

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE - SENSORY ANALYSIS**

Ontario appellation wines offer the consumer a guarantee of origin backed up by a quality assurance program.

Sensory evaluation (tasting) is a cornerstone of the wine evaluation process that the Ontario Wine Appellation Authority uses to determine if a wine meets the required standard for appellation status. Once finished, all wines undergo an approval process before they may be labelled with VQA-regulated terms. The approval process includes the sensory evaluation, a comprehensive chemical analysis and a review of the wine content and label claims.

The purpose of the sensory evaluation is to determine if the wine meets criteria established in regulations at the time it is submitted for testing. These include:

- The wine is without unacceptable defects or faults (some attributes may not be considered faults until an unacceptable level is reached)
- The wine is representative of quality wines of its general category (for example Sparkling, Late Harvest or Nouveau wines should exhibit sensory characteristics typical to these wine categories)
- The wine is within an acceptable range of varietal character for the stated varieties (where grape varieties are declared on the label).

Comprehensive control measures are taken to ensure the sensory evaluation process is objective and fair and that it is carried out in a consistent manner. All samples are tasted by trained panel of tasters without being identified. Detailed information on the panellists, process and facilities can be found in the appendix to this document.

Tasting to screen out faulty wines and to assure a minimum level of quality is carried out within appellation systems throughout the world. It is almost universal in European wine producing countries and also used in new world countries for wines of origin or, in some jurisdictions, for wines that are exported. Sensory analysis in the food and wine industry is a well-developed discipline and procedures followed in most jurisdictions, including Ontario, are based on internationally accepted and proven protocols.

For the Appellation Authority's purposes, the sensory evaluation is strictly to determine whether the wine meets the standards set out in regulation. The tasting is not a "competition" and unlike wine judging does not seek to compare the wines submitted to identify the best wine or gold medal winners. Each wine is assessed on its merits against the VQA regulations

and standards. The ultimate purpose of the VQA tasting is to ensure that the wine is likely to fulfill the consumers expectation based on what appears on the label. For example, an appellation of origin wine from Ontario that declares Riesling on the label should exhibit at least some character associated with the Riesling grape variety and not show any significant characteristics associated with spoilage or known wine faults. The basic VQA standards apply to all wines and do not consider price.

The sensory evaluation panel plays an important role in the appellation system by

- Ensuring wines meet the VQA standards and are generally representative of the label claims made
- Screening out faulty wines before they reach consumers
- Building consumer trust in appellation wines and supporting the reputation and integrity of wines of origin from Ontario
- Promoting the pursuit of quality among VQA wineries
- Providing an independent quality assurance process for all VQA wineries

While tasting cannot guarantee that wine will not degrade (or improve) over time, it is the most effective and relevant way to assess wine quality as it is perceived by consumers.

## **APPENDIX A – DESCRIPTION OF THE VQA TASTING PROCESS**

### Sensory Evaluation Facilities

- Samples are presented blind in clear glass carafes arranged on white counters positioned against a white background.
- The sensory evaluation rooms are climate controlled.
- Standardized ISO/INAO glasses are used for all samples.
- Sensory sessions are monitored for their entire duration to ensure no discussion takes place between tasters.

### Sensory Evaluation Panel

- The panel is made up of wine professionals selected based on their academic and experiential qualifications (sommeliers, winemakers, wine educators).
- Panelists must complete a written exam and sensory proficiency testing, before joining the panel and every 5-years thereafter.
- Panel members undergo ongoing training on defects identification, wine quality and evaluation procedures.
- The panel roster includes at least 24 members, with 5 tasters used for each panel.

### Sample Handling and Presentation

- Information provided by the winery related to wine composition and proposed label claims for each wine is entered into a central database.
- Each sample is then assigned an identification number (VQA ID) and a tasting sequence number. The tasting sequence is determined based on the wine category, varietal composition, wine age (vintage year), etc.
- Samples are presented blind to the panel (poured in carafes marked with the tasting sequence number only). Sparkling wines are kept in their original container to avoid loss of carbonation but are concealed by covering all surfaces with an opaque tape.
- All samples are presented at the same temperature, except sparkling wines, which are refrigerated. These uniform testing conditions are defined to optimize the perception of the sensory characteristics of the samples and remove bias.
- Tasters are presented with the following information for each sample:

- Wine Category
- Vintage year or non-vintage
- Grape varieties (when they will appear on the label)
- If applicable, “unfiltered” or “bottled with lees”
- No information that may identify an individual winery or brand is provided

### Sensory Methodology

- The method of evaluation was developed by the LCBO Quality Assurance Department based on the methodology based used by the OIV (an international wine standards body) in its wine rating system. It is a complex arrangement that includes:
  - Category-hedonics ratings. The taster selects qualitative ratings for defined sensory characteristics and attributes. The rated sensory characteristics are: appearance and colour, aroma & bouquet (with the attributes: correctness, intensity and quality), taste (with the attributes: correctness, intensity, finish and quality) and harmony. The rating categories range from “excellent” to “defective”, on a five-level scale.
  - For each attribute, tasters are asked to determine if a fault or defect is identified.
- For all identified quality problems, the taster provides a description of the identified flaw, defect, or failure to meet the category standard.
- All tasters are required to answer a Yes/No question about whether the wine is of sufficient overall quality and meets the applicable VQA standard.
- A majority of panelists indicating “yes” is required for a wine to successfully complete the sensory evaluation.
- Sensory evaluation results for each taster are entered into a database, allowing analysis of the results and monitoring of individual tasters’ performance.

### Sensory Analysis as a Discipline

- Sensory analysis is a well-established science in the wine and food industry and supported by considerable research. There are internationally standardized methods of sensory analysis as well as industry-defined sensory methods that follow similar scientific approaches as other scientific methods of analysis.

- It is established through research that tasters can be trained to detect specific attributes and character at pre-determined thresholds.
- Wine faults are well researched, documented and defined, with wine fault aroma kits being widely available to “calibrate” tasters to identify common faults that can occur in the winemaking process such as mercaptans, ethyl acetate and volatile acidity.
- The range of wine character is also reasonably well defined and documented around the world with the expected character of specific grape varieties defined on wine aroma wheels and spider plots.
- While there is some variability in a sensory evaluation assessment as with any measurement or method of analysis (chemical analyses also bear a degree of uncertainty/margin of error), it is a reliable mechanism to determine whether a wine is “sound” or has a specific fault. For VQA purposes the sensory evaluation is not to “judge” the wine to determine if it deserves a gold medal or is better or worse than its peers but simply to determine if it meets the minimum standards set out in regulation.

#### Appealing the findings of the tasting panel

- Wines may be submitted to the regular sensory evaluation panel up to 3 times in total.
- Wines that are re-blended or otherwise altered may be resubmitted as a new wine.
- A winery may apply for a tasting by an independent panel at any time after a failure.
- The independent appeal panel is made up of a group of wine professionals who are not involved with the regular panel.
- Wines that are the subject of an appeal are always tasted blind in a line up with at least two other similar wines (based on availability but typically the same vintage, variety and wine category) to reduce bias.
- In the case where the wine fails to pass the independent panel, the refusal to approve a wine may be appealed to the Alcohol and Gaming Commission tribunal in accordance with Regulation 405 of the VQA Act.