

# Do You See What I See?

USE YOUR INNER VISION TO TASTE WINE

by Kate Nowell-Smith



**DO YOU EVER** close your eyes when tasting wine? I ask for three reasons. The first is straightforward: It's simply a great concentration tool. Just as silence can help one focus, so too can shutting out all visual "noise" heighten one's senses of taste and smell. If you've never tried this, I highly recommend it.

Reason number two stems from the fact that as a winemaker, yes, I evaluate a wine for balance, but I'm also trying to analyze each part of the whole. With my eyes closed, I can better pull the wine apart, intentionally zeroing in on one specific aspect at a time with each successive sip. For those of you who meditate, think of this as akin to doing a body scan, only instead of checking in on your head, neck, shoulders, and so on, you are consciously directing your senses to focus on one attribute at a time, then closing your eyes and letting that sense impression come to you.

It's best to home in on aromas and flavors first, when your nose and palate are fresh. Acid is usually the first physical

sensation to hit, so I taste for it next, then oak, then alcohol, then tannins. If any of those seem disjointed, I'll circle back and taste for residual sugar, volatile acidity, or anything else that might be putting the wine off balance.

I could end this article here: Close your eyes to better taste and evaluate wine. But there's more to it than that. If I lost you at meditation, we might be in trouble with what comes next—so please bear with me, dear reader, for reason number three. Like me, you should always take one last sip for overall pleasure, pulling out of the analytical nitty-gritty and letting the wine wash over you. This is when things can get pretty exciting: As I taste with my eyes closed, I "see" the wine unfolding over time on the palate, as if I am scanning a mural from left to right.

I don't "hear" wine, but because it changes and unfolds in the glass, there is a temporal aspect to its enjoyment that mirrors music. And there is something musical about the images I see. There are

dashes and dots, curves, and sometimes big bursts like fireworks; they're similar to the sorts of markings you might get if you asked someone who did not know how to transcribe music to put what they hear on paper.

Just like a classical orchestral work, a great wine that's delicious and complex will have plenty going on: here, there, over in the left-hand corner, now rumbling in the bottom right, now a few sparks going off up top. By contrast, an uncomplicated wine, like its pop-song cousin, will come across as something simple: a skinny stripe or a low wave.

Synesthesia is a well-described, if hotly debated, medical phenomenon. The literature speaks of people who "taste" color and "hear" aromas, for instance. I may or may not have synesthesia as defined by the scientific community, but no matter—I'm just glad to be cognizant of this extra dimension, which adds to the enjoyment. Wine, music, and the visual arts: Close your eyes and let yourself experience them all as one. SJ