

Insight: Best Practices for Teaching Professional Tasting



With Tim Gaiser, MS

August 11, 2017

Today's Session

- My recent tasting survey
- Best practices-strategies used by Master Sommeliers for teaching and coaching students
- Tasting of four wines

Today's Wines

1. 2016 Hatzidakis Assyrtiko, Santorini
2. 2015 Yalumba Viognier, "Virgilius," Eden Valley
3. 2016 Cantina Bolzano St. Maddalena "Huck am Bach," Alto Adige
4. 2014 Obsidian Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Red Hills

Teaching tasting is one of the most rewarding things we do as wine professionals

It can also be one of the
most frustrating...

Everyone has the same neurology
but is wired differently
– and learns differently

Our personal map—way of
tasting--will probably not work for
someone else

Multiple strategies are
needed...

There's also far more value in finding and providing the best direction for students vs. solutions to “problems”

What's needed?

Best practices and strategies
of top professionals

The Survey

14 Questions

- **Personal experience** with MS exams
- **“Difference makers”**: strategies that worked best personally
- **Best practices**: strategies for teaching tasting to students
- **“Best of the Best”**: the one strategy that was most effective

I: Personal Experience

- When and where did you pass the MS Advanced Exam?
 - How many attempts?
- When and where did you pass the Master's tasting exam?
 - How many attempts?
- How challenging was the Master's tasting exam for you?
- What **one thing made** the **difference** in you being able to **pass** the tasting exam?

II: Teaching Experience

- What do you find works best when coaching students in terms of:
 - **Memorizing the grid**
 - **Improving memory of common aromas and flavors** in wine
 - **Calibrating structural elements** (acidity, alcohol, and tannin) consistently and accurately
 - **Learning common wine faults**
 - **Deductive logic**—putting sensory information together in order to make good conclusions

III: Other Strategies

- What **strategies** do you most often use for teaching students how best to deal with the **nerves/anxiety** of an **exam**?
- What **strategy** makes students better sommeliers as far as **describing wine** to the **guest**?
- What's the **one thing** you think students can do that can **exponentially improve** their **tasting**?

Survey Results

Teaching Experience:

What do you find works best when coaching students in terms of:

1. Memorizing the grid

Challenge: the grid has 43
different criteria to be
memorized

Challenge: the student has to
fit their personal perception
and experience into the
context of the grid

How?

Consistency

“Students need to be **disciplined** with how they **learn the grid**... It's not unlike **learning scales in music**. You can be a great taster but it won't get you to mastery unless you've really memorized the grid. Then **it's about reps.**”

Devon Broglie, MS - Austin

Repetition & Consistency

“The **grid must be automatic**; you must know where you are in the course of tasting a wine so as not to bounce around and miss things. As in music, **it's all about PRaT - Pace, rhythm and timing.**”

Jared Slipp, MS – Washington D.C.

Repetition and Memory

“For me **the grid is essential**. Having it down **frees the mind** to think about the wine--not if you’ve missed a line on the grid. **Almost like a mantra**, it can be meditative and calming to have it memorized and to know that it is there to go back to like a home base to keep you on track.”

Melissa Monosoff, MS – Dallas

Verbal Practice and Consistency

- “Record yourself going through the process. Start with sight - develop a cadence and rhythm where you feel comfortable and in a flow.”
- “Announce each category you’re in before you start describing the wine.”
- “When you hear yourself say the category you will mentally check the box, building confidence along the way as you move through nose and palate.”
- ***“It’s crucial to taste the same way every time!”***

Narrative, Cause and Effect & Mentoring

- “The grid has over 40 different criteria to memorize so a great deal of conscious repetition is needed.”
- “Practice talking through the grid out loud with memories of the best examples of classic wine styles you’ve ever tasted.”

Tim Gaiser, MS – San Francisco

Narrative, Cause and Effect & Mentoring

- “Simple repetition is not enough; one has to learn **cause and effect** behind every step of the grid and know why wines look, smell, and taste the way they do.”
- “Mentor a group! Feynman said... You really don't know something until you can teach it well.”

Tim Gaiser, MS – San Francisco

2. Improving memory of common aromas and flavors in wine

Challenge: we as a culture don't
pay attention to olfactory

How can we connect a student
to their own olfactory
“software” so they avoid re-
inventing the wheel?

Increasing Olfactory Awareness

“This is hard—lots of personal experience wrapped up in this. I remind people to **engage in the world** and bring the scents they smell when cooking, walking, or whatever, to the table.”

Matt Stamp, MS - Napa

Aroma Kits for Key Markers

“I teach sense memory using **Les Nez du Vin kit** and real fruits, vegetables, and flowers, etc., along with wine.”

Peter Neptune, MS – Irvine

Comparing Fruit Qualities

“Trying to buy the most common fruits found in wines (citrus, apple, cherry, plum) and then experiencing them at **various stages side by side** (fresh-cut, bruised, dried, rotting, stewed, etc.).”

Michael Meagher, MS – Boston

Olfactory and Internal Imaging

- “Become aware that smell memory - and taste - is **visual internally for most of us; connect** your own life olfactory and taste **memories** to the **images** and **movies** you have of them.”
- “From there, really **increase** your everyday **attention** and **desire** to be **aware** of and **remember** how everything around you **smells.**”
- “Use the ‘**basic set**’ and imaging to practice the most aromas and flavors found in wine--every day!”

3. Calibrating structural elements consistently and accurately

Challenge: how can we help the student to become consistent and accurate at assessing structure?

Consistent Physical Calibration

“I ask students to **check** for structural elements on the **same place** on their **palates** every wine they taste. For me, tannin is at the front of the gums, acid on the roof of the mouth, etc.”

Jesse Becker, MS – Chicago

Structure & Theory

“ ‘**Structure never lies**’ has become my mantra.
There is no such thing as low acid Riesling or high
tannin Barbera.”

Jared Slipp, MS – Washington D.C.

Calibrating With Extremes and Theory

“I think starting with the **most extreme examples** and **working towards** the **middle** is a smart way. I think it’s important to know that a hallmark example from a classic vintage will generally represent as X in terms of acid or alcohol or tannin. *Theory is the most basic tenet of this.*”

Will Costello, MS – Las Vegas

Using Internal Visual for Calibration

- **“Use an internal visual scale or dial** with increments ranging from low to high to confirm and/or match up to what you're tasting.”
- **“Calibrate with extremes:** taste a high alcohol wine next to low alcohol wine and as you taste the two wines match up the physical sensations of high vs. low with corresponding markers on your internal scale.”
- “Do the same with acidity, tannin, and length of the finish.”

A close-up photograph of several wine bottles in a cellar. The bottles are arranged vertically, and their necks are wrapped in a dark, textured material, likely cork or a similar protective material. The background is dark and appears to be the interior of a wine cellar. The text "4. Learning common wine faults" is overlaid in white, centered on the image.

4. Learning common wine faults

Challenge: what is the best way
to educate students on common
wine faults?

Classwork

“Go to the **faults class** at **UC Davis** and develop your own vocabulary to describe them.”

Catherine Fallis, MS – San Francisco

SWE Kit

“Use a **faults evaluation kit**--SWE sells them.”

Eric Hemer, MS, MW – Miami

Le Nez du Vin Kit

“The Les Nez du Vin ‘Les Defaults’ kit is great.”

Peter Neptune, MS - Irvine

Adding Theory is Vital

- “Buy the Le Nez du Vin ‘Les Defaults’ wine faults kit.”
- “Keep the kit in your garage!”
- “Use it outside!”
- “Use the vials and not inoculated wines.”
- “Theory: *read up on the wine faults and how they occur.*”

Using Wines as Examples

“Smell **Sherry** (oxidation), **Madeira** (cooked), and **Amarone** or most **Barolo** (VA). Once a corked wine has been pointed out to you, it's hard to forget. H₂S, Mercaptans etc., are a little more difficult to teach by example.”

Jason Heller, MS – Yountville

5. Deductive logic: putting sensory information together in order to make good conclusions

Challenge: perhaps the most
difficult aspect of deductive tasting

How do we teach students to transform sensory information into a logical conclusion?

How do we train students to avoid jumping to conclusions with not enough information?

Theory and Listening to Self

“Having **strong theoretical knowledge** by studying the region, grape characteristics, etc., is key to coming to the right conclusion. Then you have to **listen to what you have said.**”

Kyungmoon Kim, MS – New York

Aromatics and Flavors as Clues & Evidence

“Lay out the clues like they are taro cards.
Examine all the evidence and put your theory to work.”

Emily Wines, MS - Oakland

Listening

“This is the single most important and difficult aspect of our blind tasting exam. I coach candidates to **listen to themselves**. Avoid speaking to the universe. **Speak to yourself. Listen.** Ask yourself if the conclusion is **reasonable based on descriptions.**”

Larry O’Brien, MS – Brecksville, Ohio

Making Tasting as Objective as Possible

“Once I **viewed** deductive tasting as not something that I subjectively did, but rather as **something** that was **purely objective** and **driven** by unadulterated **data**, it became a lot easier to connect the dots.”

Michael Meagher, MS – Boston

Theory and Logic – Cause and Effect

“Look at what the facts tell you. This is where the ‘what makes a beverage taste the way it does’ theory comes in. Match the end facts to causal logic.”

Shayn Bjornholm, MS – Bainbridge Island

Multiple Strategies Required

- “This is the most challenging part of tasting and a lot of it is **theory--knowing classic grapes and regions and connecting the dots.**”
- “**Write out your own personal grids** for all the classic grapes and wines – **and work backwards from the final conclusion!**”

Multiple Strategies Required

- “Focus on **signatures** in wines and match those to **appropriate structural levels**. For example, the carbonic maceration and stem inclusion in Beaujolais Villages with medium-plus acidity, lower tannin, and medium alcohol.”
- “Time must be spent **tasting similar wines/grapes next to each other** and noting signature and structural differences. A **Coravin** is outstanding for this purpose.”

Other Strategies

1. What strategies do you most often use for teaching students how best to deal with the nerves/anxiety of an exam?

Challenge: how do we help students deal with the anxiety of the exams?

How do we help students bring their “A” game on exam days?

Anchoring, Posture & Confidence

- “First, I ask them to **pay attention to their posture**. When they are calm and confident, I ask them to sit comfortably, confidently, and face the wines.
- “I then ask them to **become aware of how they are sitting**, where their hands are, and how their posture is.”

Andy Myers, MS – Washington D.C.

Anchoring, Posture & Confidence

- “Then I ask if they feel comfortable and confident. When they say yes, I have them press harder into their seat and tense the muscles in their hands and feet to basically lock that posture down in their **muscle memory**.”
- “As they begin with a wine I watch for the moment they **break posture** and have them **reset**. When they learn to recognize the posture break as a sign of stress and insecurity, I work on getting them to ‘**reset**’ to their ‘**confidence seat**’.”

Andy Myers, MS – Washington D.C.

Creative Isolation

“Exercise, meditation, good food, a glass or two of something at night, and a comfortable space; and stay the hell away from other candidates.”

Chris Tanghe, MS – Seattle

The Grid as Mantra

“Focus on the grid and do it in the same order every time.”

Doug Frost, MS, MW – Kansas City

Be a tasting machine

Doug Frost, MS, MW – Kansas City

Practice With Distractions

“Blind taste in a **very noisy room** or expect **interruptions**. Try to do a wine in less than two minutes. **When you get the wine wrong, do it over again out loud with the correct descriptors.**”

Fernando Beteta, MS – Chicago

Each Wine as Its Own Exam

“Treat the tasting as six individual disciplines with total focus on each element.”

Fred Dame, MS – San Francisco

Visualization

“Breathing deeply to calm the mind and body, visualization of tasks, and anticipating situations so nothing comes as a total surprise—and practicing under pressure.”

John Szabo, MS - Toronto

Focus on Exam Wines

“Focus on the wines, not on the moment, or the Masters. Own the table. Own the wines. Own the words. Don’t waste them.”

Joe Spellman, MS - Chicago

Improving Timing and Endurance

- “Taste in **uncomfortable areas** or **imperfect conditions**. Create stress while you learn so the stress is not foreign when you walk into the room.”
- “**Build endurance**, don’t just taste 6 in 25, do 8 in 32. Improve your synapses firing by tasting the same wine repeatedly on a stop watch. Start with 4 minutes, then do it again at 3:45; then again at 3:30 and again at 3:15. It builds an internal clock and removes one big stressor – time!”

Matt Citriglia, MS - Miami

Visualization & Focus

“I often talk about **visualization** and realizing that the Masters are just people--guests--and nothing to be afraid of. We are 100% there for their success. It may sound harsh, but they need to realize that the judgement is about grading an exam and not about them, or their self-worth, or their worthiness as a sommelier.”

Melissa Monosoff, MS - Dallas

Focus and Consistency

- “Taste with as many strangers as possible. Only focus on what is in your glass and never make eye contact with the person grading you.”
- “The only constant when doing a flight is the six glasses in front of you and the clock. The people on the other side of the table are always different.”
- “The more of a consistent environment you can create mentally (focusing on the glasses, tasting in the exact same order, memorizing the grid), the more in the moment you can be and not have your nerves get the best of you.”

Sabato Sagaria, MS – New York

Routine

“I tell students that maintaining a **normal routine is a must**. If they work out in the morning on a normal basis, then they should work out the morning of the day of their exam. I also am a firm believer of taking a sip of something to calm your nerves prior to walking into any portion of the exam if you feel it will help you.”

Virginia Philip, MS – Palm Beach

Assuming Control

“I recommend students **find something** about the **exam** that **they can control**. For example, I recognized when tasting I would tend to lose my train of thought when someone would interrupt me to tell me half way for time. I realized that I would need to control this, so I asked that no time be given and I would ask for time. Whatever way the student can find to make themselves more confident and powerful, it’s a benefit.”

Will Costello, MS – Las Vegas

Multiple Strategies

- “One has to be able to **step out** of the **nerves** and **into their zone** where they can really focus for the necessary 25 minutes.”
- “The student also needs to be able to **quickly reset** if they lose their concentration and confidence in the middle of the exam.”

Tim Gaiser, MS - San Francisco

Multiple Strategies

- **“Energy psychology strategies: EFT—Emotional Freedom Technique, Spin Dynamics and Circle of Excellence.”**
- **“Also eye positions/anchoring for confidence.”**
- **“One has to practice confidence to improve it and to make it a habit--especially in the context of an exam.”**

Tim Gaiser, MS - San Francisco

2. What's the one thing you think students can do that can exponentially improve their tasting?

Perfecting Small Steps

“Stop tasting so many flights of 6 wines in 25 minutes!!! Look at pro golfers - how much time do they spend playing 18 holes, tournament style vs. practicing? Practicing is hitting 100 balls from the same spot. It's golfers putting themselves in situations they might encounter in a tournament setting and practicing them until they get it perfect. Then they practice some more.”

Andrew McNamara, MS - Tampa

“Work on theory.”

Bobby Stuckey, MS – Boulder, CO

“Stop trying to figure out what the wine is. Stop finding one thing and running with it.”

Christopher Bates, MS – Geneva, NY

“Learn the roughly 30 to 50 objective aromas/perceptions that are very common in classic wine styles and understand what causes them.”

Geoff Kruth, MS - Petaluma

“No magic here: **FOLLOW THE GRID.** If anything, it is all about fundamentals.”

George Miliotes, MS - Orlando

“No one is born with the best tasting palate. Tasting has to come from **everyday practice**. When you are around the different ingredients in the grocery store or farmer’s market, have a curiosity to inspect, smell, and try to put it in your memory bank.”

Kyungmoon Kim, MS – New York

“Embrace failure; without it the student can never learn!”

Matt Citriglia, MS - Miami

“Take the ego out of getting the wine right for a test and learn to actually be able to taste and evaluate wine.”

Melissa Monosoff, MS - Dallas

“Drink wines you don't like. We all love Burgundy and not many people enjoy drinking Torrontès or Pinot Grigio on a regular basis. If you aren't drinking everything, the only time you will get to taste it will be if the stars align at a blind tasting.”

Sabato Sagaria, MS – New York

“Find balance! If all you are doing is studying, that’s not helping your overall mindset. Eat healthy, rest, and find an activity that allows you to forget about wine. For me that was road biking, hiking, yoga, and snowboarding. That was how I was able to recharge and it also helped me improve my ability to stay focused when I was in a tasting.”

Sabato Sagaria, MS – New York

**“Drink wines you love because you love them--
at least half the time. The other half, focus like
a high wire performer strung over a pool of
piranhas but with a plan that feeds your
machine, builds confidence, and challenges your
knowledge.”**

Shayn Bjornholm, MS – Bainbridge Island

“Nothing ‘exponentially’ improves tasting. In my experience you don't suddenly become a virtuoso.”

Scott Carney, MS – New York

**“Clear the mechanism as in Kevin Costner
from ‘For Love of the Game.’”**

Steven Poe, MS – Santa Ana

“Talking through classic wines out loud using the grid in a four minute sequence using your own memories of the best example of each you've ever tasted. Do this 5-10 times more than you actually taste.

Tim Gaiser, MS – San Francisco

“Students should **slow down**. Everyone is in such a hurry to be the first to do this, the youngest to do that etc. Enjoy the journey and make it work for you and your schedule as well as for your family.”

Virginia Philip, MS – Palm Beach

“Stop concluding too soon! Make sure you evaluate the wine dispassionately - visual, nose, palate, structure - **BEFORE you begin your conclusion. Weigh all the evidence.”**

Wayne Belding, MS - Boulder

Final Thoughts...

Becoming a professional taster
is a process – a journey

There is no “hacking”
becoming a professional ...

Teaching tasting—or practically anything else—is like being an outstanding jazz musician

One must know all the basics
cold to be able to improvise
when teaching

Survey next steps...

My sincerest thanks to all the
Master Sommeliers that took part in
the survey!

www.timgaiser.com/blog