FRUIT
Fruit is the first thing I look for in a wine. If a wine has fruit, it has a chance. If a wine lacks fruit, I rarely give it a second sip. When my friend and colleague Guy Stout (a master sommelier, teacher, and very astute blind taster) talks about tasting blind tasting, he refers to the “FEW” rule; look for Fruit, Earth, and Wood. Fruit comes first and everything else follows.

So what is fruit? Fruit is the flavor of the grapes coming through in the wine. We may describe that fruit in a number of different ways. In white wines, we may describe fruit in general terms as citrus or tree or stone or tropical or some combination of two or more. We can also get more specific and say lemon or lime, apple or pear, peach or cherry, pineapple or mango. We may describe the fruit in red wines as red or black or some combination. And we may get more specific and pin that fruit down to red cherries (think Pinot Noir) or dark berries (ripe Cabernet Sauvignon) or even to blueberries (tooth-staining Petite Sirah) or black raspberries (dense Shiraz).

Where does all this fruit come from? Well, from the fruit—which is to say from the grapes. Each grape variety has in it the potential to produce the same chemical compounds that make up the aroma and flavor in certain other fruits. The primary reason wine is made out of grapes and not blueberries or pears (both of which produce juice that can be fermented) is that nothing other than grapes has the potential range and depth of possible flavors as grapes.

As grapes get riper, the fruit evolves. Pinot Noir can go from bright red fresh cherry fruit to almost black fruit with a mix of cherry and berry characteristics. By the same token, white grapes can go from simple citrus flavors to tropical fruit depending on the degree of ripeness and acidity. It is important to remember that as sugar ripeness rises, acid levels in the grapes are falling. If the acid gets too low and the wine is out of balance, it can prematurely lose its fruit.

BALANCE
Balance is harder to define or really pin down than fruit but you generally know it when you see it. The wine in the mouth is all about balance. Balance between ripeness and acidity, Balance between acidity and tannin and sweetness. Balance between natural grape flavors and fermentation or winemaking flavors. Balance between development and freshness. Balance can be about fit and integration or it can be about tension. A seamless, perfectly integrated red can satisfy and a vibrant sweet-fruit-balanced-with-vivid-acidity Riesling can thrill. They are as different in style as two wines can be but both are in balance.

And balance doesn’t just come in the wine. Balance starts in the vineyard. If the crop load is too high, the wine made from those grapes will lack concentration and taste dilute and so be out of balance. On the other hand, a vineyard that is not carrying enough of a crop can yield grapes that make awkwardly concentrated wines that also are out of balance. If the grape grower gets the balance wrong, the winemaker is unlikely to be able to fix it and so is unlikely to be able to make a balanced wine.

PLACE
After fruit, the next thing I look for is Place. Or maybe place (or a lack of place) jumps out at me. Does the wine taste like where it is from? Is it from somewhere? It may be from so many somewheres that no place is discernable. Sometimes place is not evident no matter how hard you look and other times you don’t have to look at all. Sometimes the wine introduces itself; “Hi, Cabernet Sauvignon, from Rutherford, nice to meet you.”
Good terroir (a lot of which is place) is what distinguishes great wine from merely good wine. Some terroir don’t offer enough distinction or quality to be featured and so the grapes grown in it are best blended with grapes from other areas to make anonymous blends. Most commercial wines show no sense of place and are likely better for it. (Nevertheless, even the most commercial wines should still show fruit.)

Earlier today, I tasted three wines that screamed “Lodi” at me. To my taste, none of them were any good at all (although I suppose there are some folks who would like them). I also tasted some wines labeled “California” that each contained some Lodi grapes. All of them were perfectly palatable and none of them had any particular Lodi character. They were commercial but they were commercial in a good way. A good Napa Valley floor Cabernet will show the “dusty” character we associate with Rutherford and Oakville. A Pauillac will show the classic gravelly notes and a great white Burgundy will offer notes of limestone minerality. Each of these characters of place is independent of the grape variety. Rather, they are specific to where the grapes were grown – which is to say to Place. Generally speaking, the best wines from the best terroirs speak most clearly of the place from which they come.

If a wine has fruit and balance, it can be good or even very good. If the fruit and balance mix well with the place, it can be better or even great.

PLEASURE

The other thing I look for when I am tasting wine is pleasure. I can’t say it is the last thing. I can’t even say it is the last of these four primary things because as I discover the fruit, I should also be discerning pleasure. As I find the balance and the sense or lack of place in wine, my sense of pleasure should also be growing. Pleasure comes from the fruit and the balance of the wine as well as from the feel of the wine. Does the wine feel good in the mouth? Does it give you pleasure?

The feel of the wine is tactile and temperature based. The tactile part comes from grape-growing and winemaking decisions. Riper grapes produce higher alcohols which produce a richer feel. More concentration or extraction provides more texture but too much extraction can lead to a chalky or even gritty feel that, at least for me, takes away from pleasure and indicates a balance problem. Even the most commercial wines should (and usually do) offer some pleasure to the taster. Wines of place should offer real pleasure to the taster. If they don’t, it is time to look some place else for wine.