

The Language of Smell

OLFACTORY TRAINING HELPS WINEMAKERS VALIDATE TERROIR



Olfactory expert Alexandre Schmitt's expertise includes a laser-like ability to focus and a vast memory of aromas. Cameron Vawter, Director of Production for Dana Estates, looks on.

story and photos by Deborah Parker Wong

An important part of any winemaker's job is identifying aromas in wine—a task that is much harder than isolating individual aromas in perfume due to wine's low alcohol content. On average, winemakers work with about 50 aromas while perfumers must memorize 30 times that number.

The synergies between these two professions are the stock in trade of olfactory expert Alexandre Schmitt, a perfumer who specializes in training winemakers to identify aromas and to relate them to wine. Schmitt studied his craft at the Institut Supérieur International du Parfum in Versailles, and his early career consisted largely of developing fragrances for household products and cosmetics. It wasn't until he met winemaker Jean-Claude Berrouet, the iconic technical director of Château Pétrus for more than four decades, that he forged a connection to wine, one that he developed under the guidance of Berrouet over a period of 12 years and parlayed into a unique global consulting practice, Wines & Flavors.

Schmitt's olfactory training is in high demand in California, where he leads sensory workshops and conducts advanced seminars with winemakers in Napa, the Central Valley and Paso Robles several times a year. He offers progressive levels of training that begin with Level I, which introduces the basic aromatic descriptors of wine. His Level II workshops focus on defects in wine, barrel and oak aromas, and Level III is a further exploration of grape varieties and the synergy of aromas in blends of up to four compounds.

Napa Valley winemakers immersed in Schmitt's Level III olfactory training.

Beyond teaching, Schmitt also consults for wineries, among them Opus One, using the same approach to creating a wine blend as he would a perfume: carefully evaluating each lot for aroma and texture and then collaborating with winemakers on the final blend.

The Aromatic Universe

In a week-long Level III workshop held at Dana Estates in Rutherford, Schmitt's continuing students—winemakers from Bryant, Caymus, Cliff Lede, Harlan, Merryvale, Provenance, Red Mare Wines, Rudd, Ovid, Zeitgeist, Ziata and buyers from Acme Fine Wines—spent several hours each day nosing organic chemical compounds and discussing both their properties and their relationship to wine and winemaking. "Many of these smells have been abused commercially," observed Schmitt when Murphy's Oil Soap was offered as a descriptor for an aroma compound known as linalool.

During a discussion describing the properties of the compound geraniol in wine, Schmitt noted that it exists in berries and contributes to tropical fruit aromas like mango in aromatic white varieties and a vegetal, leafy character in reds that can "lift" the fruit. "It will show different effects based on the complexity of the wine," said Schmitt who noted that in red wines, geraniol enhances floral and berry characters but if the wine shows vegetal notes, it can contribute to the winemaking defect known as geranium taint. Geraniol is also a metabolic by product of the preservative potassium sorbate which is the primary cause of this defect.

When describing a refuted term such as minerality, Schmitt breaks it down to a molecular level: "Mineral [aromas] are more complex because they have a tactile sensation; a smell that is painful can be described as metallic. Minerality does not always come from the soil; when it exists in the grapes, like the saffron character in Riesling, the resulting wines have a refined character and flavor." He cites the balance between



mineral, fruit and floral components that are essential to making expressive Chardonnay as a prime example.

Analytical Perception

Schmitt's extraordinary talent and his views on perception go a long way towards debunking the commonly held belief that wine evaluation is purely subjective. "Perception is flexible, and as we move toward a global idea of smell through olfactory training, we are structuring our aromatic universe. Little by little, we begin using words the same way, and this in turn forms an aromatic language that is the basis for analytical perception. We can objectivize that which is consensual."

It's evident during his workshops that Schmitt's ability to focus is unerring and that sustaining focus may be half the battle in mastering advanced olfactory training. Unlike tasting, which affords the use of all your senses to confirm or refute the aromas being detected in wine, developing the ability to smell is proving particularly valuable to winemakers who want to isolate and validate the unique properties of their terroir.

Cameron Vawter, Director of Production for Dana Estates, who has studied with Schmitt for three years attests, "At Dana we're making vineyard-designate wines and the key is understanding their origins and then using that process to make better wine. By identifying the aromatic compounds that are unique to my vineyard, I can work to preserve the expression of the vineyard and reduce unwanted compounds that may come from the winemaking process." ■■

I work with objective aromas that can be perceived."

—Alexandre Schmitt