

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



When Wine Lovers Say ‘Smooth,’ I Think...

WHAT'S THE MOST common word oenophiles use—and misuse—to describe a wine? The answer might surprise you. According to several retailers, it's "smooth." Ian Dorin, wine director of the Wine Library, a large wine store in Springfield, N.J., told me, "It's the 1,000,000%, single-most misused term of all time."

Perhaps that's because smoothness in wine is almost impossible to define. The adjective is so elastic that Gary Fisch, owner of the New Jersey-based Gary's Wine & Marketplace chain, said that "no one really knows what it means."

Many smooth-wine seekers are actually looking for wines that are sweet, said Mr. Dorin, citing examples such as the Zinfandel-based Apothic Red from California. Others want something with little or no tannins or acidity, according to Joe Salamone, head wine buyer of Crush Wine & Spirits in New York. Which in most cases translates as bland. Tannins and acidity can be off-put-



MATE FRANCHI; F. MARTIN RAMINI/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (BOTTLES)

and bottle. (K&D Wines' Mr. Finch recommends wines aged in American oak for smooth-wine drinkers.)

Many of the wines were pleasant but not particularly distinctive, including the 2012 Fog Mountain Merlot (\$11) and 2012 Murrieta's Well The Spur (\$17). Others, like the 2014 St. Michael-Eppan (\$15), a low-acid Pinot Grigio, were so smooth they were practically limp.

There were, however, a few standouts. The 2012 Ramey Russian River Valley Chardonnay from Sonoma was creamy but marked by a bright mineral note (\$32). The 2012 Domaine d'Estoublon Vin de Pays des Alpilles Blanc (\$35), from Provence, was a delight, round on the palate but with a sprightly acidity.

Close behind them were several reds that possessed smoothness as well as flavor and structure. The 2013 Chakana Estate Selection Red Blend (\$23) from Argentina was appealing, fresh and "exactly the same from the beginning to the middle to the end," my friend Mary said,

drinkers. But these components not only enliven a wine, they lend it texture and complexity, and make it a good match with food. Try drinking a wine lacking both tannins and acidity, and you'll see what I mean. There's no tension, no uplift. The wine stays flat on your tongue.

Tim Finch, manager of K&D Wines & Spirits in Manhattan, said he has had customers scrunch up their faces as they describe the attributes of a wine they don't want, suggesting in a physical fashion just how painful it is. They're almost always talking about reds, he added—something other retailers found to be true as well. In the rare case when a customer uses "smooth" to describe an ideal white, it's usually a "fancy way of saying creamy or buttery," Mr. Dorin opined.

Whether they're looking for someone to interpret their expressions or simply looking for guidance, smooth-wine seekers seem to talk to their merchants a lot. As Mr. Fisch of Gary's Wine observed, "Smooth is a conversation opener."

This might be because the word is not only hard to define but

seems to rarely appear anywhere in the stores' displays. I toured a number of wine shops recently looking for "smooth" on the sales placards and critics' reviews attached to shelves and was hard pressed to find the actual word—which surprised me, given its popularity among wine buyers. Instead I only found synonyms like "plush,"

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"soft," "supple," "round" and, a particular favorite, "easy to drink."

If "smooth" is a word that wine critics rarely employ, what about winemakers? Is it a term that they endorse or eschew? And what does it mean to them? I put the question to David Ramey of Ramey Wine Cellars in Healdsburg, Calif., whose acclaimed reds and whites have been called smooth by a few of the retailers I know.

The voluble Mr. Ramey seemed to relish the inquiry. "The more obvious references to smooth wines are wines with residual sugar," he said. "When I hear smooth wine, that's what comes to mind. It can be a literal sugar coating." Of course that isn't how Mr. Ramey achieves what some might call the smoothness in his wines. Instead, he employs several sophisticated winemaking techniques to produce richer, creamier, more viscous wines. Mr. Ramey makes sure to minimize the tearing of grape skins during fermentation, as skin contact emphasizes tannins in both whites and reds. He ferments his wines in small barrels or tanks—a size that he said helps minimize tannins. He also stirs the lees, or the yeast cells, from the bottom of the barrel (aka *bâtonnage*) of his Chardonnays post-fermentation.

Another important factor is time. As a wine ages, its tannins become softer and rounder, and the acidity diminishes, making the wine more approachable and easy-to-drink. Swirling your glass also helps; oxygen attaches to the tannins in the wine and smooths them out.

How hard is it to find—or even define—a truly smooth wine? Is it sweet, tannin-less or something else entirely? Smoothness, it turns out, is nothing if not personal. I asked five retailers for their recommendations, allowing them to interpret the term as they saw fit, and ended up with 21 wines, all under \$40. I shared the bottles with a variety of friends—some self-described smooth-seekers and others, like my friend Gabrielle, who not only eschewed smooth wines but even despised the word, which she called "too Kenny G."

Unsurprisingly, some found smoothness in wines where others found too much tannin or acidity. But a few wines, like the 2010 Zlatan Plavac Mali from Croatia (\$18), were universal hits. Soft and plummy with a spicy nose, this genetic cousin of Zinfandel benefited from 5 years of aging in the bottle. The same was true of the 2011 Launa Selección Familiar Rioja Crianza (\$17), which was soft with notes of red fruit and vanilla, thanks to several years' aging in barrel (American and French oak)

offering her own definition of smoothness. The 2013 Château Puech-Haut La Closerie du Pic (\$22), from Languedoc, was marked by a big red-berry nose. Its slight tannins soften over time in the glass, as did the tannins in the equally delightful, compulsively drinkable 2012 Château la Canorgue (\$17), a blend of Grenache, Syrah, Carignan and Mourvèdre from a top biodynamic producer in France's Luberon region.

Mr. Fisch of Gary's Wine jokingly suggested that customers seeking smoothness were actually looking for a wine that was "so smooth they didn't know what they were drinking," as if a kind of vinous obliviousness were the goal. And yet the best wines of my small tasting were not only effortlessly pleasurable but also worth thinking about. "Smooth" may be a wildly subjective adjective when applied to a wine, but it doesn't have to describe one lacking in complexity, richness and depth.

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OENOFILE: FIVE WINES SURE TO PLEASE EVEN THE SMOOTHEST OPERATORS



2012 Ramey Wine Cellars Russian River Valley Chardonnay \$32

Sonoma-based David Ramey is widely credited as a Chardonnay master, turning out full-bodied but well-balanced wines. Mr. Ramey aged this wine in barrel for 12 months and stirred the lees for a rich, creamy effect.



2012 Domaine d'Estoublon Vin de Pays des Alpilles Blanc \$35

A blend of Marsanne, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc, this is lush on the palate but possesses an appealing mineral finish. Dry but far from austere, it's aged in barrels and amphoras at a famously beautiful Provence estate.



2013 Chakana Estate Selection Red Blend \$23

A harmonious blend of Malbec, Cabernet and Syrah, this Argentine red is marked by aromas of red fruit and spice and soft tannins. Upon tasting it, a friend said it was "consistently smooth from beginning to end."



2011 Bodegas Launa Selección Familiar Rioja Crianza \$17

Rioja winemakers are particularly gifted at producing smooth reds. This pretty, red-berry-scented wine has been aged in American and French oak and is thoroughly approachable and ready to drink.



2012 Château la Canorgue Red Luberon \$17

A top organic and biodynamic estate in the heart of the Luberon region of France, Château la Canorgue produces both reds and whites. This red is initially quite powerful but over time opens and softens in the glass.