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Which Wine Drinker Are You?

Consultant Aims To Demystify Taste As a Simple Matter of Physiology

By Jane Black

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Of 11 wines on the tasting table, the Col d'Orcia Rosso di Montalcino, a full-bodied, fruity Tuscan red, was Tom Natan's top choice. Adam Manson hated it.

Both have well-trained and -respected palates. Natan is a partner in the Washington-based importer and retailer First Vine. Manson is a co-owner of Veritas, a popular wine bar in Dupont Circle. But the physiological differences in their tongues, coupled with their varied experiences, mean that the same wine tastes different to each of them. To Natan, the big, juicy flavors are luscious. To Manson, they are overwhelming, even bitter.

Neither one is right or wrong, says Tim Hanni, a California wine consultant. At a tasting organized by The Post last week at Phillips Seafood, he analyzed the two men's taste buds, a process he calls "getting your buds done."

After watching them taste and then scrutinizing their tongues through an industrial magnifying glass, Hanni labeled Natan a "tolerant" taster because he has fewer taste buds and tends to prefer ripe, concentrated wines. Manson, with more taste buds, is a "sensitive" taster and usually likes more-balanced wines without strong tannins. "Hypersensitive" tasters, Hanni's third category, tend toward delicate, slightly sweeter wines such as Rieslings that are easy on the palate. "Sweet" tasters, the final group, are also hypersensitive, Hanni says, with confidence in their taste and little interest in learning to like drier wines.

Knowing your type is akin to knowing your shoe size, Hanni says. Wearing a size 8 is not good or bad; it's just a fact that helps you find something that fits. "People live in different sensory worlds," he says. "We need to acknowledge that."

If it becomes widely accepted, Hanni's system could upend the way we think, judge, even talk about wine. Instead of 100-point scales or talk of "grassy," "gooseberry" notes -- wine descriptors that Hanni says can become "insufferable" mumbo jumbo -- drinkers would need only to understand what makes up a perfect score or pleasant flavor for them. That can vary widely depending on physiology, sex and personal experience. At a 2006 pinot noir judging in San Francisco, the female judges' first choice came in 35th out of 40 among the men. The men's first choice came in 35th out of 40 for the women. (Women are much more likely than men to be sensitive or hypersensitive tasters, though sex isn't a determining factor.)

This week, Hanni is putting his methods to the test at the first Lodi International Wine Awards in California. He says he developed the awards to help consumers and to improve traditional wine competitions, where he says one outspoken judge can sway other panelists with different palates. Instead of giving out medals, taste-bud-tested judges will bestow prizes based on taste preferences. So, a wine may win a top prize for tolerant tasters but only a bronze, or no medal at all, for hypersensitive drinkers. Consumers who know their type can then buy wines that are at the top of the class for their palate, not an anonymous judge's. "We're heading towards an Oprah moment," Hanni says.



Tim Hanni uses a magnifier and camera to photograph a taster's tongue. He says taste buds hold clues to how we experience wine. (By Michael Temchine For The Washington Post)

His goal, he says, is to democratize wine once and for all. It's something the industry has been talking about for years: getting rid of the snooty sommeliers and insisting that it's okay to drink white zinfandel with your steak if that's what you like -- really. "There's no right or wrong" has become a mantra of the new generation of wine professionals.

But the overwhelming nature of the wine business has made it tough to persuade consumers to trust their palates. "I don't know of any other industry that has such a broad range of products and prices," says Natalie MacLean, an author and the editor of a free wine newsletter at <http://www.nataliemaclean.com>. "There are more than a million producers, and each one makes at least a few wines, all of which change every year. Multiply that together and it's dazzling, overwhelming and confusing."

The Budometer, a computerized palate assessment tool, aims to turn theory into practice. Consumers fill out a survey at <http://www.budometer.com> that is designed to gauge their tastes. (Hint: If you like black coffee or Scotch or, counterintuitively, find foods too salty -- salt suppresses bitterness -- you're probably a "tolerant" taster.) The Budometer instantly tells consumers what kind of taster they are. It offers up styles to look for -- tannic reds, New World pinot noirs, Alsatian whites -- and specific wines they might enjoy. Starting in May, visitors to Copia, an education center in Napa that promotes the understanding of food and wine, can confirm their status by having their tongues analyzed.

Hanni developed the Budometer with the help of two sensory scientists at the University of California at Davis. It takes into account a decade of research on taste and sensory perception; Hanni calls it neurogastronomic programming. Designed for neophytes, it asks just five questions, but Hanni plans to add a more advanced questionnaire for enthusiasts soon. The extended survey will help people understand how experiences affect or even overcome genetic predispositions, he says. A tolerant taster might love French pinot noirs, which by the book would be too thin and dull to appeal, because he spent his honeymoon touring Burgundy.

"The struggle is to take away the mystery of wine without taking the magic," MacLean says. "Tim's idea is a big step forward, because he is not just spouting the old clichés about 'Wine is for everyone.' There's methodology behind his theories."

As important as the science is Hanni's fervor for making wine easy, whatever it takes. He developed the first "progressive" wine list in 1985 for Murphy's restaurant in Atlanta, grouping bottles not by country but by styles such as "light and fruity" or "lush and full-bodied." He also developed and sells Vignon, a blend of salt and spices designed to help any food pair well with wine -- even asparagus and artichokes, which are notoriously difficult to match.

A recovering alcoholic, Hanni hasn't swallowed a sip of wine in 14 years, something he insists hasn't affected his ability to work with wine. In fact, he says it helps: "There are people who write me off as an idiot, because how could I know what I'm talking about if I don't taste? When I stopped drinking, I became an observer. What I do isn't dependent on tasting; it's dependent on observing and studying and researching why you like what you like, not trying to convince you that you should like what I like."

Some of his ideas might seem heretical, but Hanni, one of the first two Americans to obtain a master of wine designation, is careful to present his creations in a way that is welcoming to wine novices and unthreatening to the establishment. At 55, Hanni still has a bit of the hippie in him. His most common expression is "I'm having a blast." Every e-mail ends with his tag line: "Peace, Partnership and Prosperity." The message: It's only wine. Why can't we all get along?

So far, so good. Though the Budometer is still in its beta phase, it has had a warm reception. Wine writer Andrea Immer, enologist Richard Peterson and Copia's senior vice president of wine Peter Marks are fans. And once consumers comprehend exactly what Hanni is talking about (the shoe analogy helps), they, too, get excited about the prospect of being able to better navigate a wine list or simply trust their instincts.

Janice Iwama, a 24-year-old research analyst who attended the recent tasting, for example, was happy to learn that she fell into the sweet category, which explained her intense dislike for red wines. Taster Tom Broughan, a George

Washington University law student, said that "having guidelines is helpful to focus my picks and get away from things I know I don't like." His previous strategy was to look for a brand he knew his father liked.

To be sure, some worry that the Budometer may be too confusing for people who just want a glass of wine after work. "Wine enthusiasts love it. But if it adds another layer of information or complexity on behalf of the casual consumer, it may not make it easier," says Mark Chandler, executive director of the Lodi Wine Grape Commission, where the competition is being held. "It's one more piece of information you have to know."

Then there are those who just don't want to find out that they lack taste buds: Karen McMullen, managing director of Washington Wine and Women, was disappointed that the Budometer pegged her as a tolerant taster, because she has always preferred the subtle French and Italian wines she learned to love while summering in Europe as a young woman.

Hanni, however, wasn't surprised at all. When he reviewed the selections she preferred at the tasting, he saw that despite her physiology, she did favor the delicate European wines. "The Budometer is geared for new wine drinkers," Hanni says. "Once you graduate intellectually to Karen's level, experience takes over."

If the Budometer takes off, any stigma could soon disappear. "You are what you are," says tolerant taster Natan. "I don't mind being tolerant. Isn't that a good thing?"

Putting the Budometer to the Test

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On March 4, Tim Hanni visited Washington to let us be the first to put his Budometer system to the test. Our panel, which we invited to gather at Phillips Seafood on the Washington waterfront, was made up of nine tasters divided into two groups: connoisseurs, two men and two women; and relative wine novices, two men and three women.*

Each taster filled out the Budometer survey, designed to assess what his or her preferences would be. The surveys were processed and each taster categorized as tolerant, sensitive, hypersensitive or sweet. Then, each tasted 11 wines selected by Hanni to see if the Budometer was accurate. The testers used a scaled-back version of the system that judges used at the Lodi International Wine Awards this week, sorting wines along a spectrum of "love," "like" and "don't like." (Lodi judges divide the wines between various levels of gold, silver, bronze and no medals. For results of this week's competition, visit <http://www.lodiwineawards.com>.)

Our panel proved that the Budometer worked, although as Hanni warned, it's geared for novices rather than experts. The connoisseurs generally followed the prescribed path but tended to reject wines that they "should" have liked based on quality. (For example, tolerant taster Tom Natan liked but didn't love an inexpensive Rodney Strong cabernet sauvignon.) The beginners hewed closely to expectation.

The tolerant tasters, as expected, favored the bigger, lusty wines: a Rosso di Montalcino, a malbec and an old-vine zinfandel.

The sensitive tasters preferred a range of medium-bodied, balanced wines.

The hypersensitive and sweet tasters preferred lighter, more delicate and sweeter wines including a Folie a Deux Menage a Trois, with its notes of sweet pears and citrus, and a Kim Crawford sauvignon blanc, an aromatic, cool-climate wine with high acidity. (Karen McMullen, technically a tolerant taster, also preferred the Kim Crawford and a J. Vidal-Fleury Crozes-Hermitage from France that is medium bodied with hints of berry. But as a connoisseur with great experience, she let her emotional preferences prevail.)

**Connoisseurs panel: Adam Manson, co-owner, Veritas wine bar; Suzanne McGrath, owner, the Curious Grape; Karen McMullen, managing director, Washington Women and Wine; Tom Natan, partner, First Vine. Beginners panel: Tom Broughan, Alberto Cardalliaguet, Terry DelCasino, Chris Dragisic, Janice Iwama.*

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Four Ways to Taste Wine

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Tim Hanni's Budometer divides wine drinkers into four categories: tolerant, sensitive, hypersensitive and sweet. The rating is based on the number of taste buds you have -- a higher number makes you more sensitive to strong, bitter flavors -- and your personal experience. Here is a basic guide to Hanni's categories. To take his survey, go to <http://www.tastesq.com>.

Tolerant

Favors intense, powerful wines with oak characteristics. This group also enjoys wines with high alcohol levels, above about 14 percent.

Hanni recommends:

White: Oaked chardonnays, Rhone whites -- though it's best to stick to reds.

Red: Cabernet sauvignons, Rhone reds, old-vine zinfandels, barolos, amarones.

Sensitive

Favors smooth wines with richness and, more important, balance. Many styles appeal. There is a moderate tolerance for oak and alcohol levels.

Hanni recommends:

White: U.S. and Chilean sauvignon blancs, Viogniers, rich wines from Alsace, New World chardonnays.

Red: Shiraz/syrah and Rhone blends; merlot and merlot blends; rich-style pinot noirs; red zinfandels; more modern French, Italian and Spanish reds.

Hypersensitive

Favors lighter, more delicate wines with just a touch of oak, if any. Wines with high alcohol tend to create an unpleasant burning sensation.

Hanni recommends:

White: Dry and slightly sweet Rieslings and Austrian, German and Alsatian wines; French or Chilean chardonnays; unoaked New World chardonnays.

Red: Lighter New Zealand, French and U.S. pinot noirs; lower-alcohol red zinfandels; lighter French, Italian and Spanish reds.

Sweet

Very sensitive to bitterness and alcohol. Has the confidence to want only sweet wines. Period.

Hanni recommends:

White: White zinfandels, sweeter Rieslings, Lambruscos, Moscato wines.

Red: None (unless it's sweet red dessert wine).