



WINEPRESS

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Work
Safe

Dam
Builders

Matt
Kramer

Alexandre
Schmitt



Photo: Jim Tannock

A Language of Aroma

For every 100 pieces of sensory information your brain receives, just one is from the sense of smell, says a man who knows the nose.

SOPHIE PREECE

As a young man, Alexandre Schmitt learned the 1500 scent descriptors required of a Parisian perfumer, overtraining his sense of smell to find a common language.

But when he began training winemakers in olfactory perception 15 years ago, he immediately recognised a chasm of misunderstanding in their communication about wine. “They were not talking the same language and their excuse was ‘we have subjective perception’.”

People have “more or less” the same sense of smell, “but we don’t have the same perception and we don’t train our perception in the same way”, he told an audience of 375 at the International Sauvignon Blanc Celebration last month.

Through the course of his work, he endeavours to teach people a common language around wine, which calls on the vocabulary of chemical compounds, such as methoxypyrazine, as well as other descriptors that can result in more precise descriptions, such as dry earth or potatoes.

When we smell we receive a physiological “sensation”, Alexandre told the audience, which was given three aromas to try and describe. “You get something and it’s a feeling you process. A stimulation. You don’t know what it is, of course, but you know it is something.”

Then there is “perception”, which can depend on who you are, where you come from and what references you have. “So of course if you have been raised in the desert, or in the countryside, or you are a city boy, or if your father was a banker or a carpenter, it means your memories are not the same.”

As an example of “syncretic perception” he spoke of the first time he was exposed to Cis-jasmone, which is a chemical identified in a jasmine extract. His brain supplied a memory and image of him as a boy in the countryside, in the south west of France. “It was the end of the day after a storm in the summer time.” Assessing that “crystalised memory”, he believes the storm released the smell of the earth and of tar from the damaged path, and that the pine trees released resin, which mixed with the aroma of wild herbs. Those characters are more or less the smell of Cis-jasmone, but it’s a reference too personal to be understood by others. So he learned the correct descriptions for the extract, including floral, wild flower, jasmine and celery. “They are objective and rational and they make me able to share much more with you.”

In talking about wine, comments need to be similarly structured to be understood. “On one hand we use

subjective perceptions. On the other hand we want to share our emotion when we are tasting the wine.”

To learn the vocabulary, you need to over train your sense of smell, to know the difference, for example, between lemon, grapefruit, lime, orange and mandarin, along with the chemical language of thiols, 3MH and 3MHA. Alexandre noted the obsession with wine, and desire to discuss and unravel it. “We don’t talk about chicken and green peas in the same way.” But if those tasting wine use their unique subjective perceptions as language around the aroma, they cannot get their meaning across to others. “So how can we share comments when we taste wines, if we don’t use the same perceptions?”

He supplied information on olfactory training at the session, which said it was clear that through “constant, stubborn and guided smelling practice” students could acquire a sound knowledge of the aromatic descriptors of wine.

“It is surprising that wine professionals and amateurs taste wine without having ever received olfactory training. The best musicians spend years studying music theory and practising scales on a daily basis. Why should it be different for wine professionals who use their sense of smell every day?” [Ⓜ]