

*chapter three*THE OBJECTIVITY OF TASTES
AND TASTING^I

Barry C. Smith

Most wine tasters and many wine critics will tell you that taste is subjective. It is a matter of what you like or dislike, of what is right for you. In matters of taste your opinion is sovereign. You should simply not allow yourself to be persuaded that you have not fully appreciated this or that wine: there is no such thing as getting it right or wrong. It is your opinion that counts. Such is the oft-pro pounded wisdom that it is somewhat difficult for others to get a hearing. However, a closer examination of the business of taste and tasting will show us that things are not so clear-cut. To begin with, the reasons people offer for saying that taste is subjective vary considerably and not all of them are compatible with one another. Moreover, the considerations most often advanced in favour of subjectivity are not always consistent with the attitudes or practices of those who advance them. (It is harder than one thinks to live up to the belief that taste is subjective.)

In the end, so many different things come to be listed under the heading of subjectivity that one begins to suspect that there is no common view or single opinion about what it means to say that taste is subjective. In the light of this, just how convincing are the arguments for the subjectivity of taste? And if we can no longer give good reasons for endorsing subjectivity what should we say instead? In particular, what scope is there for thinking that there may be such a thing as the taste (or tastes) of a wine, and that judgements about taste may be objective? These are the issues I will explore in what follows. Let us start with the claim that taste is subjective.

WHAT IS THE CASE FOR SUBJECTIVITY?

People are inclined to say that all we can be sure of is how a wine tastes to us personally; and that how a wine tastes to us personally is a purely subjective matter. It is on this basis that we make up our minds about what we like and dislike. So, they will say, taste is subjective.

What is interesting, here, is how quickly we pass here from what looks like a commonplace observation to a philosophical thesis: a thesis that requires further discussion and defence. It is also surprising that many wine tasters and wine critics are so ready to accept this controversial doctrine, especially in the light of their practice of assessing and recommending wines to others. For example, Michael Broadbent tells us that:

After fifty years of tasting and teaching I am convinced that to talk about, let alone claim, total objectivity—‘relating entirely to the external object’—in tasting is nonsense. Moreover, to be a subjective taster is nothing to be ashamed of. One can even argue that that a subjective approach—‘arising out of the senses’—is the most enriching approach to fine wine. (M. Broadbent, *Wine Tasting*, p.95)

He goes on to declare that ‘in the ultimate analysis, “I, the taster”, am the final arbiter’. Though like most critics Broadbent appears to be in two minds on this issue. For he tells us ‘The problem is, as usual, to note or convey subjective and objective impressions’ (p.95). This is surely right, and yet despite this concession, Broadbent, like many other critics, places strong emphasis on subjectivity.² Why does subjectivism about taste have such a strong appeal? Or to put it in a more philosophical vein: how subjective are taste and tasting?

To address this question properly we first have to understand what is meant by the subjectivity of taste. Many different claims are made under that heading and they target subtly different things; not all of them incompatible with objectivity. Talk of subjectivity as ‘arising out of the senses’ helps to stress the experiential dimension of taste but this does not preclude tasting giving us objective knowledge of the world. After all, the senses of sight, touch, and hearing give us knowledge of the external world, so why not taste and smell also? A stronger notion of subjectivity would equate the tastes we discover with the sensory experi-

ences we have as tasters. On this view tastes are the exclusive properties of individual tasters. Another way to construe subjectivity is to see our judgements about how a wine tastes as answerable to nothing except our subjective states. How the wine tastes just is how it tastes to me at this moment. Other notions of subjectivity have to do with the difficulty of capturing the indefinable quality of our experiences in words. Even if we could put our subjective experience of a wine into words, there would be nothing we could get right or wrong about the wine, since we would merely be describing our own experiences. Finally, we have the view that judgements of taste are matters of opinion and not matters of fact; that each taster is the final arbiter, and no person’s opinion of a wine is better than anyone else’s. I have only my own assessment of a wine’s quality to rely upon. That is because, so the thought goes, there is no standard of taste for evaluating the quality of wine, and if there were objective facts to get right there would be no divergence of opinion between expert wine critics.

These claims concern different senses of subjectivity and to pursue the general issue, we shall need to look at each of them more closely.

TASTE, TASTES AND TASTING

A potential distraction in these discussions is the use of the word ‘taste’ to indicate a certain discerning sensibility or refinement of judgement. Here is where we find ideas of good or bad *taste*, of improvement in, and of criticism of, one’s *taste* by others. Questions of *taste*, in this sense, dominate discussions of philosophical aesthetics. *Taste* can be cultivated and educated; it qualifies for assessment and evaluation. Undoubtedly, knowledge and experience are required, but showing *taste* in the appreciation of wine is about exercising judgement and preference. It is controversial, however, whether there are *standards of taste*, whether we could all equally recognise them, whether there are good judges of such matters—as the philosopher David Hume thought—better able to say what counts as good *taste* and able to criticise the *taste* of others.³ I shall return to the role of wine critics below, but for the moment let us adopt the view of *taste* proposed by art historian Michael Baxandall. Here is how he characterises *taste* in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*:

Much of what we call 'taste' lies in this, the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder. We enjoy our own exercise of skill, and we particularly enjoy the playful exercise of skill which we use in normal life very earnestly. If a painting gives us opportunity for exercising a valued skill and rewards our virtuosity with a sense of worthwhile insights about that painting's organisation, we tend to enjoy it: it is to our taste. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972, p.34)

So with painting, also with wine!⁴ Increasing one's powers of discrimination, one's skills as a taster, is part of exercising *taste*, but it also requires that there be something worthy of one's attention, something that affords an opportunity for the exercise of a skill. This means a fine wine.

Another potential stumbling block in these discussions is the failure to distinguish between taste as a sensation and *the taste* of something; between the sensations I have when I eat a strawberry, on the one hand, and the taste of the strawberry, on the other. To avoid confusion, I will make a distinction between *tastes*, which I shall argue are properties a wine has, and *tasting*, which is an experience a subject has. Wine *tasting* is the way each of us personally encounters the *tastes* of a wine. The key question will be whether the sensations we have when tasting are good guides to the tastes of a wine.

HOW CONVINCING IS THE CASE FOR SUBJECTIVITY?

Are tastes just each individual taster's sensory experiences? Can we equate tastes with the subjective experiences of tasting? We certainly rely on subjective experiences to know how a wine tastes. For even if we know a great deal about its objective chemical properties or *vinification*, we would not know what it tastes like without tasting it. The experience of tasting provides the only route to such knowledge. But my experience of how a wine tastes need not rule out the possibility of others experiencing the same thing. Why suppose the taste I discover to be available only to me? Surely, I discover something about the wine: its floral character, say, or its sharp acidity. These are properties I attribute to the wine, not just to my experience. But what sort of properties are they? Not chemical properties: we were assuming I knew those already. The properties I discover through the experience of tasting are the tastes of the wine. In

what sense then are such taste properties subjective?

Of course, you cannot be sure that someone else will detect the same tastes you do. But there is every reason to think tastes *are* there to be detected. We draw each other's attention to what we have noticed in a wine. 'Do you get the pear?' we may say when tasting a white Burgundy, or 'Fig?' when tasting a Rhône. Any of these descriptions may be spurned of course, but usually they help to improve one another's perceptual awareness of the taste of the wine, leading to finer discriminations. Neither person may be a better taster than the other. Their efforts are more collaborative, and through such interactions their perceptions become keener, their discriminations and responses finer, and they gain more satisfaction from their responses, their decisions and choices:

Finer perceptions can both intensify and refine responses. Intenser responses can further heighten and refine perceptions. And more and more refined responses can lead to further and finer and more variegated or more intense responses and perceptions. (Wiggins 1991, p.196)⁵

Saying that the experience of tasting is a personal one need not prevent us from saying that it acquaints us with how a particular wine tastes, or from supposing that other people can be acquainted with that taste too. Some of the flavours and aromas we notice may so well-known that they serve as reference points of reference for the varietal: the smell of rose petals in Gewürztraminer, for instance. Acknowledging the role of subjective experience in tasting, by itself, provides no case for saying that that taste or tasting are subjective.

THE SENSATION OF TASTE

We assume that other people see what we see and hear what we hear, when they are in the same immediate environment. So why do we not assume that other people taste what we taste? Perhaps because taste is said to be the most subjective of the senses, requiring actual bodily contact with a substance. But isn't touch a contact sense also? It is, however, touch that allows one to explore the contours of the external world, while taste consumes and destroys its object inside us. Taste is a chemical sense like smell, requiring interactions between gases and receptors in us. And each of taste, touch and smell contributes to wine

tasting. All three are thought to be more subjective than audition and vision, which allow us to contemplate distant and unchanging objects. For instance, visual experience enables me to see a church on the hillside. And whereas the church I see is separate from my experience of seeing it, the taste of the Chablis is not so clearly separable from the experiences I am having when drinking it.⁶ Perhaps it is this closeness of a taste to the immediate experience of the taster that makes taste appear so irreducibly subjective? In other words, must we think of tastes as being in us rather than being in the wine? To say this is to concede that people cannot literally encounter the same tastes.

An argument for subjectivity can now be constructed as follows. Tastes seem to be inextricably bound up with the personal experiences of tasters, so they cannot be part of the external world? The taste of a wine is made known to me at the place where the liquid enters my mouth. The site of the taste is on my taste receptors in my mouth and on my tongue. The experience of taste occurs within me, crucially involving my conscious states. So the taste I am having is not the taste you are having: we each taste separately. Therefore taste is subjective.

The reasoning here is a little quick. The feel of a velvet fabric on my fingers is an experience that occurs to me at a specific site on my body, but this does not make the feel of the velvet available to me only. Touch allows us to discover properties of objects but leaves room for others to discover the same properties by means of *their* tactile experiences. Why not the same with taste? It may be said that taste is more internal than touch because it is focused on what goes on inside our bodies. But subjectivity cannot be characterised in terms of what is literally going inside us or else the circulation of blood around my brain would count as subjective.

The subjectivity we are interested in—the kind that threatens objectivity—is one in which there is nothing independent of our opinions to which they are answerable. It is only when there is room for a contrast between opinions and matters of fact that that we have an objective subject matter. A wholly subjective opinion is one that is answerable to nothing more than how things seem to the subject. What about our opinions of wines? It may depend whether we are talking about evaluations of a wine's quality or judgements about its particular characteristics. A judgement about a wine's characteristics would be sub-

jective if there were no gap between how things seemed to us, on an occasion, and how they were, because that was only how they seemed to us. But we do admit a gap, on occasions, between how things strike us and how they are. We are happy to grant a distinction, for example, between the way a wine tastes, and the way it tastes to us after sucking a lemon. We are not tempted to equate the taste of a Meursault with how it tastes to us after brushing our teeth. How a wine tastes is not exhausted by how it tastes to an individual at any given moment. We distinguish between good and bad conditions for tasting, where these involve the condition of the wine as well as the condition of the taster. And we apply these distinctions to ourselves and to others. I can predict that you will not notice the tender raspberry fruit of Nicolas Potel's 2001 Volnay Les Caillerets if you have just eaten a plate of kippers. Nor will I be surprised that a bottle of 2000 Beaucastel Châteauneuf du Pape tastes soupy given the sweltering temperature of the place in which it has been kept. So long as there is room for a distinction between the taste of a wine and how it tastes to *someone* under certain condition there will be no reason to conclude that a taste is constituted by the individual experience of a taster, and so no convincing case yet for saying that tastes are subjective.

The stubbornly persistent view that when we speak about a wine's taste we can only be speaking about our response to it is based on the idea that tastes can only be experienced as sensations, and that sensations, being utterly subjective, cannot provide any basis for drawing conclusions about the world, or other people's experiences. But this overstates the case. I can tell by the sensations on my lips and tongue that a wine has been severely chilled. On this basis I readily conclude something about the wine that enables me to predict how others will experience it. Tasting requires me to attend to my sensory experience but this does not prevent me from knowing about the world around me. Sensations are narcissistic in telling us how things are with us. But they are also revelatory: telling us how things are around us. In this way, they are Janus-faced. The temperature of my skin tells me how hot or cold I am, but in normal conditions it also tells me about the ambient temperature of the room.

Why should it be any different for taste sensations? My tasting experience can tell me: whether a wine has too much alcohol because of the slight burning sensation at the back of my throat; whether it has too little

acidity because of the flatness in the finish; whether there is an excess use of wood by the slight irritation of the gums; whether the tannins are still too firm by the mouth puckering sensations of dryness and astringency. Experienced tasters will learn more from their sensations about the texture of the wine—about whether the tannins are fine- or coarse-grained—by paying attention to particular aspects of their sensory experience. In similar fashion, wine-makers use sensations of smell to indicate faults or problems with the fermentation. The sulphurous smell from a barrel sample can tell me that the reduction has been too severe, that the wine is starved of oxygen and will need to be raked. So the fact that tasting sensations are the conscious experiences of individual tasters does not thereby prevent them out from providing information about the objective characteristics of the wines tasted. The more discerning I am as a taster, the more discriminatingly will I use my sensations to tell me something about the properties of the wine and the way it has been made.

FINE WINE

The character of the sensations I enjoy in tasting depends on the qualities of the wine I taste. A dull and shapeless wine cannot produce the complex amalgam of sensations a great wine gives rise to, however interesting and imaginative the taster. The better the quality of the wine, the better the quality of the experience I can have in drinking it. Only a fine or great wine will repay the attention given to it, because only a sufficiently rich and complex wine will exercise our discriminative powers in a rewarding way.

If finer wines are responsible for finer experiences, are all the properties of fine wines available to just anyone? To answer negatively is to risk not only accusations of elitism, but, beyond this, a general scepticism about what experts claim to discover through tasting. For how can there be aspects of a wine revealed to some tasters but not others when tasting is such a direct and immediate experience? These questions bring us to the heart of tastes and tasting.

Either the aromas and flavours of a wine are there for all to recognise, or there are flavours and aromas available only to those who enjoy particular taste sensations, who have special sensory equipment, as it were.⁷ Neither of these is an easy option to take. Are normal tasters ruled

out from experiencing the pleasures of fine wines?

The assumption that gives rise to this dilemma is the view that tastes are just what is immediately experienced. The idea that there is no more to the taste of a wine than is revealed to us directly in sensation leads to a credibility gap between those who claim to detect a large range of flavours and aromas in a wine and those who don't. But when we separate out initial or immediate sensations from further responses we can see a difference between the kinds of experience had by the novice and the expert, and that we are not comparing like with like.

Compare the undifferentiated responses of someone tasting as a matter of their immediate, overall impression of a wine, and the more componential, taste impressions of the analytic taster who mentions ripe fruit, balancing acidity, judicious use of oak, and soft-grained tannins. The analytical taster is doing something quite different from the novice. It is not his immediate or overall taste sensations he is attending to. Instead, he guides his attention towards certain aspects of his experience, selecting some for peculiar scrutiny. To begin with, he pays a good deal of attention to impressions of smell. Novice tasters pay scant attention to the aromas of wine, sniffing quickly then getting down to what they take to be the real business of tasting. However, a great deal can be learned from the nose of a wine. First, the experienced taster notices the volatile aromas that arise from the glass when still, then the somewhat reluctant aromas that arise after a little agitation. He concentrates on the sequence and intensity of his olfactory sensations. Are there base, earthy notes and higher menthol notes? Is there a smooth transition or an abrupt change from the odours at the beginning to those at the end? Does any note dominate? The wine's olfactory profile usually gives clues as to its taste profile that may be confirmed in the sequences of taste sensations. A wine of age is easily recognisable by the nose. And until recently there were considerable differences between Old and New World wines. However, there are also interesting mismatches between taste and smell, giving the lie to the claim that taste is almost entirely due to smell. There may be little on the nose and yet one can be pleasantly surprised at how full and sumptuous a young wine is. The nose may be very promising but the wine be a little short. The nose can also be misleading about the taste, thus thwarting our expectations. The citrus notes can lead one to expect piercing acidity but one can be surprised by how round the wine

is. The experienced taster attends to individual flavours and their intensities at different stages. Something may be present in the taste that does not show on the nose and could not have been anticipated. In addition, the experienced taster performs retro-nasal breathing to bring to life further aromas, and so see the quality and persistence of flavours in the finish. Going back and forward one can settle on a more precise identification of aromas and flavours. One can come to understand better what is going on in the wine. The comparison is instructive; it may tell us something about the potential development of the wine, in the glass or in the bottle. In this way taste and smell collaborate rather than collapse in tasting a wine.

As well as smell, tasting involves touch, the wine's mouthfeel, and the way it travels across the mouth. Perhaps sight too has a role to play in setting expectations.⁸ Wine tasting is a multimodal experience in which taste sensations are just one component, and where attention to, and reflections on, all aspects of that experience can lead to increasingly refined judgements. There is a focus on the fruit—which kind?—the level of acidity—is there enough?—the amount and quality of the oak used—too intrusive?—and, perhaps the quality of the tannins. Each judgement requires selective attention to a particular aspect of the overall experience, and repeated attempts may be necessary to settle on the right judgement of both taste and smell. All of this goes far beyond the immediate sensations produced by sipping and swallowing. The tasting impressions on which a considered assessment of a wine are based are first sought out and highlighted by *selective* attention. We need to prepare ourselves and be receptive to certain kinds of experiences. We need to know what we are looking for. Tasting is not, as many think, a passive experience. We are seeking out particular type of experiences, and this requires knowledge and training. Not everything about the taste of a wine is surrendered at first, or is accessible without a skilful search. A great bottle will not yield everything all at once, or to just anyone. It will reveal more if we take our time and let our experience develop like a photograph.

Now we see why we are not comparing like with like. The person who is sceptical about the elaborate descriptions given by wine connoisseurs thinks that all there is to taste is given in immediate sensation. It is just a matter of how things taste to him at a moment. And if his initial

and undifferentiated experiences reveal none of the elements the connoisseur mentions, then they simply cannot be there. But on the contrary, time must be taken to build up the experience of the wine gradually. The elements for a final assessment take shape and begin to show themselves only after the novice has sipped and swallowed.

Are these further judgements and assessments open to the novice? Yes, but not without training in the art of tasting. The novice is often surprised to discover this fact about the different modalities he is employing, but after learning he becomes better able to attend selectively to each of these aspects of his experience, and set expectations at the outset. It is perhaps the idea that we have to learn about our experience, that we have to learn to taste—or learn by means of tasting—that bemuses people and leads to scepticism. There is a kind of democracy of tasting: everyone can experience wine by tasting it; you just put the wine to your lips and drink. But thereafter the course of experience of the novice and the expert differs. For the latter, the experience is far from undifferentiated. It has to be segmented, selectively attended to, weighed, and categorised by comparisons with other experiences and memories. (The less experienced among us will do some of this but to a lesser extent.) A wine can, of course, speak to us straight away, and may even lead us quickly to something that we then focus on. But focus is what matters and the more definition a wine has the easier this will be.

The discriminations good tasters make on the basis of perceptually attended experiences require considerably more cognitive effort and concentration than is required by an immediate sensory response. 'Taste invites reflection,' as Voltaire put it.⁹ And there is an important insight here because wine tasting is not exhausted by first perceptual reactions and also because the nature of the invitation crucially depends on those initial perceptions. Many people will, alas, have had little to invite them to further reflection, drinking wines of no particular distinction that offer limited pleasure. As the great Bordeaux oenologist Emile Peynaud put it:

...there are still millions of hectolitres of neutral, shapeless, and impersonal wines about which the taster can say nothing once he has spat them out. The birth of a taster's vocabulary dates from the advent of quality wine. (E. Peynaud, 1987 p.215)

GOOD FEATURES OF SUBJECTIVITY: IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE
AND THE EPIPHANY

So far, I have been arguing that tastes are not fully revealed by our immediate sensory responses. Nevertheless—and here I wish to emphasise the importance of the immediate experience we have in tasting—there has to be a way to know whether a wine deserves our attention and will reward our efforts to understand it. And this invitation to pay greater attention must come in the initial tasting experience. We instantly recognise when something is worthy of reflection, when it is great. So we should not think of the immediate experience as just the novice's domain in contrast with the reflective judgements of experts. Some wines immediately grab our attention, and reveal their stature straight away, as they do in those unique, memorable occasions in which we first become aware of the incredible poise and beauty of great wine. One suspects that those who show no interest in carefully attending to what they are drinking have not yet had the heart-stopping moment when they first taste a great wine: they have not yet had their epiphany.

As every wine lover knows, there was a time when they were unaware of the power, depth and beauty some wines possess. That came in an epiphany. Most wine lovers will remember it: the first time they encountered a rare and astonishing wine. Until that moment they had simply drunk wine, noticing some to be more pleasing than others. Why do we even start drinking wine? It doesn't attract us immediately; we have to acquire the taste. The reason we start isn't hard to seek. As Jamie Goode once put it: it's alcohol and it gets you drunk; what greater lure is there for teenagers than that?

There were the embarrassing pretensions of youth; the moments of *soi-disant* sophistication when one turned one's back on beer and said, 'No, I'll have the Hironnelle, thanks.' But one swallow does not a summer make and progress towards something finer was gradual. It happened at inauspicious restaurants on first dates, when one was nervously keen to impress the other party with one's *savoir-faire*, desperately trying to remember one's parent's wine choices in front of an intimidating head waiter.

There are student years when one drinks indifferent wines, mainly for the company and the conversation. And then comes the epiphany. We always remember it: an unusual moment; the temperature of the

room was just right; one was somehow more receptive, open to the unexpected; a moment when everything in the rush of experience is briefly stilled. (Am I imagining things when I say that good wine makes a different, gentle gurgling, surging sound when poured from the bottle?) You taste and at that moment you know the difference between this experience of drinking and all those that you have had before. The senses are dazzled. You are stunned by the intoxicating power of the experience; the pleasure is exhilarating and hypnotic. The velvet feel of the wine in your mouth, the lingering flavours and aromas when you swallow. It is an intensely hedonistic moment, and encounter with a fine and elegant thing. There is a desire to be still and to focus on what is happening. There is the swoon of something great entering your system. The body has no struggle in accepting this harmonious liquid—it feels good for us, like a blood transfusion with several vital elements in it. You delight in your experience, and in that of those with whom you share the bottle. The moment is fleeting, ephemeral and transitory, and yet utterly memorable. And you know, at that moment, that you want more opportunities like this, not to drink this very wine again, because this is an unrepeatable experience. (As the French say, there are not great wines, just great bottles.) You want opportunities to drink other wines as great as this and to share them with others, You will search for such wines and for such moments again and again because now you know great wines exist and that you that you are capable of recognising and responding to them. At that moment you learn something about wine and something about you. You are astonished that wine can reach such heights, can provide such a complex and yet harmonious experience. And in understanding that wine can do this, you want to know more.

There is something so intense about these experiences. The quickening of the senses tell you something special is happening. The wine demands your attention: it gives you an experience so memorable that you take in and retain much of the detail around you: who you were with, the room you were in, particular aspects of your surroundings. A definite sense of place and time, and what you felt at that time all help to create powerful taste memories. But the creation of the memory began with a taste experience so pleasurable and uplifting that your attention was grabbed: you were forced to attend to what the wine revealed to you. It is an experience that cannot be repeated and will not be forgotten.

The momentary nature of these experiences is important. Epiphanies are all about moments that change us for good and for life. We realise that the tastes of wines have dimensions and depth, and can fix themselves in the memory with such incredible precision and power that days or weeks later a taste image or memory will return unbidden. Wines with this power, wines of such purity, precision, and finesse can only be wines of *terroir*: wines of place, tradition and culture. The depth of flavour that age lends them is not only in this bottle, or that vintage—each one expressive of its season—but in the vines, the soil and the wisdom of those who have learnt how to express what nature gives them, differently each year.¹⁰ When we understand this we will have understood what fine or great wines are. Though we remain surprised that out of soil and sun, vines and human endeavour come wines of such outstanding beauty, balance, definition and complexity. Even when one knows more about how wines are made it is still a staggering proposition to accept that such inauspicious elements could be cultivated into such soaring examples of richness and grandeur.¹¹

The description of the epiphany amounts to a possible autobiography, yours or mine, and shows why the enjoyment and love of wine is not restricted to the precious few. It is through personal experience that each of us comes to learn of the greatness of wine. And it is due to the greatness of a wine that we have the quality of sensory experience just described. An ordinary wine cannot do this for us. Only a carefully handmade wine of such purity, harmony and depth can lead to these epiphanies.

What is philosophically significant is the way these momentary but lasting experiences can be immediate, transitory, highly personal and yet revelatory of something beyond us: something of whose staggering power and elegance we are made suddenly and lastingly aware.

For the experienced wine taster too, it is the immediate encounter with a wine that tells him or her whether it is worth the attention. But how do these initial experiences mark out some wines for special attention? It appears to be the immediately recognisable quality of the wine that impresses itself so forcefully upon the mind. Our judgement that something can afford us pleasure and fascination is due to a prior perception of its quality. Quality somehow impresses itself immediately on the mind, and only after comes attention to the specific features and

character that make this a wine of such quality. It may be surprising that I say that among the first things we are aware of is the quality of a wine. Assessments of quality may seem to call for considered judgement. And yet the recognition of quality does appear to precede a detailed understanding of what is going on in the wine. The immediate recognition of quality also explains why an epiphany is possible for someone who lacks analytic tasting skills. The significance of these moments is due to a perception of quality that transforms our ideas about wine from that time on. In tasting an exceptional wine we are aware of something both very fine and very complex; of the purity and harmony of its many elements, or their being all there at once and in perfect unity. We are often made most aware of this by the way the different elements of a complex wine are resolved in the finish. The richness at first, then the slight austerity: the elegant final note. The sweet fruit is balanced by good acidity; the structure is there but does not disrupt the delicacy of the fruit. The alcohol does not show too strongly. Combined effects of aroma and flavour reveal a thing of real beauty. Properties of such wines, their definition, purity, finesse, unity and balance—clearly signs of quality—are given to us almost immediately and strikingly in our first overall taste impressions; though are only recognisable as being the elements by experienced tasters. The most important of these properties are unity and balance:

Quality is always related to a certain harmony of tastes, where no one taste dominates another. (E. Peynaud, 1987, p.192)

Further tasting impressions, such as a wine's roundness its weight, its length or persistence of flavours may be assessed by attending to sensory experiences in us. We note these after the initial reaction to how great or otherwise the wine is. In this way, wine tasting is a continuous evolution from initial perception, reworked and developed into a final opinion that confirms, or modifies our initial impression. Initial impressions can be misleading, of course: some wines can be false and seductive, falling apart, or disappointing under further scrutiny. The initial impression is just an impression. Final assessment requires judgement.

Claims about tastes being subjective often fail to separate these different stages of tasting. We can all easily say in the initial swallow

whether we like something or not. Pleasure is something anyone should be able to recognise straight away. But saying what it is about the wine that is so pleasurable, what is good about it, and what makes it preferable to another is less easy. This requires practice and concentration: weighing things in the mind as one holds a little wine in the mouth. Nevertheless, the immediate impressions of an exceptional wine already signal the difference. The bouquet is more beguiling, the feel in the mouth more luxurious. All of this prepares us for the greatness of the wine.

Does the expert's knowledge also make a difference *in tasting*? Surely it does. Knowledge comes into play as soon as we reflect on what we are experiencing. One realises something about the wine that was not obvious at first. Thus knowledge doesn't simply add to the overall experience of tasting, it changes the intensity of one's tasting impressions. It can lead to better focus, through which we revise our initial impressions. The expert knows that the immediately apparent bitterness of a Viognier is part of the essential apricot kernel taste of the wine; so is its viscosity. Coming to understand this grape and its typical expression, may lead one to appreciate a style of wine that would have at first been off-putting were one expecting something similar to say a Chardonnay. Through knowledge of what is aimed at we can acquire a taste for what we did not at first appreciate.¹² In this way knowledge changes the way a wine tastes to us, affecting our experience and enjoyment of the wine.¹³ Not only should we reject the idea that everything there is to the taste of a wine is available to just anyone, we should reject the idea that we are always ready to taste anything. Knowing what we are tasting, and knowing what to look for in tasting it, may have a great impact on the quality and pleasure of the experience. Initial impressions are seldom neutral. Accuracy in tasting is often set by prior knowledge and expectations, though knowledge does not guarantee the extraordinary recognition skills some have in blind tasting. This is an exceptional ability and partly depends on large amounts of prior experience of, and memory for, wines not tasted blind.

WINE TASTING: DESCRIBING, COMMUNICATING OR SHARING THE EXPERIENCES?

We have rejected the line of reasoning that says all there is to the taste of a wine is given by our immediate, undifferentiated responses, and that

all wines have to reveal will be equally accessible to just anyone at any time. But there is a further consideration in favour of subjectivity that exerts a considerable pull; namely, that in tasting there is some pure and irreducible residue of subjective experience that cannot be put into words or shared with anyone else. Notice that this kind of subjectivity is entirely compatible with our experience revealing real properties in the wine, so we have come a long way from stronger claim that tastes are the subjective experiences of tasters. On this more liberal notion of subjectivity there is the qualitative feel of an experience: what it is like to taste the last mouthful of 1986 Château Margaux while looking down at the Île St. Louis. Can anyone else really know what that experience was like? Can every aspect of those sensations be put into words and conveyed to others? Perhaps this is the stubbornly subjective part of wine tasting that cannot be dismissed.

Several things are run together here that need to be kept apart. There is whether we can *describe* the taste of wines, whether there is some way to *communicate* what it is like to drink them, and whether others are able to *share* the pleasure we take in drinking them. These are three separate issues. If I could describe the taste of Château Margaux to you, you may still not know what it was like to drink it. Conversely, if you share the bottle with me, you may enjoy the same heady experience without either of us being able to describe the taste of the wine. Nevertheless, we want to speak about the exceptional bottles we drink, want to note the tastes we find in them, hone our powers of discrimination.¹⁴ However, we lack a precise vocabulary to describe tastes and smells. It is a common feeling that our experience of these outstrips our language and we struggle to find any way to describe them. I may want to tell you about the subtle range of flavours in a 2001 Clos de Tart but capturing its tastes in words may defeat me. I could speak of the firm structure cloaked in fruit, the purity of expression, the slight *pruneaux* taste, the rustic, earthy notes, the supple roundness in the mouth, the touch of *régliée* in the finish. It all helps but none of it uniquely pinpoints *this* wine's taste. A factor in this difficulty is the subtle combination of flavours in good wines. Well-made wines with age take on a complexity of flavours that blend and harmonise. The components having been somewhat distinct, finally knit together and are less clearly separable than before. We lack names for these complex yet beautifully harmonious tastes. Similarly, we

may search in vain for the words to convey the particular aromas we attend to before drinking. Here I disagree with Peynaud when he says:

...it is easy to describe what one senses provided one has made sufficient effort to notice it. (Peynaud, 1987 p.215)

We constantly face this problem: how to label the elements we can distinguish in tasting? We can attend to them and even recognise them, but we do not name them. This is also the case for pain sensations. We are not used to describing taste sensations.

How then do we indulge our shared love of wine? And how do wine critics succeed in writing about wines? There are ways to overcome the limits of literal description. We often use similes, as when we say the wine tastes of stone fruits, or honey, or smells of asparagus, or rose petals. We are saying the wines smell and taste *like* these things, not that these are elements of the wine. Riesling has the smell of kerosene and limes but it does not contain them. A well-aged Bordeaux will smell of antique furniture polish, but there is none in the wine. We need to make a distinction here between the *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* properties of tastes and smells.¹⁵ Consider smells. When we say a flower *smells fragrant* we can say it is fragrant. Though when we say a wine smells *of* leather we are not saying it *is* leather. Kerosene and limes are extrinsic properties of the Riesling's bouquet. Similarly, if a wine tastes acidic, or sweet or tannic, these are *intrinsic* tastes of the wine, while its tasting *of* liquorice, or *of* raspberries, or *of* vanilla are simply *extrinsic* properties: things the wine tastes like. That intrinsic taste properties are real properties of a wine is not compromised in the least by the fact that they may only be detected by creatures like us with our sensory apparatus. All this means is that it is through the subjective experience of tasting that we gain personal access to what is objectively there in the wine.

By distinguishing the tastes in a wine and our experience of them, we see that sometimes we talk about one, and sometimes about the other. Wine writers work this way, mentioning either properties in the wine or their characteristic effects on the experiences of tasters. They may speak about a wine's having firm tannins, or prefer to talk about the mouth-puckering feel. Through such experiences tasters can correctly identify what they drink as a tannic wine. Their subjective experiences

are a good guide to the objective properties of the wines. The properties they detect, in the case of tannins, are not just the wine's polyphenols. Tannin is a texture but it also has a taste. Wine writers speak of savoury tannins, of the difference between fruit and wood tannins, of bitter and astringent tannins, or of aromatic tannins. By talking about the quality of the tannins we are speaking about the tastes of the wine we perceive in tasting.

The case of tannin is straightforward. It has a distinctive experiential profile. But the rarer tastes will be harder to identify through our experience of them, and the experiences may be less easily sifted and discriminated by the novice. The best we can do to convey a wine's flavour is to try to highlight the nuances of our experience. The trouble is that they are notoriously difficult to put into words. Yet this is what most of us have to go on in attending to the tastes of the wine we are drinking. How, then, can we convey to someone else what it is like to drink this particular wine? Sometimes the answer is metaphor. As poets and novelists know, metaphor serves very well to allude to these elusive features of our subjectivity, the changing moments in consciousness. Metaphors are their stock in trade for conveying different aspects of moments in the inner lives to others.¹⁶ So too gifted wine writers often resort to metaphors to allude to features of their tasting experience. How successful they are depends on how apt the metaphor is. Good wine metaphors set off chains of associations that give us clues about our own likely experiences. We know what to expect when a wine is described as 'monumental'. We are being told something about the wine and how it will strike us. Jancis Robinson provides an excellent example in her tasting notes for a 1945 Château Pétrus: 'Like velvet. But with a pattern on it.' In these few words she conveys something majestic about the wine *and* something about the experience of drinking it. In similar vein, Andrew Jefford, talking about a rich and ripe Moulin à Vent, writes that the fruit 'comes helicoptering into the mouth.' Very different wines, but both ones we want to taste on the basis of their metaphors. More expectations are set by these surprising words than by the frequent talk of 'Asian spices and pain grillé notes'—much beloved of Robert Parker in describing Bordeaux. Metaphors are exceptionally good at capturing aspects of subjective experience, but as acts of creativity they demand exceptional skill and ingenuity. Some will be better at this than others.

To resort to conveying something of our experiences need not preclude us from giving information about the wine. To convey something accurately about our experience in tasting a wine *is* to convey something about the wine. Its objective properties are known to us though the distinctive experiences the tastes of the wine give rise to in us. The same is true of colours. The colour of objects is known to us through our experience of those objects in normal lighting conditions. We take an object to be *red* when it *looks red* under normal conditions. We do not take everything that *looks red* to *be red*: the lighting conditions may be abnormal. So it is only under certain conditions that our experiences serve as guides to the colour of things. It is reasonable to suppose that normally colour-sighted others have similar experiences when looking at things in good light. If I know you are looking at a red door I know the kind of subjective experience you will be having

In similar fashion, the tastes of a wine are identified by the sensory experiences they produce in tasters in good conditions. And if I know the taste of a particular wine—by the experiences it gives rise to in me—I may know the experiences you are likely to have when tasting it too. This thought makes sense of the care we take in choosing wines for others, and why we look forward to tasting the wines they selected for us. There is something important here not to be missed. When I taste a wine of extraordinary beauty I want to share this experience with someone else. I may have a specific person in mind. Through the experiences we have each had when tasting together I may know that you will appreciate the exquisite poise and elegance of this wine. By reference to the bottles we have drunk together, the qualities we have noticed and commented upon, we come to know of each others' subjective responses. The common pleasure we take in these wines connects us to one another at a basic level. Our perceptions, pleasures and preferences coincide. And as these things form part of who we are, part of our inner world, we learn that we are to this extent alike. By responding similarly to the fineness and beauty of this 1994 Méo-Camuzet Vosne Romanée, we understand something very elemental about one another. We understand something about the wine and about each other. We feel recognised at the level at which we take pleasure in things, and we know others have that pleasure too.

This deeply social aspect of wine helps to explain why the experience of tasting a great wine involves intense feelings, why it connects us to the

people, places and things at a moment. The desire to share part ourselves with another, to share the intensity of delight at a moment, is an important part of our social natures, and great wine, affords us this opportunity.¹⁷ The wines we drink in company unite us through a common experience, which at time can be very close. And in this way we retain a fleeting moment of intense experience as a fixed point in our lives and our memories of others.

However satisfying such moments are, it is also disappointing to recognise people with whom we cannot share such experiences. Why are they not stirred by this remarkable wine? Are they just unmoved, or is it that they do not taste what we do? To concede as much may seem to put pressure on the view of tastes as real and objective properties. Though it may simply mean that we have to recognise that there are different populations of tasters, and that they will not all have the same range of tastes available to them.

Where there is similarity of response among a population of tasters does this indicate that they are getting something objectively right about a wine or does it simply indicate agreement in opinion? If people fail to have such experiences, is it right to say any they missing something? Perhaps there is just a restricted intersubjectivity—a mere matching, among some individuals, in their subjective reaction to wines. But such a view offers no explanation of why they have such similar responses. Why does their experience have the form it does if not in response to the features and qualities of the wines they are tasting? Their experience can only have the degree of complexity or interest the wines afford them. And how could we draw one another's attention to aspects of a wine's taste, and value the accuracy and precision of such comments unless we are doing more than just commenting on our own experiences? Unless it is simply a matter of suggestion—which would have limited success—there must be something in the wines these individuals are tasting which gives rise to these common responses. Why not say it is the tastes in the wines that give rise to the variety of experience we enjoy as tasters?

OBJECTIVITY AND REALISM ABOUT TASTES

The length of a wine, the persistence of flavours in the mouth, the aromas one detects by retro-nasal breathing. Sensations of this sort are often reliable guides to features of the wines we taste and to what others

are likely to encounter in them. There are seldom disputes over whether a wine is 'short' or 'long'. From tasting impressions we assemble a view of the qualities and characteristics of the wine we taste. These judgements concern real features of the wine even though they are based on our experiences as tasters. To say this is to defend a form of realism about tastes.

Tastes are properties a wine has that give rise to certain experiences in us; and they cannot be reduced to, or equated with, those experiences. If tastes were no more than subjective experiences it would be literally false to say that a wine was long, or rich or sumptuous. These would be mere projections of our responses onto the wine, and it would be as mistaken to say these things *about the wine* as it for children to think that being disgusting is a quality of *broccoli* just because it tastes disgusting to them. A subjectivism which regarded attributions of tastes to wines as projections from our experiences would have to deny that some of our taste impressions could be more accurate than others, since it sees all claims we make about tastes being features of the wine itself as mistaken. But we saw above that we do distinguish between sensory experiences that are good guides to the taste of a wine and those that are not. There are optimal conditions for tasting that have to obtain for our experience to relate us to the real taste of a wine. The optimal conditions are both internal and external to us: the temperature and odours in the room, the condition of the bottle, the shape of the glass, the time of day, what one has just eaten or drunk, one's level of attention and one's mood are all important in creating conditions in which to appreciate what is there to be discovered in a wine.¹⁸ Realism about tastes makes room for such a distinction between how things strike us and how they really are—between the appearance and reality of tastes. Subjectivity does not. We accept that not all experiences of tasting are on a par, or are equally valid: one's tastes sensations at each moment are not the sole arbiter of how something tastes. Tastes are not exhausted by our sensory experiences: to taste a wine after eating watercress is not to experience what the wine tastes like.¹⁹ If other people fail to respond enthusiastically to tasting a very fine Château Palmer a likely explanation is that they are not in the right tasting conditions to appreciate the wine properly. Similarly, if our reaction to a wine surprises them, they may ask us to entertain the idea that we are not in the right condition for tasting correctly.

The gap that realism opens up between tastes and our experience of them gives tastes some life of their own. They are not constituted or exhausted by the tasting experiences of individuals, and may exist independently of them. This is surely what we want to say. A trophy wine may be traded at higher and higher prices until it disappears into the cellar of a speculator, never to be tasted by anyone. But we still think of it as having a taste and we wonder what it is like. Of course, we could think of its taste in terms of the experiences that would be available to someone *were* they to taste it. But what would give any such taster the exquisite experiences they would have in tasting it except the tastes of the wine? But why say that it is the tastes rather than the chemical properties of the wine that would give rise to these experiences? The answer is that it is not the chemical properties themselves but how they taste that matters. Which of the many chemical properties in wine we select for attention and promote depends on which ones give rise to the desired responses in us. They may be quite diverse and there may be no way to identify them save by our experience of them in tastings. Through the knowledge and skill of the wine-maker we select and promote a heterogeneous collection of chemical properties of a wine, and we choose them because of how they taste. Tastes are real properties of wines even though they bear an essential relation to the subjective experiences of creatures like us. We cannot think about or identify them save in terms of our subjective experiences, but they exist whether we experience them or not. They are there *for us* to experience. They are not in us, they are in the wine: the pleasures they give us are not in the wine, they are in us.²⁰ Tastes are what enable wines to produce certain kinds of pleasurable experience in us.

Sometimes our sensations reveal the tastes of a wine directly, sometimes they only indicate these properties at one remove. Not every feature of a wine's taste is directly given in experience. For example, we seem to 'taste what isn't there' on occasion, as when we taste that a wine is hollow in the mid-palate, or that it lacks acidity, or structure. We look for a something in our tasting experience, and when it is missing from experience we conclude it is missing from the wine. Experienced tasters can tell that a wine is closed: that we cannot get at all the flavours it has. Similarly, we may taste that a wine is too young to drink at present, tasting how things are now, and judging how they may be later. A nice

example is given by Andrew Jefford, writing about Château Latour 2000 in 2004 (note again the use of metaphor):

At the moment, it is a kind of velvet bomb quietly ticking. Inside it, curled up like nascent ferns, lie the densely backed black fruits that characterise young Bordeaux. (*The World of Fine Wine*, Volume 1, 2004, p.58)

Tastes extend beyond our experience of them. We encounter them, or recognisably fail to do so on occasion. Through the experience of tasting we feel for their shape and dimension. They are not matched to simple sensations: they can be many-layered. They develop in time and at times may elude us. Our experience of tasting (including sensations of touch and smell) can point to qualities not presently accessible in a closed or a young wine, just as vision and hearing can point to things over the horizon or out of earshot. Tastes are what tasting under the right conditions gets at. Under these conditions, tasting discloses something objective. What should we say, then, about tasters who in equally good conditions disagree about what they taste? Should these disagreements lead us to abandon objectivity? Not necessarily.

Take the case of phenol-thio-urea. In most populations it tastes bitter to about seventy-five per cent of people and tasteless to the other twenty-five per cent. Should we say that the twenty-five per cent are mistaken? It seems right to say they missing a bitter taste that phenol-thio-urea has. But suppose that the twenty-five per cent became the dominant population and that eventually there were no more people to whom it used to taste bitter, should we say it no longer has a bitter taste? Why say that? After all, there was no change in the substance, only a change in those tasting it. Instead we should say we can no longer perceive the bitter taste phenol-thio-urea has. In other cases too, where there are different populations of tasters, perhaps some populations will be able to perceive some tastes but not others, with different degrees of overlap between the populations. A wine may have more tastes than any given taster, or population of tasters, can discern. All may exist in the wine awaiting detection by a discriminating palate. Hence the right view is to embrace pluralism about tastes and assert the co-existence of such tastes in the same wine. Take the example from *Don Quixote*, presented

by David Hume in his famous essay, *Of the Standard of Taste*.²¹ Here, two wine connoisseurs are drinking from a hogshead of wine. One says the wine tastes of leather. The other says it tastes of iron. They contest each other's descriptions while drinking more and more of the wine. When they reach the bottom of the barrel they discover a key on a leather thong. The right conclusion to draw should be that both were right and we should accept the existence of a plurality of tastes. The connoisseurs did not really disagree: there was no genuine conflict. They were mistaken to criticise one another's opinions since they were both right. Both the taste of iron and the taste of leather were in the wine.

Notice that this is not to subscribe to relativism about truth. We do not need to say that what one connoisseur says is true only relative to his subjective tasting experience. Relativism would lead us to say that each was right to deny the other's opinion: that truth was relative to a point of view, and that from the point of view of the one who tastes leather it is true relative to that point of view that the wine does not taste of iron. But pluralism denies this. It tastes of leather *and* iron. Each taster is only sensitive to one of these tastes. Pluralism and realism are the best option to explain these facts.

Realism about tastes makes room for each person's tasting judgements to provide objective assessments of a wine: good tasters are those who get matters right. In assessing a wine our judgements are not simply answerable to how things are with us, and to our natures, or our perspectives as tasters. Judgements of taste go beyond our sensory experience to how things are in the wine itself. But what about assessments of the quality of a wine? Should the properties by which we classify wines as mediocre, exceptional, delightful, outstanding, hedonistic equally be seen as properties of the wines to which our judgements are answerable? Or are they just matters of intersubjective agreements within populations of tasters? Interestingly, there is little disagreement when a wine is awful. But saying what makes a wine good or better than another can lead to deep disagreements. Can some or any of these judgements about quality be getting something objectively right?

Perhaps the properties of quality these judgements reflect are related to easily identifiable properties like being tannic or having persistence. For example, take the property of balance in a wine. Balance can be thought of as the unity and harmony of its parts, comprising fruit,

alcohol, acidity and tannins in red wines. Each of these properties can be detected by good tasters, but what about a judgement that no one dominates the other and that they are harmoniously combined? Is this just a subjective impression of the taster? Surely not; balance is something that is difficult to achieve and which wine-makers strive for, even if it is a property that it takes human tasters to pick out. Even when a wine is balanced, there may be several points at which the alcohol levels, the acidity, the fruit and the tannins could have been brought into harmony. One taster may be blind to one level because of under- or over-sensitivity to some of these elements, and yet be able to appreciate its balance had the wine had slightly more alcohol, or acidity or wood. This is not to say that *any* combination will produce balance: balance is difficult to achieve and there are still objective facts about when it does and does not occur. But there may be more points at which a wine will be balanced, and some tasters recognise one of these points and other tasters recognise another.

What of properties like *finesse*: the subtle way a wine produces its elegant effects on us? It too can be treated as an objective property in the wine, albeit one identified solely by the quality of experiences it gives rise to in us. In philosophical parlance, such properties are secondary qualities: the sort of qualities only detectable through characteristic experiences in creatures like us. At this point, some of my fellow philosophers will insist that such properties amount to mere dispositions of the wine—at certain times and under particular conditions—to produce a certain pleasurable taste experience in normal perceivers. By 'normal' they do not mean 'those who get matters right,' they mean what is statistically normal among a population of tasters who are not hypo- or hyper-sensitive to one or more of the basic taste elements or alcohol. What is statistically normal in a given population is often cultural. Cultures raised on a spicy cuisine, or diets that include or exclude dairy products, or which are constantly exposed to Coca-Cola and sweet foods, may have different thresholds of sensitivity to different basic taste elements of sweetness, sourness, bitterness, etc, or their combination, even though the basis for the sensitivity thresholds will themselves be physiological. Perhaps within these cultures there will be statistically normal perceivers and it is by reference to them that we can establish whether someone is a reasonably reliable taster. From what a person purports to find in a wine under good conditions, we can tell whether

he/she is a good judge of the wine's properties in that population. We may even find out, to our cost, that we are slightly out of the normal range of the surrounding population, just as many men find out that their colour judgements are not discriminating enough for clothes shopping. However, if you always claim to find wines acidic, or sweet, then I know you may not be in the statistically normal range. (As Peynaud showed, different sensitivity thresholds to these features can be measured.)

Do we have to say that a wine's balance, *finesse*, purity, along with more descriptive characteristics like roundedness, weight, or structure consist in its having dispositions to produce different experiences in diverse populations of tasters? Why say this, rather than saying that these properties are in the wines? It is not just that we have particular responses to the wine: we respond in precisely the way we do because our experiences are responsive to characteristics of balance, *finesse* and roundness and so on in the wine. We are appropriately sensitive to these features in a good wine. It is true that our concepts of qualities such as body or suppleness or balance are, as philosophers say, response-dependent: we cannot conceive of such qualities save in terms of the kind of responses they give rise to in us. But the properties our concepts apply to are there in the wine: it is these characteristics we recognise or fail to recognise on occasions. *Finesse*, balance, purity and definition are the sorts of properties that call for the responses of pleasure and recognition we have.

If the tastes of a wine only consist in dispositions to produce effects in us, which ones should count? A wine tastes less agreeable when combined with certain foods, or tasted at the wrong temperature. Are we to countenance all these dispositions to taste different ways to different people under a variety of circumstances—as tastes the wine has? All the variations would have to be included if we thought of tastes as interactions between us and the wine.²² Why stop at one set of conditions as the crucial ones concerning our interaction with the wine? Why not include them all? To do so would lead to a proliferations of tastes and offer no definitive criteria for talking about *the* tastes of a wine. And yet we are more inclined to think of getting the best out of the wine by creating the optimal conditions to experience the flavours and aromas it has. We think of a fine wine as having integrity, precision and purity. In

taste it is not the kaleidoscope of interaction effects we are after. With a wine of *terroir* we will consider it to have a very definite profile of flavours and aromas that characterise it uniquely. And by thinking about the taste (or tastes) of the wine as the tastes it has, we can then see the various experiences we can have under different, non-optimal, conditions as the way that taste is masked or distorted by interfering factors. On this picture there is the taste the wine has and the way it tastes when presented to us. We can often sense (by tasting or by smell) what has to be changed (temperature, for example) to get closer to the real taste of the wine—to access its full expression of flavours.²³

WINE CRITICS AND DIVERGENCE IN OPINIONS

Finally, if tastes are real, objective properties of wines, then what is the role of the wine critic? Are they always the best judges of the character and quality of wines, and should we subscribe to their opinions? Resistance to this idea comes from many quarters: from doubts about critics' abilities given their differences of opinion; from refusal to have one's own opinions about taste overruled; and not least from wine critics themselves who tend to stress the subjectivity of taste. The last two points are connected. Critics do not claim that tastes amount to no more than their subjective experiences of wine: if they did their writings would simply be narrations of their experiences, and amount to nothing more than autobiography. Such a view would make a nonsense of their recommending wines. It is because their experiences of drinking wine—undoubtedly subjective experiences—tell them about something about the character and qualities of the wine, that we can benefit by what they write. Critics, too, take their experiences to reveal something about the wines they taste and to have implications for the experiences others could have. They use their tasting experiences as guides to how we may enhance our drinking pleasures. However, wine critics will insist that their recommendations and opinions cannot overrule the personal preferences of individuals; a view shared by the public. But does this view not challenge the objectivity of taste judgement? Can a critic really tell us a wine we do not like is exceptional, or that a wine we do like is of poor quality or little interest? The answer is yes, for there is a difference between the quality of a wine and people's personal preferences. A wine may not be very interesting or very well made but some people may

prefer drinking it to drinking something more complex and interesting. Titian is a better painter than Jack Vettriano but that does not prevent some people from preferring the latter to the former. Bach is better than Barry Manilow but some people will prefer to listen the lesser musician.²⁴ These personal preferences cannot be criticised, people have the right to choose what they wish: it is up to them. But it is not up to them, or a mere matter of personal inclination, to determine who is the better painter or musician, or which is the better wine. There are standards by which we can judge a wine, or musical score, or painting to be better than another, and these reflect discernible properties of those objects, properties that it may take practice and experience to recognise and which we need experts to direct our attention to. Once our perceptions and discriminations are sufficiently refined we can appreciate the reasons for evaluating wine as we do.

The issue of preference, or *personal taste*, as I will call it, is very important in wine. I may have no personal liking for Chenin Blanc and however enthusiastically you may describe the qualities of the very best Savennière, I will remain unmoved. Critics are right to praise the virtues of a Coulée de Serrant, to prize and value it highly as a fine and exceptional wine, but as a matter of personal taste I will always prefer a premier cru Chablis from Dauvissat or Raveneau. Wine critics understand that they cannot overrule an individual's personal tastes and it is in this limited sense that they take taste to be subjective. They still make recommendations and they are predicting a certain experience for those that take their advice. They also know that the wines they select and admire are not to everyone's taste. The moral is that we must find the right critic to advise us, the one whose personal tastes or preferences more nearly align with ours. In this way, we can use critics like fine scientific instruments to test and select those tastes that will give us exceptional pleasure. A good critic or taster will be able to identify and recommend the best wines of a given kind or style even when he or she does not favour that style of wine. Having the ability to assess and describe wines is one thing; having certain personal tastes is another. That we, and the wine critics, have personal tastes does not imply that all taste is subjective.

A popular reason for doubting critics' competence in assessing wine is their lack of success, on occasion, in identifying a wine by blind

tasting. Is it guesswork or precise judgement that enables them to get it right on occasion? Without the ability to identify the wines they are drinking why should we trust that they know what they are talking about? Should we take them to be reliable tasters at all?

There is a widespread mistake in popular thinking here. Why should we suppose that appreciating a beautiful painting depends on first being able to identify it either as Piero della Francesca or a Fra Angelico? Why suppose that a music critic can only respond critically to a piece of music when they can identify the composer?²⁵ A highly developed musical appreciation does not await precise identification of a particular piece of music. Why should it be different with wine? Wine-makers have been noted, on occasions, not to recognise one of their own wines when it is presented blind at a dinner party. Why should this matter? Perhaps this makes them able to assess the qualities of the wine fairly and objectively.

However, if wine critics really are good judges of taste why are there differences of opinions among them? Novice tasters may doubt their own powers of discrimination but they will wonder why, if there are objectively correct judgements to be made, wine critics disagree about the qualities of certain wines. After all, they are trained to recognise flavours and aromas, and have tasted widely. If they can reach different opinions about a wine's character and quality is there such a thing as getting matters of taste right? Or are judgements of taste just matters of opinion rather than matters of fact? This line of thought puts in doubt the claim that there is something in the wine to which critics' judgements are answerable. For if the judgements of experts is unimprovable, how can they be responding to the taste of the wine and yet coming to different conclusions? Surely, these judgements are answerable to something in them, not just something in the wine. And this would make their opinions to a large extent subjective, where one opinion is as good as any other.

However, when we say that critics vary in their opinions about a particular wine we need to be cautious. It may be the case that critics *diverge* from one another in their assessment of a particular wine. But divergence is not always *disagreement* or *conflict*. There are cases where we might want to say that each critic is detecting and reporting a different taste the wine has and that it has both of these tastes.

We also need to know whether the difference in opinion between critics is about the merits of the wine, how appealing it is, its comparative standing with respect to other wines, or about the actual flavours or features it has. Differences in opinion with respect to preference or overall assessments of quality may leave untouched an underlying agreement about the properties and characteristics of the wine so assessed. Personal tastes may make the difference and yet there may be considerable overlap and agreement between tasters about what they are tasting, i.e. about what a wine tastes like.²⁶ Being objective in one's judgements, getting something right, may be a matter of stating with considerable accuracy what a wine is like, what it tastes like. Beyond that there may be differences in opinion about what is most appealing about a wine, what gives more pleasure. These disputes over and above a certain standard of quality are perhaps due to personal preferences, and then again, preferences may be due to particular sensitivities of particular populations of tasters to certain aspects of a wine: to its alcohol, or acidity, its tannins or the use of oak. It should be possible to separate out these differences and thus reach some objective agreement on the properties of a wine. Different critics may pick out different tastes, some may be more sensitive to one taste than to another. So why not avail ourselves of all these opinions so long as they do not conflict?

We have now arrived at a view of tasting as an objective exercise that relies on our subjective responses to the real and many tastes in a wine. Astute critics or *cavistes* may lead one to refine and develop one's perceptual experiences and responses. Some of them may be more sensitive to one range of tastes than another, and to the different points at which a wine can be brought into balance, so we have to find the best guide to the tastes in which we take particular pleasure. There is objective knowledge to be had here. But the chance to know one's own tastes, to develop one's palate and discriminate more and more finely depends on the opportunities for drinking that are presented or can be sought out, and these depend on both the advice of critics and the skill of wine-makers. The danger is where too many people rely on just one critic, and one set of tastes and preferences comes to dominate the wine market because of commercial pressures and financial speculation. The emergence of a super-critics who favour big, ripe fruit, high alcohol wines with high extraction and the use of new oak—a simplified and

easily replicated world-style of wine-making—may lead to a simplification in tastes or in measures of quality. The market may welcome these simplifications, where giving scores replaces the careful descriptions and the slow acquisition of knowledge. For those who trade but know little about wine this may be vitally important, but it is also potentially distorting, and there is a great risk that something will be lost, not just in judgement but also in opportunities to taste. Wines will be made to give quick and easy pleasure, and to collect the ratings that traders and their clients will understand. Over-reliance on a single critic's preferences, by buyers or traders, or consumers may lead to the erosion of discrimination and difference, the loss of a sense of a place and of culture: the *terroir* that sums up the history and geography of a people who have laboured in particular vineyards to express wines of individual character, given personality by nature. Such wines, like people, behave differently at different ages, and to get to know them in all their variety and diversity makes us richer for it. When critics, willingly or not, come to dominate the style of wine that is preferred by the markets, and hence produced by more and more wine-makers, they are dominating our tastes and as a result limiting our experience and opportunities. When this occurs, we will have fewer evocative memories of the sort that Proust knew could at times bring back a whole world: a walk up to the hill of Corton, a late evening tour through the villages of the Côte de Nuits. Fewer and fewer of us will delight in discovering the multiple layers of taste simultaneously present in a bottle of 1996 Méo-Camuzet Vosne-Romanée. These experiences can give us intense feelings, can bring us closer to others. We must seek them out and not lose sight of them. However many wines of a similar style and easy pleasure people drink, they will eventually seek out something new, something different. People and their palates are easily bored and markets are never static. People want interest and diversity, and it is to be hoped this will still be available to them. The *local* matters. Wines of *terroir* are worth fighting for. Taste as well and as widely as you can, enjoy the best experiences available to you. This advice need not mean an oenological tour of the world: the vineyards of Bordeaux and Burgundy contain enough diversity and interest to last a lifetime. We should get to know them, for they are wines which at their best call for an intensity of experience and a delicacy of response, by which we refine our exercise of taste. By

understanding them better we gain the satisfaction and reward of choosing well. And through the intoxicating pleasure great wines afford us we learn to recognise what is there for all.

Bibliography

- Baxandal, Michael (1972), *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Broadbent, Michael (2003), *Wine Tasting*, 9th edition (London; Mitchell Beazley)
- Brochet, Frédéric (2001), 'Tasting: chemical object representation in the field of consciousness',
http://www.academie-amorim.com/us/laureat_2001/brochet.pdf
- Denham, A.E. (2000), *Metaphor and Moral Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Hume, David, 'Of the Standard of Taste', from the *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (1776) reprinted in David Hume: Selected Essays, (1998) edited by S. Copley and A. Edgar, (Oxford World's Classics)
- Kosmeyer, Christine (1999), *Making Sense of Taste* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)
- Locke, John (1823), *The Works of John Locke, New Edition*, Vol. X. (G. Shaw and Son)
- Lyas, Colin (1998). 'Art Criticism', in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge)
- Peynaud, Emile (1987), *The Taste of Wine*, translated by Michael Schuster (New York: J. Wiley)
- Reid, Thomas (1758), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, edited by D. Brookes (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press)
- Schaper, Eva (1983), 'The Pleasures of Taste', in *Pleasure, Preference and Value*, (1983) edited by Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Wiggins, D. (1987), 'A Sensible Subjectivism', in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell)

NOTES:

- 1 A previous version of this paper was presented at the University of London conference on 'Philosophy and Wine' Dec. 2004, and I would like to thank members of that audience for the discussion that followed. I owe a considerable debt to Michael Dwyer for his excellent editorial suggestions. I am also very grateful to Jean Hewitson for so many helpful discussions of these topics, and to Ophelia Deroy for acute critical advice and comment on previous versions of the paper.
- 2 See also Hugh Johnson telling us that he does not 'think that taste should be a great cause of argument. We each have our own taste'. Though he goes on, 'as long as we account for it and make it available for other people to enjoy, that's all we can do.' (*Decanter* interview Oct.2005). Jancis Robinson tells us, 'I know that all wine tasting is a subjective business' (*Decanter* interview March 2006). The Michelin guide to *The Wine Regions of France* states that, 'Taste is subjective, individual, and yet experts seem to understand each other, know what to look for, and recognise the same sensations their fellow experts find.' (p.58)
- 3 In his famous essay, *On The Standard of Taste*, Hume tells us that good critics, or judges of taste must show delicacy of judgement, be free from prejudice, able to draw on a wide range of experience for comparisons, pay due attention, and be unclouded by mood.
- 4 I am indebted to Louise Page for bringing this quote to my attention and suggesting the analogy with wine.
- 5 Here I am deeply indebted to David Wiggins' paper, 'A Sensible Subjectivism'. I do not know if he would approve of the uses to which I am putting the subtle and wise things he says there.
- 6 For a good account of how the hierarchy of the senses has been presented through the ages see Kosmeyer 1999.
- 7 There are of course super-tasters and those with gustatory disorders such as agueusia who lack all sense of taste. But the issue addressed here goes beyond these cases.
- 8 The French psychologist Frederic Brochet (2001) conducted experiments with experienced wine tasters asking them to describe the characteristics of a white and a red wine. The next day he gave them the white wine coloured by a tasteless red dye. The same tasters now used descriptors of the red wine to characterise the white wine. We may see this as showing that sight is also a component of 'tasting'.
- 9 Voltaire's view is discussed at greater length by Eva Schaper (1983)
- 10 No better example is there of such expression of vintages and *terroir* than the great wines of Burgundy. In different vineyards, different parcels, different growing seasons, the gifted wine-maker will adapt to what is there and help transmit these expressions of difference in wines that show power and restraint. The elegance, harmony and purity of the wines allow them to retain their personality *and* differences.
- 11 John Locke was struck by just these facts about Château Haut Brion on his agricultural tour of France:
 'It grows on a rise of ground, openmost to the west, is pure white soil, mixed with a little gravel [...] One would imagine it scarce fit to bear anything.' (John Locke 1677 from Observations on Vines, In *The Works of John Locke*, Vol. X, p.329)
- 12 Although as a maker of Scotch once explained to me: if you have to acquire the

- taste you don't really like it.
- 13 Here I am at odds with Kent Bach (see Chapter Two) who thinks that knowledge of a particular wine cannot affect your enjoyment of it.
- 14 'Great wine has that marvellous quality of immediately establishing communication between those who are drinking it. Tasting it at table should not be a solitary activity.' (Peynaud, 1987 p.214)
- 15 The distinction in this form is due to P.M.S Hacker in *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Blackwell 1987) to which I am also indebted for his discussion of secondary properties.
- 16 See A.E. Denham, *Metaphor and Moral Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).
- 17 When considering whether wine is an aesthetic object the comparison is usually made with the contemplation of music or painting. But neither of these provides the right analogy, I believe. The right comparison with tasting a great wine is more like to be the rather 1960s idea of a happening: a one off event in which everything came together and where all the details conspire to create the exalted moment of experience.
- 18 Mood is important because it connects or divides us from others and may divide us from better parts of ourselves.
- 19 In the Middle Ages monks regarded watercress as a substance with medicinal powers that purified the blood. People who drank to excess could be put on a diet of watercress for a week. Whatever the wisdom of this remedy it is true that wine and watercress do not mix.
- 20 This the view the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid held: 'I cannot say what it is in a sapid body that pleases my palate but there is a quality in the sapid body which pleases my palate and I call it a delicious taste' Chapter 1 Section I, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1758).
- 21 From Hume's *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, (1776) reprinted in *David Hume: Selected Essays*, edited by S. Copley and A. Edgar (Oxford World's Classics 1998)
- 22 Even if we claim that tastes are interactions between the wine and the taster, the issue of how subjective or objective they are remains open. If our reactions to a given wine differ then tastes will be, to that extent, subjective; whereas if, as normal tasters, we respond in similar ways, under similar conditions, tastes will be objective, or at any rate, inter-subjective. Therefore, nothing about the current issue is settled by taking the interactionist view.
- 23 For a robust defence of the dispositional view against these objections see Deroy's chapter in this volume.
- 24 This point is well made by Colin Lyas.
- 25 Of course, someone may confuse two painters or composers that are so different that it reveals a certain incompetence in judgements of similarity that undermines the credibility of that person to judge. However, even in blind tasting critics will not mistake an Alsace Riesling for a Puligny-Montrachet.
- 26 In a famously sharp-edged dispute between Robert Parker and Jancis Robinson about the merits of 2003 Château Pavie the protagonists' highly contested statements were concerned with the relative standing or overall quality of that wine. However, the clear disparity in their verdicts tended to obscure the level of agreement there was between them about the actual characteristics of the wine. The very same qualities in the wine, identified by Parker and singled out for praise as signs

of the pleasure to be afforded by drinking this wine in the future, were criticised by Robinson as symptoms of excess and a lack of respect for Bordeaux-style wine making.

