

Dry vs. Sweet

What is the root of these perplexing contradictions that keep some people from even considering half of all wines?

By Wil Franklin

Understanding a few essential characteristics of wine will go a long way toward understanding how to make fine wine a part of our daily lives, just as it is in many cultures where wine is an essential part of every meal. One of the most perplexing characteristics of wine is the “sweet vs. dry” issue. Too many times I have heard friends say they don’t drink white wine because it’s too sweet, yet they like late harvest red Zinfandel that is sweet. Others tell me they don’t like red wine because it’s too dry, but then turn around and drink an even drier white wine. What is the root of these perplexing contradictions that keep some people from even considering half of all wines? Clearly the words dry and sweet mean different things to different people. In an attempt to make all this more understandable, I’ll put on my winemaker’s hat and explain the actual, technical meanings behind the terms.

First, dry does not mean the puckering sensation felt in the mouth when quaffing a high acid white wine – that’s tartness. Second, dry is not the tactile, chalky sensation that coats the roof of your mouth when imbibing a big, tannic red – that’s astringency. Dry and sweet simply refer to the sugar content (or lack thereof in wine). Unfortunately, the diverse legal and vernacular terms used for centuries to describe local wine tastes around the world do not conform to neat, concise technical terminology. (See Table 1)

Let’s start with the quantitative meaning of dry, since it is the simplest to define. Quantitative or technical dryness is the absence of sugar. There, we’re done. Technically speaking if wine has some measurable amount of residual sugar, then it’s not dry.

Legal jargon aside, the first step in understanding the term dry is to realize that it has both qualitative and quantitative meanings. In other words, wine has certain “qualities”

associated with dryness as well as specifically measurable “quantities” of constituents that make wine taste dry.

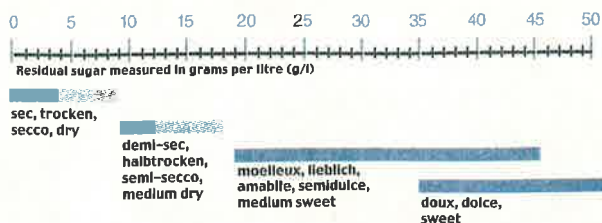
The human threshold – the physical ability to sense sweetness – is around six to ten grams of sugar per liter of wine. That is to say, a wine may have some residual sugar remaining, but at a concentration lower than six grams per liter, say three grams per liter, a wine may be perceived to have no sweetness - it tastes “dry.” The threshold of perceived dryness is “qualitatively” different for every individual, every different wine, and is even influenced by any food that happens to be eaten with wine. Understanding these qualities and why they affect the sense of taste is the key to understanding how the term “dry” is actually used in the wine world.

One of the most influential qualities of wine that affects the perception of dryness is acidity. Acidity is the tartness factor and is sensed by taste buds on the sides of the tongue. Lemons and limes have a high level of acidity, as do green apples and malt vinegar. Acidity acts to cover up the effects of sugar. Wines with high acidity as opposed to low acidity, will drink drier. A “dry” German Riesling from the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer will taste drier than a Marsanne from the Rhone Valley of France, even if the two wines are measured by technicians to have the same sugar content.

To really get a feeling for all this, try the following five-minute experiment. Pour two glasses of water, one cup each. Add and mix in a tablespoon of sugar. Now, to one glass, mix in two table-

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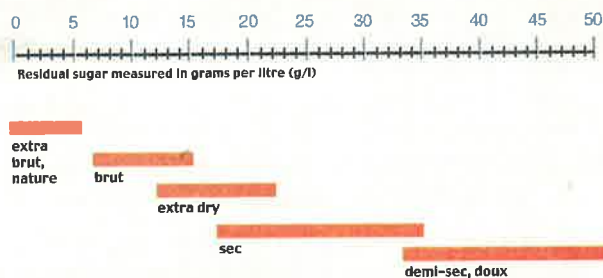
These higher levels are allowed when measured acidity is no more than 2 g/l BELOW the residual sugar's measurement.

French wines such as Sancerre, Chablis, Meursault, Mâcon etc are below 4 g/l residual sugar.

Dry German wine and Chenin Blanc from the Loire will generally fall on the upper end of the “sec” bar, but will have corresponding higher levels of acidity than the Sancerre, Mâcon and Burgundy.

Wines from Napa, Arroyo Grande, Central Coast, etc., generally fall on the upper end of the “sec” bar with corresponding lower levels of acidity.

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spoons of fresh lemon juice. Taste the cup with just the sugar, and then the one with both sugar and lemon juice. This will give you first hand experience on how acid and sugar interact to balance each other. I'll wager the lemon-sugar water will taste slightly "drier" even though both glasses contain the same amount of sugar.

Astringency and alcohol are two other qualities that affect the sense of dryness. Astringency, caused by tannins that come from the seeds and skins of grapes, is a characteristic that slightly enhances the perception of dryness. Between two wines that only vary in tannin content, the more astringent wine will be perceived as dryer. Tannins act like acidity to slightly numb the taste bud's perception of sweetness. Conversely, alcohol slightly lowers the sense of dryness. If you were to re-do the sugar water experiment, but in place of lemon juice added two tablespoons of vodka to one glass, you would find the alcohol-sugar glass would actually be perceived as sweeter or less dry.

An intense aroma of ripe fruit is also commonly mistaken for sweetness, due to the anatomical and physiological links between the human sense of taste and smell. However, does a bowl of sugar smell sweet? It doesn't smell like anything. If you encounter a "sweet" smelling wine, try a sip before making a snap-judgment on the nose alone. There is a good chance it is dry and more than likely an intense, flavorful wine that sings on the palate and leaves a lasting impression.

The qualities that affect our perceptions of sweet vs. dry are not necessarily related to the intrinsic quality of a wine. What a winemaker hopes for is balance. Balanced wines will show a harmonious integration of sugar, acidity, alcohol and astringency that make a wine greater than the sum of its parts. It is the emergent quality that all true works of art possess and all good wines achieve. Armed with knowledge, take back the world of wine and take joy in exploring all it's beauty. *Z*