

# SNOW ON WINE



## Sugar, You're Too Sweet For Me!

Dr. Jeff Snow

Director of Education

November 2022

Holiday dinners are coming up. As we select wines for these festive events we each have some level of sweetness in mind. And as SES members, with all our “Learning by Tasting”, picking such a bottle off the shelf should be easy for us, right? Heft the bottle -- read the front and back label – a sense of what it will taste like should come to mind. Then again, maybe not such a “no-brainer”. Recently, our President Claudia complained that she often ended up buying a “sweet” white wine, when she wanted a “dry” one. Of course she looked all over front and back labels and sugar “%” was not listed nor any comment on dryness or sweetness. Only (as law requires) alcohol %. Why, she wondered, wouldn’t the winemaker put such info about the level of sweetness on the label? A good question.

When wine geeks say “DRY” we really mean Fully Fermented with no Residual Sugar. But of course some fully fermented red wines have a perceived sweetness, not due to sugar, but to other organic compounds such as esters, aldehydes and ketones which give a sweet taste (much as non-sugar chemicals in your coffee sweetener do). To avoid confusion I now prefer to say “Residual Sugar (**RS**)”, as a percentage. And then using the term “Perceived Sweetness (**PS**)”, ranging over dry, off dry, slightly sweet, sweet, and very sweet or cloying defines what we experience.

There is only a loose correlation between **RS** and **PS**. A wine with say 1.5% **RS** and the high acids often found in our Washington grapes might have a **PS** of off dry. But with very low acid would seem quite sweet. Like many aspects of holiday dinners, **PS** is complicated this year, especially with recent hot harvest weather. Understanding a grape’s “inner turmoil” as harvest approaches is key.

Our local vineyards are generally blessed with very cool nights as grapes mature. Vintners watch closely as grape sugars approach the 23 -24 Brix level of sugar maturity. But as sugar rises, acid declines. Usually our cool nights slow the acid decline so grapes retain quite high acid. But this year warm or even hot evenings caused acid levels to plummet. In order to retain enough acid the vintner might risk picking early, with sugars in the lower range of maturity, but well prior to “phenolic” maturity. With white grapes this can work since they are immediately pressed off the skins, seeds and stems. Only the juice goes off to tanks to be fermented. With this year’s low acid levels the vintner may choose to leave less **RS** in order to have similar **PS** to other vintages of their wine. To achieve lower **RS**, the yeast beasties eat more of the sugar, and they “poop-out” more alcohol. To produce a wine with similar **PS**, less **RS** is required, and a higher alcohol level in the 14% to 15% range may be a tell.

And this may answer to Prez Claudia’s question. Putting the %**RS**, the acid level, and the harvest Brix on the label is too complicated for most buyers to understand. But go to your local specialty wine store and the wine specialists there have all that information on hand and can easily tell you what the %**PS** of a wine you purchase.

Our specialty wine stores are a great resource in finding wine to meet our taste preference. And with **PS** it is complex. Really it is about the acid to sugar balance more than the actual **RS**, although some other factors are involved. Other resources include the winery websites which often give detailed information about the taste of each wine along with serving suggestions. And websites like **Vivino** list tasting notes for many wines, as do popular wine journals like **Wine Spectator**. As SES members who have been “Learning by Tasting” we are well prepared to use all these resources to select Holiday Feast wines.

**Happy Holidays, and may your feast, the wine, and your guests all be delightful.**