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Does Blind Tasting Make Sense?

You've all seen it. You've all heard the rumours. That guy (yes usually a guy) who elegantly swirls his Riedel glass and by a mere sniff, he's able to pinpoint that the old vines thrived on south eastern facing slopes on limestone with a thin layer of clay. It couldn't possibly be anything than Chardonnay from a rather cool year that was picked late and aged in used barrels on its lees for 12 months before being bottled without filtration. It clearly exudes notes of Meursault 1er Cru from the upper slopes, not 2009 nor 2010, not younger thus rather 2008 from a grower called Jean-Luc who has a dog named barrique! Et voilà! As he calmly puts down his glass, to the applause and excitement from the other diners, they look at him in awe and say "this guy definitely has a unique gift"!

Well that's one part of blind tasting, it can certainly be entertaining and fun and my vain side has to confess that I kind of enjoy being the guy above.

However I personally never believed that tasting was a special gift. It's downright a question of hard work and experience. Blind tasting is a process of deduction. A sharp memory is according to me as important as those precious taste buds. As much an intellectual as a sensorial experience. By eliminating all the parameters such as varieties, blends, regions and vintages it can't possibly be, we probably already eliminated 90 % of the wine world and should be rather close to the truth.

However the question remains does it really matter? Do we need blind tasting?

I suppose the happy amateur doesn't really care. We are creatures of habit and just like we tend to be faithful to brands whether it's fashion, perfume, whisky or beer. Most people tend to stick to brands and rarely question or compare it's quality like we wine nerds tend to do with wine.

Albeit In educational terms, blind tasting is a

fantastic tool! I always let my students blind taste and encourage them to do that as much as possible. To judge and assess a wine and its quality from its colour to the palette of aromas and its taste, structure, length, complexity and personality without being biased by the label. A lot of training will strengthen you as a taster, to believe in your own taste, to be courageous. What if you happen to prefer this well-made Cru Bourgeois over that renowned Cru Classé? Good for you and your budget I'd say.

We've all seen the reaction in various tastings, when the wines are revealed and that lean, green tannic monster with that famous label that didn't do well suddenly "starts to show its class with some aeration" or how "it needs at least another 15 years before showing its depth and complexity". Or we could simply say – not good!

Apart from education or show off at the dinner table, does it still matter? As a working tool in my role as a sommelier and wine director for restaurants, I always preferred to blind taste when I was looking for a new house champagne, new wines by the glass or pairings for the dishes. A very good way of judging quality without bias.

Most international wine competitions are based on blind tasting for the same reason. Many leading wine magazines do the same and I'm not saying you have to taste blind if you write a portrait of an estate or an article. However to judge and rate a wine's quality, I seriously consider blind tasting being the most honest way.