



Benchmarks and Glasses



Wine makers and grape growers are looking for ways to improve their grapes and wines, even in very small increments. What if there was a way to enhance the sensory experience of wine with no additional effort in the vineyard or cellar? Too good to be true? Those who know me know that I have become a bit of a glass snob over the years – I always carry good quality tasting glasses in my car. Ever since [George Riedel](#) and Robert Mondavi teamed up to convince consumers that glasses make a difference, I have used wine glasses to elevate my tasting experience. I'm not sure if I would go so far as to say, as Riedel promotes, that a particular grape variety benefits from a special size and shape of glass, but I am convinced that a standard Syrah-style glass (glass on right) can improve the sensory attributes of almost any wine (also decanting red and white wines, young, old and inbetween). There are lots of ways to make better wines, and I focus on the vineyard. But changes in the vineyard tend to be a bit ponderous and slow. Actually, improvements in the cellar can have the most immediate and dramatic impact on wine quality. Denise Gardner, extension enologist at Penn State, has said that if all wine makers improved SO₂ management, it could measurably improve wine quality across the wine industry. In the past, tasting rooms would often use little plastic cups to serve wines to customers. That might work for an extremely aromatic wine like Concord or Niagara, but for wines with more delicate aromatic features, a proper glass can dramatically enhance the sensory experience. On the flip side, however, if a wine has any flaws, the glass will highlight these, too. So be sure that your wines are sound before applying glass technology to them.



I was having dinner with a wine connoisseur friend recently and he showed me a very unique and odd glass that is made by Peugeot, yes, the same French company that makes the cars. The young white wine glass was a very elongated and tulip-shaped with an almost right angle narrowing of the mouth that forced volatile aromas toward the nose. We were drinking a white Burgundy and compared the sensory qualities of this glass with other shapes and it was remarkable how this glass not only intensified the aromatic features but in subtle ways also altered them. This particular glass, the [Peugeot Impitoyable #2](#) and costs \$60 so it's clearly not for everyone.

It was an interesting and fun exercise that demonstrated the power of the glass to affect the sensory perception of a wine. Most people may not care or recognize the improvement in a wine via the glass, but I think people who are involved in wine production, education, and service should seek the truth in every wine, good or bad. It is important for those in wine production to get a full and accurate whiff of your wines! And for your delicate wines, like a dry Vidal, semi-sweet Riesling, or a Bordeaux red, they cannot help but be improved by a better glass.

Every Thursday afternoon Jim Law, the owner and wine grower at [Linden Vineyards](#) in Virginia organizes a technical wine tasting for his staff. It is an opportunity to learn and taste wines from other places that may have some relevance and educational value to the goals at Linden. I find the best producers always taste wines from other regions, especially those that are synonymous with a grape variety or blend. It's also important that wine industry professionals taste benchmark wines in the categories that they produce.

It's just as important to understand what constitutes a fine Concord or Norton as it is to know the benchmarks for Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc. In my contact with wine growers I find that those who taste critically and technically on a regular basis have a well-defined wine philosophy and objectives in their production methods. They also tend to be curious about where and how benchmark wines are made. If possible, taste wines with people



who have more skilled palates and knowledge than yours as this is the only way to learn. It's very important not to develop cellar palate by just tasting your wines in the same environment year in and out. This can lead to a form of palate tunnel vision that can fail to detect flaws or changes in style that may occur over time. Wine making benefits from a broad base of knowledge, not a narrow, hemmed-in perspective. I have written about viticulture technical travel in the past and can say with certainty that tremendous advancements in knowledge and practices are available to anyone who wants to improve their wines.

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