

Let your senses grow

Michelle Locke

Imagine a garden where melon, peach, apple, lemon, pear and gardenias bloom. Then imagine holding all that in a glass. That's the theory behind wine sensory gardens, featuring plants commonly smelled and tasted in wine.

Take a stroll through the neatly laid out cabernet-merlot corner of the red wine garden at the Kendall-Jackson Wine Center in Sonoma County, California, and you encounter things you expect to find, such as black cherry and black currant. And there are a few you might not expect, such as oregano and bell pepper, which also can be picked up in some reds.

It's a wine and noses experience. "We call this our scratch-and-sniff garden," says Matthew Lowe, a chef at Kendall-Jackson Wine Estates who has been involved with the gardens for a decade.

In each garden there are four quadrants representing different wines, and in the middle of the garden is a section of things that pair well with wines, for example sweet onions and peppers with Sauvignon Blanc. Self-guided tours are always available and there are guided tours three times a day during the summer.

The idea is to correlate the scent of a flower or tang of a berry with what you experience in the tasting room.

"You can come out to the pinot garden, you can grab a strawberry, you can grab a cherry from the tree, you can grab a blackberry or a blueberry and taste it to remind your palate about what you're smelling in that glass of wine," says Lowe.

Got a green thumb? This is also something you can try at home, says Katrina Frey of Frey Vineyards in Mendocino County.

Frey Vineyards was a pioneer as a purely organic winery, and the family planted sensory gardens "because we are a bunch of gardeners who also happen to make wine," says Frey. "Gardening is our relaxation and hobby. And it brings beneficial insects into our vineyards, and so it helps with our natural control of pests."

What type of aromatics you plant will depend on your climate; some common

flavors in red wine are raspberries, strawberries, black cherries and blackberries. For white wines, citrus and apples are common, along with mint and jasmine. Herbs are hardy and a good place to start. They don't take up a lot of room.

"In our garden, we have a section of herbs that we think go well with white wines, and these are lemon thyme, tarragon, basil, dill, cilantro and lovage," says Frey.

Colorful choices

Another idea is to go chromatic. For a white wine garden, you might look for plants with gold or yellow leaves; for red wine, plants with dark red leaves.

At Round Pond Estate in the Napa Valley, sensory gardens are curated by Jeff Dawson, who came up with the idea some years ago after encountering the "Aroma Wheel" developed by Ann Noble, a University of California, Davis, professor. It identifies aromas in wine.

Dawson helped get the gardens at Kendall-Jackson going, and six years ago moved to Round Pond, which has two gardens: Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon — the two major varietals grown there.

Plantings include things referred to when describing wine, such as grapefruit, lemon, lime nectarine and melon for Sauvignon Blanc. In the "affinities" section, there are plants such as peach and lavender, as well as a "color-pairing" concept in which Sauvignon Blanc is matched with lighter-colored vegetables such as yellow tomatoes and yellow zucchini, while cabernet is paired with red tomatoes.

It's a pick-and-sip opportunity. The best way to experience the garden is to walk around and take in the aromas and flavors, then take something like a strip of bell pepper back to the tasting room to see what works with which wines, says Dawson.

"When you have that sensory experience, that's the most profound effect in terms of relating it to what you might cook for dinner that night, or looking at what you're cooking for dinner and deciding what wine you might buy," he says. "The light comes on."



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1. Part of the sensory garden at the Kendall-Jackson Wine Center in Fulton, California, in the United States.

2. The Round Pond Garden in Rutherford, California. At Round Pond Estate in the Napa Valley, sensory gardens are curated by Jeff Dawson, who came up with the idea some years ago after encountering the "Aroma Wheel" developed by a University of California professor.

Showing blind faith in wines

Ruby Gao

At a tasting event held earlier this month in Shanghai by the International Wine Challenge (IWC), I tried a prized Pinot Noir, with charming ruby color, elegant note of vanilla, ripe fruit flavor and soft tannin, exhibiting typical old-world style. Unexpectedly, the label revealed it to be a Chilean wine and with a very attractive price.

In the world of wine, surprises of this kind are common. But whether its a wine's price, producer or quality, without expert guidance, such delights can only be found by chance.

For the uninitiated, selecting a wine can be daunting. When faced with a large list of wines on a menu or displayed in a wine store, what can we do? Ask the waiting staff or salespeople? In my personal experience, they are most likely to either recommend more expensive wines or promote a

particular brand. Consult the sommelier? Not all restaurants hire professional staff. And, not everyone is fortunate to have a friend who is a wine specialist familiar with wineries, regions and vintage years.

What customers require is not an endorsement for particular wine producers but independent and objective voices to be their reliable reference when ordering wine. The wine ratings offered by a non-commercial wine contest are an option.

According to Paul Catchpole, the director of the IWC, the objective stance of their annual independent wine competition held in London, to a large extent, is determined by the rigor of the judging system, including how many judges they use, the judges' credibility and whether the wine is blind tasted.

"For example, IWC has 400 wine judges and 40 of them are wine masters consisting of wine writers, wine buyers and wine consultants," Catchpole added. "When

tasting, they can only ask about the vintage and region and then give the mark. The wine is scored out of 100. A score of 85 or above qualifies the wine for the second round where it is reassessed. Finally, the organizer will announce who receives the gold, silver or bronze medal. This medal can become a consumer's point of reference when choosing wine."

So what happens if two judges give divergent scores for the same bottle? The answer is simple: Give the wine to the co-chairmen for re-tasting.

Catchpole also emphasized that to ensure the consistency of the judges, all wines that don't score high enough to qualify for the second round are re-tasted by co-chairman to ensure a decent wine isn't missed.

It is this type of competition and the blind tasting method that allows some small wineries to gain an international platform — hence my Chilean Pinot Noir surprise at the tasting event.

Such independent recommendations would be particularly welcome in young wine markets such as China, where expert advice is limited.

In the global wine market, China is still a new player but has developed quickly in recent years. Earlier this month, Vinexpo published its 2010 wine and spirits report, showing that China is the seventh-largest wine producer in the world and the fifth-largest red wine consumption market by volume.

Some wine importers said it is a pity a lot of wealthy Chinese wine consumers only know Chateau Lafite Rothschild. With a lack of other suggestions, the luxury brand has become the benchmark of quality wine in China.

For Chinese wine consumers, objective voices would make them feel more confident in making their selection and ultimately improve their wine experiences.