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Winespeak – The Language of the Grape

Are you sometimes intimidated or confused while reading the wine list at the restaurant? Does the Sommelier lose you half way through his description of the wine? Wine terminology, also called '**winespeak**' really isn't all that difficult to learn, but it is an acquired language.

Before we begin, it is important to remember that even oenophiles (the name given to wine experts) had to learn the art of 'winespeak' at some point, so with this in mind, sit back, relax with a glass of your favorite wine and prepare to be entertained, and perhaps to even learn a few new 'winespeak' words to add to your vocabulary and dazzle your friends at your next dinner party.



Our first 'winespeak' lesson begins with differentiating between the commonly used grape terms, Garnacha, Grenache, Syrah and Shiraz. There is actually no difference between Garnacha and Grenache; confusing, not really, in Spain the grape is known by the name Garnacha, while everywhere else it is referred to by the name Grenache; likewise with Syrah and Shiraz, in Australia and South Africa, Syrah is known as Shiraz, which is rather like the Americans referring to the car 'hood' and the British calling it a 'bonnet.' Do you suddenly feel like Juliet reciting her famous line to Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?"

Now let us address the Spanish terms of Joven, Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva, all of which denote the level of barrel aging that the wine received. The word 'Joven' in Spanish means 'young' and these wines receive little or no barrel aging, Crianza wines are aged a minimum of two years and spend one year in the barrel, Reserva wines are aged for three years and spend one year in the barrel and Gran Reserva wines are aged for five years and spend two years in the barrel. Aging refers to the time that the wine actually remains in the wooden barrel (called a cask) that is usually made of different types of oak. The

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longer the wine sits in the barrel, the more 'oak' flavor is passed on to the wine. The wine is then bottled, where it rests for a designated period of time allowing the wine to begin its maturing process before it is sold.

Beginning to feel more knowledgeable about wine already, aren't you? Let us move on to French 'winespeak' with the word 'terroir', (now doesn't that word just roll off your tongue), that refers to the type of soil where the grapes are grown. Soil and environment does matter when it comes to grapes, as the type of soil really does impart its own unique flavor into the grapes. For example: Garnacha grapes grown in Spain, will taste slightly different than Grenache grapes grown in other regions, taking into account the climate, the acidity of the soil, the level of rainfall, etc.

Are you confused about the difference between the terms Champagne, Sparkling Wine, Cava, and Prosecco? According to strict laws of France, Champagne can only be produced in the Champagne region of France; produced elsewhere it must be referred to as 'sparkling wine' or 'methode champenoise', (champagne method); Cava is a sparkling wine that is produced in Spain with the majority of Cavas made in the Penedes DO (Penedes region of Spain), and Prosecco is a sparkling wine that it is produced in the Veneto region of Italy.

Champagne or sparkling wine is designated by the terms: Extra-brut, Brut, Extra Sec, Sec, Demi-Sec and Doux, which refer to the level of dryness of the wine (amount of sugar content in the wine), ranging from very dry (Extra-brut) to very sweet (Doux). The drier the champagne or sparkling wine, the less sugar content it has, with Extra-brut having the least amount of sugar, and Doux having the most amount of sugar.

What is the difference between the terms AOC, DO, DOCa, DOC and DOCG? This is where we become multi-lingual with our 'winespeak'; the term AOC is a French word that stands for Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, (appellation of origin controlled), which designates not only the geographic region where the wine was produced, but also controls the types of grapes used to produce each type of wine. The terms DO and DOCa are Spanish terms, which stand for Denominación de Origen (denomination of origin) and Denominación de Origen Calificada (qualified denomination of origin); the terms DOC and DOCG are Italian terms, which stand for Denominazione di Origine Controllata (denomination of origin) and the even stricter Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (denomination of origin guaranteed). The most important thing to remember is that whatever the term, they each denote that the wine conforms to each country's set wine standards.

Continuing with our 'winespeak' lesson, we come to learning the important terms that one usually hears so freely bantered about when describing wine. The term 'nose' or 'bouquet' refer to the aromas that you experience when 'sniffing' the wine, often people will refer to the floral or fruity nose or bouquet of the wine; the term 'en bouche' is French and literally means 'in the mouth', and refers to your palate (tongue), and is used to describe how a wine tastes and feels on your palate. The term 'long-finish' refers to the lingering aftertaste of the wine; a long-finish denotes a wine of quality, that when sipped, you will feel a low 'burn' in the back of your throat, the lower the 'burn', the better the wine. If a wine is described as having a 'short finish', in essence it means that the wine is not very good, and one of my favorite new 'winespeak' words is the British word 'plonk', which means that the wine is awful.



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The most important thing to remember when you are beginning to learn 'winespeak' is that it is like learning any other language; you must be prepared to practice it daily. 'Winespeak' discussions will continue in future editions of the magazine, but in the meantime, pick up a few great books on wine, and do a little of your own research. Ending on that note, I raise my glass of wine to you and wish you Santé (to your health!).

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