

NICK JACKSON, MW: *Beyond Flavour: The Indispensable Handbook to Blind Wine Tasting*. Independently published, Nick Jackson, 2020, Monee, IL, 168 pp., ISBN: 978-1-7099-6570-8 (paperback), \$19.99.

Maybe it is because, coincidentally, I had listened to a podcast interview of Nick Jackson, MW, before reviewing his new book that it seemed like I could hear his voice while reading (GuildSomm, 2020). Or perhaps it is because the book is written in a friendly, conversational style that makes the reader feel as if they are getting personal advice and firm guidance from the author on how to improve blind wine tasting results.

Jackson completed his Ph.D. in Theology at Cambridge University, where he discovered a passion for wine and a talent for blind tasting. After his studies, he left academia and went into the wine world, first as an auction specialist at Sotheby's, and then as the buyer for their retail business in New York. All the while, he continued formal wine studies, going from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust (WSET) courses into the Master of Wine (MW). He has since ventured off on his own, into wine consulting, while continuing to serve as an educator and mentor for students in the MW program.

Dr. Jackson begins with recounting his own experience, studying for the MW exams. Like many students, his tasting exam preparation had focused on flavours. This garnered him a level of success. But during a trip to Germany and Italy, reflecting on his recent MW entry qualifying exams, he had a revelation that such a focus was misguided, and if he were to pass the actual MW exams, he had to concentrate more on the structural components in wine. For white wines, this meant acidity; for red wines, tannin.

This focus on structure rather than on flavour is what is behind the title "Beyond Flavour." However, with flavour being a significant aspect of wines (for tasting and enjoyment), Jackson does not dispense with it entirely; he treats it as an important source of confirmatory evidence, supporting a conclusion primarily based on structure. In what follows, Jackson goes on to examine the most prominent white and red grapes, examining their structure and noting their flavours, and often the relationship between the two. After the first part of the book *Structure: The Basics*, explaining his approach, he goes on to *Tasting for Grape Variety*, then discussing ways of *Tasting for Region of Origin*. These core sections are devoted solely to still, dry white and red wines. He covers a full range of styles in the subsequent section *Other Wine Styles*, including sparkling, sweet, fortified, rosé, and orange wines. Two short sections, *Tasting for Quality* and *Miscellaneous Advice*, round out the body of the book. There are two appendices, offering approaches to various types of blind tasting exams and notes on specific vintages for certain classic wine regions.

After the introduction, Jackson has a short section on *How to Use this Book*, suggesting that it is to serve as a reference book to be applied as needed, rather

than read cover to cover. I might disagree with him here. I first read the entire book, and then went back to certain parts of it, as needed (I am working through my own WSET Diploma studies). Jackson provides tremendous insight throughout, and if one were to treat it solely as a manual without a thorough once-through, some of this might be missed.

In the second section, *Structure: The Basics*, Jackson lays out his strategy for a focus on the structural aspects of white and red wines. This sets the direction for this crucial section and the theme for the rest of the book.

For white wines, the key structural component is acidity. The acidity level is assessed and examined in many other approaches to tasting, the WSET, for example, but Jackson goes into it from a very unique perspective. He suggests that there are also types and shapes of acidity for consideration: each varietal has its own specific attributes for these. Jackson offers some of his own adjectives for type, such as “bracing,” and encourages students to come up with their own terms. The idea of “shape” is probably more foreign to readers. It relates to the way the acidity behaves on the palate over the time it spends there.

For red grapes, the key structural component is tannin. This he breaks into component qualities: level, type, and location. He suggests that, in addition to identifiable levels, wines will have a consistent type of tannin associated with the grape varieties, and a consistent location on the palate where it is felt. As with the “shape” of acidity, this last characteristic, “location,” is the challenging one. Tannins, in general, are commonly known to be “palate-drying.” Further discerning exactly where on the palate this is felt, however, is the key to correct identification.

Contending that these attributes are unique to grape varieties (the ones used for quality wines, anyway), focusing on them in analysis leads the taster to a conclusion about that variety. Once thoroughly done, it cannot be any other. From that conclusion, others can be made, such as the region, for example, and later in the book, even the vintage.

In the next two sections, *Tasting for Grape Variety* and *Tasting for Region of Origin*, Jackson applies this focus on structural components. In the former, he starts with white grape varieties, and goes through them individually, examining the level, type, and shape of their acid structure. The shape is where the description gets complicated, requiring a bit of imagination and an appreciation for thinking deeply about what it is that one is sensing. His description suggests the shape of the acidity has space and direction, as a physical movement through time (or not, for a variety whose acid “pins down” the wine). Further, the shape is described in relation to the other parts of the wine, such as body and flavour, and whether they are integrated with or separate from the core acid structure. For some of the varieties discussed, he provides a visual representation of this.

For reds, the discussion of the tannin level gives way to the more detailed analysis of its type and location. Jackson contends that there are different parts of the palate

where tannins are, and are not, felt, with some varieties actually having “holes.” This discussion is also related to time and space, as wine moves across the palate on a “journey,” some following a straight trajectory, like an arrow, others more indirect, like a horseshoe.

In *Tasting for Region of Origin*, Jackson’s extensive knowledge and experience become even more evident as he outlines general considerations for identifying wine regions, then going into specifics of individual regions. The author notes that this section is to be read with reference to the previous section on individual varieties, and even with that, the complex connections that he makes remind the reader of an earlier statement he makes, that some background knowledge of wine styles and grape varieties is assumed.

In the next section, *Other Wine Styles*, Jackson addresses styles not covered specifically by the previous sections: sparkling, sweet, fortified, rosé, and orange wines. He departs a bit from the focus on acid and tannin, and provides simple and succinct, yet very specific strategies, for assessing these other wines. Useful advice includes identifying the keys to assessing sparkling wines and sweet wines.

Two short sections finish the body of the book, *Tasting for Quality* and *Miscellaneous Advice*. Tasting for quality provides a systematic approach for assessing quality using a mnemonic that ties together an analysis incorporating and applying important points from previous chapters. Miscellaneous advice touches upon two areas, the challenge posed by identifying blends, and a discussion of wine faults.

Finally, in Appendix 1, Jackson outlines approaches to specific types of examination questions, and in Appendix 2 offers brief descriptions of specific vintages in some classic regions. These short appendices demonstrate Jackson’s experience as a student and then as a mentor for the MW program, and as a former buyer for Sotheby’s retail business in New York, where he gained a great depth of knowledge of the world’s finest wines and their vintage variation. Appendix 1 provides short summaries of approaches to a wide variety of blind exam question types. Appendix 2 represents the most esoteric information the book contains: most of us may never sit through an exam where we would be required to know the difference between 2011, “...a tough, unloved vintage,” and 2010, “...a perfect vintage,” for red Bordeaux. Those who have such aspirations will find the short descriptions in Appendix 2 very helpful.

As a whole, the author successfully delivers on providing a unique blind tasting exam approach, with a focus on structure, rather than flavour. Some may dispute this approach, and he freely admits that it might not resonate with all, with various other approaches available. There is also, however, far more to the book than just the structure-based strategy. Throughout, Jackson identifies pitfalls, points of confusion, and similarities that can lead to examination disasters, as well as the key differences that are the road to success.

The amount of advice he provides leads to a small problem with his intention that the book serves as a reference manual: it does not have an index. As daunting a task as it would be to index the vast and varied information that it contains, hopefully future editions of the book do so.

Another noticeable absence has to do with the discussion of acid structure in specific grape varieties. The illustrations depicting the shape of the acid structure are helpful, but Jackson does not provide one for each of the grapes discussed. While it does seem as though the varieties without visual representation perhaps do not warrant it, or that the written description is sufficient for the reader to imagine it, future editions might consider including such illustrations for all varieties discussed.

Dr. Jackson's book does a commendable job of synthesizing an enormous amount of technical information into a strategy for blind tasting. While he states early on that a level of knowledge about grape varieties and wine styles is expected of the reader, his approachable writing style makes the book appealing to the personal enthusiast as well as to those pursuing formal programs for professional reasons. It is a clear, easy, enjoyable read, offering a useful strategy for approaching blind tasting exams with which wine enthusiasts can challenge themselves, familiarly written in an audible mentor's voice that wine students need to hear.

Kenneth A. Fox
University of Saskatchewan, Canada
fox@edwards.usask.ca
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Reference

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JÉRÔME DOUZELET and GILLES-ERIC SÉRALINI: *Le Goût des Pesticides dans le Vin* [*The Taste of Pesticides in Wine*], Actes Sud, 2018, Arles, 142 pp., ISBN 978-2-330-09300-6 (paperback), €14.80.

This is an interesting and small (144 pages) book by Jérôme Douzelet, a chef and owner of a nice hotel *cum* restaurant, and Gilles-Eric Séralini, a molecular biologist, political advisor, an activist on genetically modified organisms and foods, who got several times in trouble with Monsanto. Still, this did not refrain me from reading the book, which sets out to show that, at blind tastings, people can detect the flavor of pesticides in wine and/or in fresh water in which a certain number of