

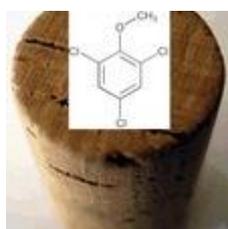
By Gregory Dal Piaz (www.snooth.com)

Bad Wine

Learning what wine flaws smell like

There are many potential flaws in bad wines, and the sad part is that, more often than not, a bad wine's flaw is so subtle that it ruins our experience without us even knowing -- well, almost. Most of the major flaws found in a bad wine are pretty distinctive, and getting to know them can help you separate the good wines from the bad wines.

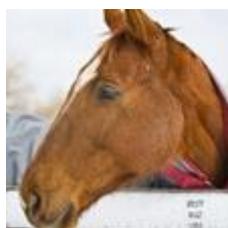
It would be great for everyone involved if we all could tell a corked wine from a truly bad wine, and knowing the difference can end up saving you money whether you are returning a bottle out on the town, or bringing it back to a retailer. Get to know what's wrong with your wine! Learn about bad wine



TCA

Corked wines, or wines affected by trichloroanisole (TCA), are the biggest problems in the world of wine. The level of TCA is what can be the issue, ranging from barely perceptible to overwhelming.

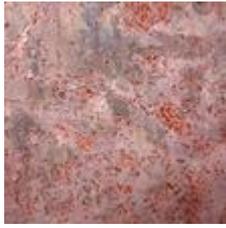
When it's really obvious, corked wines smell of moldy newspapers, damp socks, mold and mushrooms (though many old wines develop that mushroomy aroma naturally). When it's below our level of detection TCA still can crush a wine by stripping it of its fruit, leaving it out of balance and shrill



Brett

Brettanomyces is the by-product of yeast activity in a wine, though not the good yeast that converts sugar to alcohol. It is usually present in oak barrels, though it does infect entire cellars, and is mostly closely associated with the wines of the Southern Rhône and to a certain extent, Tuscany -- though it can, and does, appear in every major wine-producing region.

In low concentration Brett can add great complexity to a wine's bouquet. The typical positive descriptors tend to be a little funky, like barnyard, horse blanket, horsey, sweaty and/or cheesy. In higher concentrations, the aromas of Brett are typically created by three distinct chemical compounds, one of those -- 4-ethylphenol -- smells exactly like Band-Aids!



Oxidation

As wine ages, it oxidizes. Just like iron rusts, oxygen converts certain compounds in wine into other, generally less desirable compounds. At a slow controlled rate this creates the complexity of aged wines. When a wine is too old, or has been exposed to too much oxygen either through a faulty closure or too much time in barrel, the aromas and flavors of an oxidized wine tend to recall toasted nuts, brown spices, and other tan flavors.

Oxidized wine is often referred to as Maderized. Madeira is a famous wine that undergoes an intentionally oxidative winemaking process, giving it a unique flavor profile and the ability to age nearly forever



Reduced

My wine is reduced -- what the heck? Well, just as a wine can be faulty if it's exposed to too much oxygen during the winemaking process, a wine can be faulty if it's exposed to too little as well! Without oxygen being introduced during the winemaking process, hydrogen atoms end up bonding with sulfur to produce hydrogen sulfides, which smell like rotten eggs.

If not dealt with, these hydrogen sulfides can combine with carbon atoms in the wine, resulting in skunk and rotten cabbage aromas



Sulfur

Since we're on the subject, it's worth noting that there are sulfur dioxide aromas in wine that are a different class of fault than the hydrogen sulfides of reduction. Sulfur dioxide is easily recognizable as a sulfury (duh!) or struck-match aroma.

It's worth noting that sulfur, used as an antioxidant and preservative in wine, is very common. Some producers now make wine with no sulfur added, and while these tend to be very expressive

wines, they are also very prone to having bacteriological and re-fermentation issues in the bottle, which lead to whole slew of other faults.



Volatile acidity

This one is a bit of a doozy. First off, a little bit of VA, as volatile acidity is referred to, can really make a wine's bouquet explode with intensity and depth, so a little is usually good. VA comes in two main forms: the first version is acetic acid, and gives wine a vinegary smell.

Over time, the acetic acid interacts with the alcohol and creates ethyl acetate, which smells just like nail polish remover, mostly because it is found in most nail polish remover! Now, I wouldn't go around drinking nail polish remover -- that would be very bad -- but you don't have to worry about drinking wines that exhibit this form of VA. In fact, many of the greatest dessert wines ever made exhibit noticeable VA

Our Favorite Aromas

After all this talk about off aromas it's time we take a look at some of our favorite aromas, why they occur, and which wines we can find them in.

By [Gregory Dal Piaz](http://www.snooth.com) (www.snooth.com)

Wine Nose

Talking about Caramel, Vanilla... and Cat's Pee?

Ever wonder what the heck wine writers are talking about when they describe the nose of a wine? Like, how about that buttery thing that goes on with some of the wines you love. What is up with that?

Well, almost all of the weird descriptors for a wine's nose have some basis in fact, though I am as guilty as the next guy in using a little bit of fantasy when extolling the virtues of my current favorite bottle, like calling the aromas the nose! While rhapsodic prose might be over the top, and best saved for more intimate settings, some of these wine nose descriptors are worth learning more about!

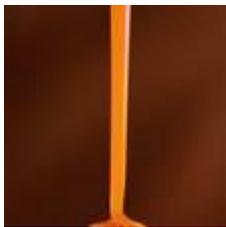


Butter

The smell and, to a certain extent, the taste of butter is present in many wines. How did it get there you ask? In two ways, I'll tell you.

The reason we smell and taste butteriness in a wine is because there are perceptible amounts of chemicals that give butter its aroma: diacetyl. In most cases, this diacetyl is a by-product of malolactic fermentation: a process whereby the sharp malic acid of grapes is converted into the creamier lactic acid of dairy products.

Another way for that butter smell to get into your wine is via barrel ageing. Most wines spend time ageing on oak barrels. This allows the wine to soften and integrate. In order to bend the wood into the barrel shape, the staves are heated over a fire. The exposure to that fire toasts the inside of the barrel, creating many complex compounds that add flavors, such as a buttery note, to some wines.



Caramel

Caramel, as you might know, is a mix of toasted sugar and butter. Well, we've already covered the butter, so you might not be surprised to learn that the burnt sugar component of caramel also comes from the toasting of wine barrels.

As the wood is toasted, it undergoes the same Maillard reaction that meats, for example, experience through pan-searing. The end result is the formation of toasty or burnt sugar notes!

Personally I prefer my caramel wrapped in Chocolate, dark chocolate at that, but I've been known to suffer through a bag of Rolos!



Vanilla

Vanilla is also a note that barrel ageing stamps on wine, and it seem folks love their vanilla! From Ice Cream to soda pop, vanilla is one of our favorite flavors, so why not in wine?

Oak is rich in many aromatic compounds and vanillin, the aroma of vanilla, is one of those compounds. When a wine spends time in a barrel, many of these compounds leech out into the wine, adding layers of aromas and flavors.

After several years, the layer of wood that interacts with the wine loses almost all of these compounds -- at which point the barrel is referred to as being a neutral barrel, and is generally traded in for a new one.



Clove

Spicy! I hear people talking about spice all the time and while there are spicy wine (ever have a cracked pepper filled Shiraz?) a lot of those sweet baking spice you find in wine come from... you got, toasty oak!

When a winemaker orders a wine barrel he can have it custom-toasted. There are significant differences between the flavors that a light toast or heavy toast barrel can impart to the wine it holds. Basically the heavier the toast, the more intensely spicy and smoky the flavors get.

Ginger and clove tend to be fairly common in wine and seem to be some of the most prominent aromas that you get from medium-plus toast barrels -- which, unsurprisingly, is probably the most common toast level.



Petrol

Say what? Yup, petrol -- sort of more kerosene than gasoline -- is a classic element of the aroma of mature Riesling. The compound responsible for this aroma has been identified as trimethyl-dihydro-naphthalene, which positively rolls off the tongue!

The precursors to this petrol smell are most likely present in almost all wines but the unique character of the Riesling means that only Riesling is capable of consistently accumulating enough of that long-worded chemical to make it count. So be forewarned, if you don't like petrol in your wine, drink your Rieslings young!



Cat's pee

OK, am I freaking you out yet? First kerosene then pee? Yes, cat pee!

I know, don't blame me, I'm not the guy who first thought of this, but you know what? It's pretty accurate! Some wine actually contains a particular sulfur compound: p-mentha-8-thiol-3-one. It's found primarily in the Sauvignon family of grapes: Cabernet and Blanc.

In Cabernet Sauvignon, it contributes to the blackcurrant aromas of the wines. With Sauvignon Blanc on the other hand, it contributes, well, mostly cat's pee.