

Last week while working one evening at Sharrow Bay I got asked a question I never had before by a Cumbria Life reader 'Out of the huge number of wine labels that exist are there certain things I should be looking for across the board from country to country?' I answered the question as best I could but it really got me thinking when I returned home after service and I began thinking about this subject a lot. What should you look for and what should you ignore? Well although there are a huge number of nuances there is some general advice that I would give you.

Name (Geography and Estate)- This is first factor that I look for in a wine. There are two aspects to the name of the wine – the geography (either the country or region) and the estate (the name of the producer). The estate means the people who made the wine also had a hand in growing the grapes on their own land. The more specific the geography of where the wine was produced the better. For example a wine that says it's from Napa is probably a better bet than a wine that simply says it's from California. A good way to pick a top quality wine is memorise a few plots of land that are famous for producing high-quality grapes.

Vintage – This is the year that the wine is produced and after the name of the wine is the next aspect I look for. The vast majority of wines in the shops are meant to be drunk right away, so you want to make sure the wine isn't too old, particularly if you're buying it expecting lively, fresh fruitiness.

Alcohol content – In light of the recent report I read about the strongest beer in the world being launched in Scotland this is a very topical issue. Too many wines today have too much alcohol, which leaves them unbalanced. There are some classic wines with fairly high alcohol levels but if I had nothing else to go on I would look for alcohol content at about 14% and below.

Reserve -On American wines, this doesn't mean anything, so ignore it. There are various rules around the world concerning words like Reserva, but there's no guarantee it means anything in other parts of the world. Unless you know something about the rules concerning, say, Rioja, where it has genuine significance, don't worry about it.

Old Vines (Vieilles Vignes in France) - Theoretically, older vines produce fewer, but more flavorful, grapes, but the problem is that no one has defined what an 'old vine' is, so anyone can put this on the label. Again, ignore it.

Organic or Biodynamic – This is something to keep your eyes open for if you are interested in this aspect of food or wine production. There are different rules across the world however each country has a certified logo which you should look out for.

Pictures on the labels- In the past few years, there have a huge increase in the number of inexpensive wines with cute animals on the labels. I have met people that buy a certain Australian wine because there is a Koala on the side. Unfortunately these wines are generally less attractive than the labels. Of course, some good wines happen to have animals on the labels like the Stag's Leap from California, for instance. However I would avoid wines where the cute animal seems to be the main point of the wine.

Some people like to carry a vintage chart with them when shopping for wine- I hope that this can be used as your own exclusive Cumbria Life label chart for your use when buying wine!

Bonne dégustation

Nico