

BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

Neel Burton: *The Concise Guide to Wine and Blind Tasting*, 4th ed.

Acheron Press/Ingram Content Group, La Vergne, TN, USA, 2022,
503 pp., ISBN: 978-1913260385, \$24.99.

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I fancy myself an expert on blind tastings, partly because I have run dozens of them and written about them in several refereed articles, including one in this Journal. So I was surprised to learn that there is a best-selling book about blind tastings in its 4th edition that I had never heard of. Hence, when the review editor suggested I review this book, I eagerly accepted.

But blind tasting occupies only one of this book's 32 chapters, and less than one-third of that chapter teaches about blind tastings. The book mostly examines wines, their grapes, locales, vintners, and chemistry.

When teaching about how to hold blind wine tastings, the author recommends no more than six wines per flight, standard unmarked vessels to hold each wine so that the shape of the vessel does not hint at the wine in it, ISO wine tasting glasses or the equivalent (with a tulip shape and a long-enough stem to allow one to hold the glass by the stem alone), spittoons, and tasting sheets, which the author's web site provides. He recommends five minutes for the tasting of each wine and five minutes per wine for subsequent discussion. That adds up to one hour per flight of six wines. My experience suggests that is too much time on serious business and not enough time for the social aspects of amateur tastings.

The author notes that sensory perceptions are typically better before noon than in the late afternoon or evening, so he suggests that serious tasting be done mid-morning. And he explains why different atmospheric pressures imply that wine testing on airplanes in flight is folly.

In proposing a taxonomy for wines, he describes five components of wine: alcohol, acids, sugars, polyphenols (a "broad group of biochemicals that are principally found in grape skins"), and volatile compounds. The teachings about these take five pages and give more detail than amateurs like me are likely to find useful. For example, in the section on polyphenols, subsection "Aldehydes," we read that "Acetaldehyde

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binds to sulphur dioxide so strongly that a wine cannot contain free sulphur dioxide unless all the acetaldehyde has been tied up, and vice versa, with major implications for wine making” (p. 61). This section goes beyond my ability to comprehend, although I readily concede that those who have studied organic chemistry may find it interesting and accessible. In describing “Wine Faults,” there is more than a page each on oxidation, reduction, and cork taint, which struck a familiar note for me. Then there is a page on *Brettanomyces* and Geosmin, which were not particularly helpful to me.

The two-page discussion of the perception of wine describes its taste and smell components. It contains these words: “The prickle of dissolved carbon dioxide is transmitted by chemesthesis, the same sense or sensibility by which chemical irritants such as chilli or mustard register their fieriness” (p. 65). All of this mind-numbing chemical detail is in the chapter titled “Blind Tasting.” The author recommends that after the taster assesses the flavor of a wine, the taster should separately consider its seven structural elements: acidity, alcohol, residual sugar, body, tannin, oak, and finish. He provides three pages of instructions on how to assess these seven.

The author provides three examples of tasting notes he constructed: one for Mosel Riesling, one for California Cabernet Sauvignon, and one for a 30-year-old Pinot Gris from Alsace. He gives several pages of advice about how to prepare for wine competitions and examinations.

The author’s three-page discussion of “is wine tasting a game or a sport?” entertained me. He concludes that it is a sport because it involves physical activity, whereas games need not. Finally, the chapter on blind tasting ends with more than two pages devoted to criticizing wine ratings in general and Robert Parker’s influence in particular.

After the chapter on blind tasting are two appendices, one for white wines and one for reds, providing stylistic notes about the wines—13 pages each for white and red wines. I fancy myself a lover of wines made in Ribera del Duero from Tempranillo. About such wines, I read, “... compared to most Rioja, the wines are dark and brooding, more full bodied, concentrated, alcoholic and tannic, and dominated by dark berries and plums, rather than red fruits.” Hokum. I have refrained until now in this review from citing the pioneering research of Adrienne Lehrer, followed by others, which has demonstrated that in controlled wine tasting environments, wine words, other than descriptions of varying levels of sweetness and alcohol, convey no information useful in distinguishing one wine from another.

But the aforementioned quoted sentence suggests an empirical test. The author nowhere mentions the triangle test, which I believe is the only reliable way to see if a taster can distinguish between two wines. Present the taster with three glasses, two of which have one of the wines and the third has the other. Ask the taster to say which of the three differs from the other two. My research covering several hundred tests of this sort suggests that 60% of the tasters cannot tell which of the three wines differs from the other two. Let’s get a Rioja and a Ribera del Duero of the same age and approximately the same cost. Give the tasters the description from the preceding paragraph. I’ll wager that in a triangle test, fewer than half the tasters can tell which glass has wine different from the wine in the other two glasses.

Up until now, I have focused my remarks on the chapter, “The Art and Science of Blind Tasting.” That chapter contains much material, mostly involving chemistry, that is unfamiliar to me. That it nowhere describes the triangle test makes me question the overall presentation. The author puts much weight on using words to describe wines, never mentioning the research that suggests such words are not informative. For example, “...the wine is rich, full-bodied, and concentrated with high alcohol, crisp acidity, velvety tannins, and a long and bitter finish.... Its complex flavor profile [has] notes of stewed cherries, raisins, dark chocolate, and licorice” (p. 122). Take a guess at what wine this is. The answer is Amarone, but it could be others as well.

The book has thorough instructions about wines from around the world. The chapter on Sherry, for example, occupies ten pages, not counting the one-page map. I will challenge most of the readers of this review to name a wine grape, wine, or wine region not treated in this *Guide*, although the President of the American Association of Wine Economists, this Journal’s sponsoring organization, will note that the *Guide* has no discussion of New Jersey wines. I have quibbled with the book’s title, touting “blind tastings,” and I am sure that at 503 pages, the book does not merit being called “concise.” Unfortunately, the book lacks an index, which diminishes its use as a reference book.

As is my habit, when reviewing the *n*th edition of a book, I check to see how much I can save by buying an earlier edition, and what fraction of the material in the current edition is in the earlier one. For this book, I could find copies of only the immediately preceding (2014) edition, and the cost exceeded the cost of the current one. So, if you want this book, buy the current edition.