

Finding the Viola

Aroma Training in a Glass

I've always struggled to pick out individual instruments in an orchestra. I know what a viola sounds like. But put it alongside twenty other instruments, and I'd have a hard time telling you what the violist is playing.

I think smelling wine presents the same challenge. Smell vanilla extract on its own and you probably know exactly what it is. Put a faint hint of vanilla into a red wine and it can disappear into everything else. Miss that signal and you might miss a clue that could lead you toward Rioja, where the tradition of ageing in American oak can contribute that familiar vanilla character.

Tasting wine asks us to do something we don't often practice: recognize a familiar aroma when it's part of a much more complex whole.

Over four evenings, I want us to explore this skill together. We'll start each gathering with a guided smell session, then move into a four-wine tasting from *A Cellar in Fourteen Chapters*. We'll meet six aromas in a simple wine background, then try finding them when the labels disappear, the aromas get fainter, or another smell joins them.

What I want us to practice

Recognizing cherry when someone tells you "this is cherry" is one thing. Finding it without that prompt is another. Picking it out alongside rose, or in a wine with several years of bottle age, is harder still.

To work on that, we'll use references made from familiar culinary ingredients, presented in neutral dry Pinot Grigio. Alongside them, we'll have the same wine without anything added. That gives us a starting point for comparison: what changed when we added this particular aroma?

There are five skills I want us to explore:

Detection: Can I tell that something is different?

Classification: Does it remind me of fruit, flowers, herbs, earth or something else?

Identification: Can I put a more specific name to it?

Segmentation: Can I pick out two aromas when they're mixed together?

Transfer: Can I recognize something related in an actual wine?

The household references give us something concrete to learn from. They don't mean those ingredients are literally in the wines, or that a wine's version of an aroma will smell exactly like our reference.

Inside a smell session

We'll follow the same sequence each evening. My hope is that the process becomes familiar enough that we can give more of our attention to what's in the glass.

Get to know the six aromas



We'll start with the names visible. Smell the plain wine, then a reference, then the plain wine again. What does the reference add? What does it remind you of?

We'll also put related aromas beside each other. Cherry and raspberry might seem easy to distinguish until you have to explain the difference. Rose and violet might bring up quite different associations for different people. This is our chance to get familiar with the examples before we take the labels away.

Try them again without the labels



The same six references will come back in a different order, marked with Greek letters instead of their names. Take a moment to write down what each one reminds you of. If you can only get as far as “floral” or “red fruit,” that’s useful too.

Then we'll reveal the identities and compare notes. Which aromas were immediately familiar? Which surprised us? Did knowing the name suddenly make something easier to smell?

See what happens when the signal gets quieter



The labels illustrate aroma strength; during the blind exercise, the strengths will be concealed. 1x is the reference strength we learned.

We'll bring back one reference at weaker strengths, alongside a sample with nothing added. The amount of wine stays the same; it's the concentration of the added aroma that changes.

First, can you tell which samples differ from the plain wine? Then, can you say what the difference is? You may notice something without being able to name it. That seems particularly relevant to real wine, where an aroma can be a faint suggestion rather than an obvious announcement.

Two aromas together



An example after the reveal. Each paired label describes the two aromas in a single glass.

Next, we'll try three mixtures, each containing two of the evening's references.

This is where we get closer to the viola problem. You might find the cherry immediately but have to work to notice the rose beside it. Or the two might combine into an impression that doesn't quite resemble either one on its own.

Spend a little time looking for both components before we discuss them. Then we'll compare what came through clearly, what got lost, and whether knowing the combination changes what we can smell.

Try it in the wines



After a break and a reset, we'll move into the evening's four wines.

I'd like us to start with our own observations, without looking back at the reference list. Afterward, we can ask whether any of the familiar aromas showed up and whether they felt different in this setting. Did something become easier to notice as the wine opened up? Did the wine's texture or weight change the way we described its aroma?

There's no requirement to find the smells we practiced. I don't want us talking ourselves into mushroom just because we spent the last hour smelling it. "I don't find it in this wine" is a perfectly useful conclusion.

Why some aromas come back

Across the four evenings, we'll have 24 reference appearances but only 17 distinct aromas. That repetition is deliberate.

We'll return to mushroom in Pinot, Carso and Jura. Beeswax will connect Chardonnay and Carso. Green apple will appear in both Chardonnay and Jura, where bruised apple gives us another way to explore the comparison.

I want to see whether familiarity helps when the surrounding wine changes. Can we still follow the viola when it's playing with a different orchestra?

The four evenings

Pinot Without a Passport: Alto Adige vs Burgundy

Cherry · Raspberry · Rose · Violet · Mushroom · Black Tea

We'll explore red fruit and floral perfume, then bring in earth and dried-leaf character. I'll pour the four Pinots blind so we can explore those differences before knowing which region is in each glass.

WINE FLIGHT

2021 Manincor Mason di Mason
2016 Hofstätter Barthenau Vigna Roccolo
2017 Olivier Leflaive Volnay 1er Cru Les Mitans
2015 Domaine des Monts Luisants Morey-Saint-Denis 1er Cru Les Monts Luisants

Carso: White Stone, Red Earth

Apricot · Honey · Beeswax · Rosemary · Black Tea · Mushroom

This evening takes us across white wines, a macerated blend and a red. I'm interested in whether we can follow familiar honeyed, waxy, herbal and savory impressions as the color and texture change. Honey and beeswax should also give us a useful side-by-side comparison: when we use those words, do we mean the same thing?

WINE FLIGHT

2020 Zidarich Vitovska
2020 Zidarich Malvasia
2022 Škerk Ograde
2020 Zidarich Teran

Chardonnay Without Butter: Chablis vs Oregon

Lemon · Green Apple · Apricot · Vanilla · Toasted Oak · Beeswax

Here, I want us to distinguish fruit aromas from impressions associated with oak and development. Then we'll compare what our noses suggest with the acidity, texture and weight we find when we taste. Does an aromatically rich wine necessarily feel rich on the palate?

WINE FLIGHT

2014 Daniel-Etienne Defaix Chablis 1er Cru Le Lys
2014 Defaix Chablis 1er Cru Vaillon
2017 Cameron Clos Electrique Chardonnay
2018 Cameron Abbey Ridge Chardonnay

Topped Up or Left Alone: The Jura

Green Apple · Bruised Apple · Honey · Walnut · Mushroom · Fenugreek/Curry

We'll start with fresh and bruised apple, then explore nutty and curry-like references. The wines move from topped-up styles toward greater influence from ageing under a veil of yeast. I want us to see which of our references help us describe that progression, while still taking each wine as a whole.

WINE FLIGHT

2022 Overnoy Chardonnay Charmille
2022 Overnoy Savagnin Ouillé
2018 Touraize Savagnin Sous Voile
2018 Touraize Vin Jaune