

How can I set up a wine-tasting party?

Wine appreciation is a hobby meant to be shared with friends, and there's no better way to learn and have a good time than to gather a group of pals for some serious (but not *too* serious) wine tasting. Let's hit the highlights in a few quick points:

- Probably the most important rule is to aim the program at the level of interest of your group; don't make it too technical, or too much like work, if most of your pals aren't seriously into wine as a hobby.
- Offer plenty of paper and pens or pencils and encourage everyone to take notes. Jotting down your thoughts of the appearance, aroma, flavor, aftertaste and overall impression of each wine is an excellent way to help yourself focus.
- Don't overdo quantity, but try several different kinds of wine so people can compare and contrast.
- Consider an overall theme for the tasting. Maybe several different wines all from Napa, for instance. Or one each of the same varietal (grape) from Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, etc. Or try several different varietals -- Cabernet, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel for reds, or Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier for whites. Or set up a "France vs California shootout." The possibilities are endless, but in each case, the idea is to learn something by comparing similar-only-different wines to see if you can pick up consistent differences among them.
- Have bread, cheese and/or fruit available, and lots of water for sipping between tastes and for rinsing glasses.
- Put out some buckets in case people want to spit out some of the wine. This isn't necessarily a negative commentary on the wine, but wine hobbyists generally swallow only a little (if any) of each wine presented during a tasting, in order to keep control of our senses. Time enough to drink a glass or two after the formal part of the tasting, and I always save the ones I like best for that purpose!
- If you'd like to have more substantial food at your party, consider holding it until after the tasting session; then folks can relax and sip the leftover wines with something good to eat.

Summing up, it's best to keep it light. Offer everyone a chance to speak up and compare notes, and make a game out of it. But remember to respect each others' opinions, and don't force anyone to speak up if he or she is shy.