**Acidity** Critical component of wine: wines lacking sufficient acidity seem dull, lifeless; excessively acidic wines are sharp or tart. Acidity is offset by residual sugar (of, for example, so-called dessert wines) and by alcohol.

**Aftertaste** Sensations which remain after a wine is swallowed composed of aromas and tastes. Synonymous with finish. The best wines possess persistent, complex aftertastes.

**Alcohol** Primary component, mainly responsible for body or weight; also contributes to aroma and plays an important role in balancing acidity and tannin. Has a sweet taste.

**Aroma** Olfactory sensations vital to perception and pleasure of wine and derived primarily from fermentation. Aroma is perceived directly when holding a glass to the nose, and through the retro nasal passages when the wine is in the mouth. Customarily, the nose of a young wine is termed aroma while that of a mature or aged wine is described as bouquet.

**Astringent** Dry, puckering sensation in the mouth usually caused by tannin. Tannins are typical of red wines intended for bottle aging; they tend to soften with time.

**Balance** A good wine exhibits harmony or balance of constituent parts. Some wines may only come into balance with aging in bottle.

**Bitter** Unpleasant taste to most people. Although sensitivity varies widely, the most acute palates are often the most sensitive. Tannins may be perceived as bitter by some tasters.

**Body** The fullness or weight of a wine mainly due to its alcohol content. Neither positive nor negative; certain types of wines tend to be light-, medium- or full-bodied.

**Bouquet** The smell of an aged or mature wine; very different from that of a young wine. See aroma.

**Clean** Free of off-odors and tastes, a desirable quality. However, potential faults (for example, volatile acidity) may add to complexity at low concentrations.

**Closed** Commonly employed metaphor for a wine which expresses little of its inherent flavor characteristics because the wine is young, or because of its stage of development.

**Coarse** A negative term referring to a poorly made wine, often aggressively rough.

**Complexity** A highly desirable if elusive attribute of wine, referring to the range of aromatic and taste sensations. The greatest wines offer heightened complexity.

**Concentration** Volume of constituent elements, notably dry extract and alcohol; the intangible sense of “raw material” at the core of a wine. See also substance.
Corked The unattractive odor of a wet cork caused mainly by 2,4,6-trichloroanisole (TCA) or related compounds. Other forms of taint may often be falsely identified as “corkiness.” The incidence of corked wine has been reduced by improvements in cork sterilizing procedures.

Delicate Positive descriptor of appealing light wines.

Depth Refers to the impression of overall flavor; the most impressive wines have depth while great classics are profound.

Dry Opposite of sweet. How “dry” a wine is perceived to be depends on other components, and the taster. Aside from obvious exceptions (late harvest dessert or selected fortified wines such as Port or Cream Sherry), the vast majority of wine is dry. Unfortunately, this fundamental term is misunderstood by many consumers.

Elegant An imprecise, metaphorical term to describe a finely balanced wine; often used in conjunction with finesse.

Fine A wine of excellent quality.

Finesse Attribute of delicate, well-balanced wines. Usually not used for powerful wines. See elegant.

Finish Sensations which linger on the palate, referring both to their intensity and complexity. See aftertaste.

Firm Dry, sometimes somewhat astringent finish. Usually positive, a firm wine is well structured; a wine which appears overly firm is rough or even hard.

Flowery Attractive aroma of certain wines resembling flowers when very young.

Fresh Positive trait of a young white or red wine possessing noticeable acidity.

Fruity The aromatics of young wines which tasters associate with fruits (apple, lemon, raspberry, etc.). Most youthful wines may be described as fruity to varying degrees, unless they are dominated by oak. Fruity is not synonymous with sweet.

Hard Severe, assertively dry or astringent; may dissipate with aging.

Length The amount of time the aftertaste or finish remains in the mouth and nasal passages. A wine may be described as short or long.

Light Possessing little body; may simply be the character of the wine type (Muscadet or Mosel Riesling), or it may be a demerit for wines which should have more body.

Long Flattering descriptor for a wine having a persistent, lasting finish.

Minerality The invented English equivalent of a French word favored by some tasters to describe a dry wine with “stony” flavors akin to a salty mineral water (which contains dissolved solids leached from soil). Scientists dispute the direct conversion of soil chemical constituents into specific wine taste characteristics. To be used with care.

Neutral Lacking discernible taste characteristics. Typical of many ordinary mass market wines, especially whites (e.g., Pinot Grigio).

Oaky Strongly marked by maturation in oak barrels: woody, spICY, vanilla, coconut, etc.
Powerful  Mouth-filling, full-bodied, vigorous wine, usually with elevated alcohol content.

Quality  The most challenging term of all: the degree to which a wine satisfies the standards of its origin, type and price. Knowledge and experience are needed to assess quality; a professional taster should be able to distinguish quality from personal preference. Conversely, a beginner equates his or her own individual taste response with the merits of the wine.

Rich  Generously endowed with flavor; most likely ripe and full-bodied.

Ripe  Exhibiting qualities of grapes harvested when fully but not overly mature.

Rough  Astringent to some extent, but short of coarse. Roughness may be a function of a wine’s youthfulness; a rough wine may become soft with age.

Round  Feel in the mouth indicating subdued acidity together with a soft center.

Severe  Hard and very firm. Severe wines will probably not improve with keeping as they may also be imbalanced.

Soft  Antithesis of astringent, rough or hard. A soft wine may be appealingly smooth or velvety in texture; conversely, it could lack acidity.

Spicy  Most “spices” in wine come from wood barrels, not from the grapes; for example, cinnamon, cloves, pepper. Compounds which tasters describe as vanilla and smoke similarly originate largely from oak.

Style  Describes the specific context of a wine, as in “light, dry, unoaked” or “full bodied, rich and barrel aged.” Distinct from quality. However, “stylish” refers to a fine, elegant wine.

Substance  Comprehensive descriptor for the combined impression of the body and flavor of a wine.

Supple  Pleasing textural quality of red wines implying a certain softness on the palate; not hard or severe.

Sweet  Noticeable sugar, usually remaining after fermentation or from added concentrate in popular mass market wines. Sweetness may be concealed by acidity. Alcohol also has a sweet taste, although it is rarely identified as such. Surprisingly, the core concept of sweet vs. dry eludes many novice wine drinkers.

Tannin  An important component of red wine especially, particularly those intended for cellaring; with bottle aging, tannins are polymerized and eventually fade, losing their astringent or rough textural imprint. Collectible red wines (top Bordeaux, Cabernet Sauvignon, Hermitage, Barolo, Brunello) normally possess high tannin levels facilitating the aging process and giving them potentially long lives in bottle.

Thin  Watery, lacking flavor interest and body.

Weak  Lacking character and flavor; similar to thin.

Weight  Synonym for body and a fundamental descriptor. Weight varies as a function of grape variety, climate, vintage and wine style.

Young  A wine exhibiting any number of flowery, fruity and/or fresh characteristics. Some wine types and individual wines may retain youthful characteristics even after several years in bottle.