

A stylized illustration of a red wine bottle. The bottle is a deep red color with a white outline. It is wrapped with several white ribbons that have a slight 3D effect. At the top, a ribbon reads "I don't know". Below that, another ribbon reads "much about". The word "WINE" is written in large, pink, block letters across a wide white ribbon that encircles the bottle. Below "WINE", a ribbon reads "but I know what I". At the bottom, another wide white ribbon contains the word "LIKE" in the same pink, block letters. To the left of the bottle, an orange pennant flag with a white border and two white dots at the top reads "SIMON WOODS." in white, block letters. The background is a solid teal color.

I don't know

much about

• SIMON
WOODS.

WINE

but I know what I

LIKE

“To get away with writing a book like this takes a writer who is able to simplify rather than dumb-down, and who has the nous to chop his way through the thicket of politics and reverence that surrounds the subject.

“More than anything else, it takes a writer who really knows his stuff – well enough to forget much of it, and boil wine truths down to a simple, but concentrated essence. Simon Woods is just the right man for the job, and his track record gives him the necessary authority.”

Tom Cannavan, wine-pages.com

“His humorous approach to wine education makes him one of the nicest and funniest wine journalists in the UK.”

Roger Jones, chef/proprietor of the Michelin-starred Harrow at Little Bedwyn.

“...a genial, down-to-earth British wine writer, and his blog at simonwoods.com is approachable, even fun.”

The Sunday Telegraph

About the author

Wine Consultant, Author and Speaker Simon Woods has won awards for his writing, his website and his can-can dancing. While he spits out most of the many thousands of wines he tastes each year, he does swallow a few of them.

When he's not visiting vineyards, tasting with importers and retailers, or hosting one of the dozens of wine events he conducts each year, he can be found at home in Saddleworth in the north of England with his wife & two children.

You can sign up for his weekly newsletter at simonwoods.com, or catch his videos on his YouTube channel MrWoodswine.

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Simon Woods

I don't know much about **wine...**
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by **Simon Woods**

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the start

I don't know much about wine, but I know what I like...

Hmm, two things. Hate to contradict you, but you probably know more than you think about wine. You may not know the natural colour of the hair, age and favourite chocolate bar of the impossibly young-looking winemakeress who produces Château Blotto Grand Cru in that tiny village in Switzerland which is also renowned for cuckoo clocks and yodelling (ginger, 43, Suchard Milk, FYI). However, chances are you know that...

Merlot makes red wines, while Sauvignon Blanc makes white.

A brawny Argentine Malbec is a better bet for a barbecue than a bottle of port.

And you can probably spot your favourite wine on a shop shelf from forty paces without much difficulty – especially if it's on special offer.

And then there's the "...but I know what I like" bit. Again, I'm not convinced. Do you like Pacherenc du Vic Bilh? What about Jerepigo? Or Bomballerina Bianco? OK, I made that last one up, but the others do exist.

There are hundreds of thousands of different wines produced around the world each year, and even the most enthusiastic and dedicated of professional wine tasters (tough job, but, as they say...) can only sample a fraction of them.

It's a struggle to keep on top of every part of the wine world. For normal folk, as in those who don't spend all day spitting into a bucket, it's never going to happen. It's no wonder many people revert to two or three tried and tested old favourites, or whatever is in the bargain bin that week. No surprise, maybe, but a dreadful shame.

**For me, one of the most exciting things
about wine is its sheer diversity.**

Just as we don't listen to the same music all the time, or wear the same clothes every day (unless you're a student), or have pizza with chips for every meal (unless you're a student), so we shouldn't settle for the same tried and tested wines every time we're confronted with a long row of bottles.

**It's time to experiment, to get cocky
with the corkscrew.**

The world of wine has far more to offer than Merlot and Sauvignon. Some wines are thoroughly splendid, some are decidedly not. The aim of this book is to guide you away from the latter and towards the former.

Maybe the title of the book should have been, "I know a little about wine, and I'd like to find out some more." If that's you, then grab a glass and read on...

1 | you are right

2 | just say "no" to chardonnay

3 | what's so special about that?

4 | it doesn't look very new to me



all about wine part 1

a head start

1) you are right if it tastes good to you...

Don't ever let anyone tell you you're a pleb for liking a particular wine. It's your mouth you're pouring it into, not theirs. If something tastes good to you, then it tastes good, and you are right, full stop. Just as some people have a sweet tooth, others have a Shiraz tongue, or even a Pinot Grigio cheek.

If we all drank the same wine, just as if we all sported the same haircut, the wine selection in the supermarket would be much smaller, the world would be less interesting, and I'd be out of a job.

And equally, if someone gives you a glass of wine expecting you to go into raptures about it, and it makes you shudder, then again you are right.

However, I'll just chuck this in as a thought. Do you remember not liking chips? Everyone likes chips (and if they don't, they're wrong). But cast your mind back to your first taste of beer. It would have been your 18th/21st birthday, someone would have sat you down in a bar and said, "Now THIS is beer..." Did you like it? Almost certainly not, but you probably do now.

And similarly, think back to when you were eight and the box of chocolates came round. Which did you go for first?

It was strawberry cream, for me. And would you go for the same now? No way José, point me to the pralines.

There are parallels with wine. There are some wines we've always liked and always will do. There are others that we once couldn't get on with and then suddenly find indispensable.

It's amazing how many individuals who would once have crossed the road to avoid sherry have been converted to the cause by a trip to Spain. And similarly, numerous people who cut their wine teeth on the sweet oaky Chardonnays so popular in the 1990s would run away from them today.

It's not the wine that's changed, it's your taste buds or – in wine jargon – your palate. And that shouldn't be a surprise. Remember what you wore ten years ago, or what you watched on TV?

So yes, you are right, but the way you are right today isn't necessarily the same as the way you were right yesterday, or will be tomorrow.



2) just say “no” to chardonnay why you should experiment more

The words “head”, “bang” and brick wall” spring to mind when it comes to wine and my mum. Well-read, theatrical to the point of high camp and a great cook, she has a blind spot where wine is concerned. The line she trots out is,

“They all taste the same to me.”

I resist the temptation to say,

“And of course you’ve tried them all,”

and keep shoving different glasses under her finely chiselled nose in the hope that one day, something will make her sit up and take notice.

Not everyone is as blinkered as Mrs W., but there are still several million people who, in wine terms, really should get out a bit more. When they steer their wobbly trolley down the wine aisle, or pop into their local bottle shop, they always head for, if not the same wine every time, then certainly the same style.

Cheap Californian Chardonnays, Chilean Merlots and Italian Pinot Grigios can be decent enough drinks

But – and let’s be honest here – while the labels for Brands X, Y and Z might be different, the wines often taste like they’ve come out of the same tank (or vat in winespeak –



it sounds better, even if it's still a two million litre stainless steel container the size of Alaska).

If your definition of being adventurous is simply flitting from X to Y to Z, then maybe you can use the “They all taste the same to me” line.

And while you're doing your experimenting, how about spending a bit more? Out-and-out bad wine has all but disappeared from our shops, but there's still plenty of blandness out there, especially at the cheap end of the market. Wines made from underflavoured grapes – we'll get on to WHY they're underflavoured in Chapter 8 – subjected to the same winemaking regime often end up tasting similar.

It's the equivalent of taking a dubious piece of meat, smothering it in batter, deep-frying it and serving it with ketchup – it's hard to tell what it was to start with.

Spend a little more and you begin to rise above nasty nugget territory. This is particularly true in the UK, where a huge proportion of the cost of a cheap wine is duty and VAT – read more at simonwoods.com/tradeup

Beyond the cheapies and the identikit wines, there are dozens, even hundreds of alternatives in most stores. But if you don't try them soon, the message you're sending to the shop owner is that more choice is actually a bad thing. A wall of bottles can be daunting, but you don't have to try them all.

All I'm asking is for a Pinot Grigio-free week (or month, if you're feeling game) when you by-pass your preferred tippie and try something different, with the occasional foray higher up the price scale.

Otherwise, the range in store will get smaller and smaller until all that's left is cheap bottles of Brands X, Y and Z. Do you really want that on your conscience?



3) what's so special about that?

how special is that special offer?

We all love bargains. There's nothing quite so satisfying as getting something we really want at a knock-down price. The same of course is true for wine. We resent paying more than we have to for our grog, and this works its way out in two ways, depending on our outlook. Some people will delight in drinking, for example, Merlot from southern France because it offers the quality and style of inexpensive red Bordeaux for fewer beans. Others will head for Store A rather than Store B because their favourite Sauvignon Blanc is 10% cheaper.

**But when is a bargain not a bargain?
Let's delve into the grubby world of
wine marketing. It would be nice if
price and quality went hand in
hand – but in wine, they don't.**

Some £10 wines are much better than others, and the same is true at all price levels. And we wouldn't expect otherwise.

However – and this is where things get murky – many companies around the world now tailor-make their wines for major supermarket and other big retailers so that they can sell for £9.99 for most of the year, but then be promoted at £6.99 or even £4.99 for a couple of months. A £4.99 wine is too cheap for some people, but a £9.99 one reduced to £4.99 is somehow acceptable. And – surprise,

surprise – far more wine is sold during those two months when the wine is on promotion than in the other ten months. The average price paid per bottle is then £6 or less, and both the producer and certainly the retailer are making a profit on this.

**This begs the question, was it really a
£10 wine in the first place?**

Answer, no. Moreover, where such promotions were once rare occurrences, they now dominate supermarket sales.

And as only large wine companies have the volumes necessary to cater for these offers, the good little guys – whose wines actually merit the £6.99 price tag – get elbowed off the shelves. Once again, the result is less choice, more blandness.

Despite protests from a wine trade concerned about undermining those good guys and governments concerned about cheap alcohol, the world of BOGOF (buy one get one free) is not showing many signs of actually bogging off and these deals will be with us for the foreseeable future.

**So by all means, try the wines on
“special” but don’t think you’re
getting a bargain – you’re simply
paying the market rate.**

4) it doesn't look very new
to me
just where and what IS the new world?

More wine jargon now. After all, wine is the language of love, of poetry, of... (that's enough gibberish. Ed.). So – der derrr! – step forward, the New World.

The phrase “New World” originally encompassed just North and South America, but in wine geography, it also takes in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

However, the term “New World” extends in its implications beyond geography. Allow me to elaborate.

First, let's have a look at “Old World” wines, those from the traditional wine-producing regions of Europe – Bordeaux, the Mosel, Tuscany, Rioja, and so on.

Examine the label of a traditional bottle of Old World wine, and it will tell you where it's from, then who has made it. The grape variety/ies used? Probably not. A description and serving suggestions on the back label? You'll be lucky.

But why should you need them? This after all is Monsieur Dupont's Puligny-Montrachet, or Signor Del Ponte's Barbaresco, doesn't that tell you everything you need to know? Well, perhaps if you've been brought up on such wines, it does. If you haven't...



(Not that wine is the only topic that gives rise to such problems. Rocky Mountain Oysters, Yorkshire Pudding and Baked Alaska all have the potential to confuse the uninitiated. And Buffalo Wings...)

Step forward New World wines. The New World countries have been making wine for decades – even New Zealand has been growing vines for not far short of 200 years – but they've really come into their own in the past forty years. There are several reasons why:

- 1. Reliability.** New World winemakers are technically adept and sticklers for hygiene, and make very few faulty wines.
- 2. Value for money.** In order to establish a presence in other markets, the wines have been very sensibly priced.
- 3. Flavour.** Many New World wine regions are warmer than their Old World counterparts, and so grow riper, sweeter grapes. These then translate into fleshier, more user-friendly flavours – people often say that you can taste the sunshine.
- 4. Accessibility.** Those who stumble over Old World terms like Trockenbeerenauslese, Garrafeira and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo have no problem asking for a bottle of Lindemans Chardonnay.
- 5. Communication.** New World producers talk to each other, share ideas and realise that while they are competitors, it is in everybody's interest to build Brand Chile, or Brand South Africa, or Brand California.

6. The Old World simply lost the plot. It rested on its laurels, churned out too many unreliable, poorly packaged wines, and didn't take the threat from the New World seriously until it found itself displaced from the shelves.

Today, the boundary between the New and Old Worlds is getting a little less precise.

Canny New World producers have realised that the place the grapes are grown (more of this in Chapter 9) can have a significant impact on a wine's quality. They've also realised that there is such a thing as wines that are too hygienic – clean is good, sterile is not.

Meanwhile, many of their Old World counterparts have upgraded their cellars, adapted their vineyards so they can grow better, riper fruit and have even taken a few (OK, a very few...) lessons in marketing.

New has become older, Old has become newer. Perhaps it's time to start talking of the Middle-Aged World – or is that something from Tolkien?

