Illinois hybrids are ideal for sparkling wines. Some Illinois winemakers have even begun creating sparkling wines here using the “*méthode traditionnelle*,” the laborious but exacting method for creating sparkling wines first developed in the Champagne region of France. Many producers use alternate methods for adding bubbles, such as the Charmat method, or adding carbon dioxide. In the traditional method, the key to bubbles involves allowing wines to undergo a second fermentation in the bottle by reintroducing yeast after the wine has undergone primary fermentation. For Charmat, second fermentation takes place in the tank and the wine is subsequently bottled under pressure. Whatever the method, sparkling wines from Illinois will prove to be very interesting new additions to Illinois’ wine panorama.

Images:

[Image 5.1 Hogg Hollow wineglass. *Courtesy of Hogg Hollow Winery, LLC*]

[Image 5.2 Owl Creek dessert wine. *Courtesy of Owl Creek Vineyard.*]

[5.3 Lavender Crest’s winery tour. *Courtesy of Lavender Crest Winery.*]

[Image 5.4 Silver Moon Winery’s buffet. *Courtesy of Silver Moon Winery.*]

[Image 5.5 Hailey’s Winery and Vineyard storage display. *Courtesy of Hailey’s Winery, Ltd.*]

[Image 5.6 Grafton Winery’s terrace. *Courtesy of Grafton Winery and Brewhaus.*]

[Image 5.7 Wine tasting at Forsee Vineyards. *Courtesy of Forsee Vineyards and Winery.*]

[Image 5.8 Server at Blue Sky Vineyard. *Courtesy of Blue Sky Vineyard.*]

[Image 5.9 Lincoln Heritage Winery’s courtyard. *Courtesy of Lincoln Heritage Winery.*]