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## TASTING SPIRITS

For many, spirits are little more than alcohol and that view is unlikely to change if all we have to aspire to is merely another premium brand or another instantly forgettable cocktail. Attitudes will only change when spirits, like wines, engage our emotions and excite our palates with memorable drinking experiences. For that to happen we need to equip ourselves to make informed choices, not based on brand-speak but on a true understanding of tastes and flavours.

So how do we do that? First, we remember that tasting spirits is different to tasting wines. In spirits the level of alcohol is much higher. To assess and accommodate the potential impact of this alcohol, spirits must be approached with more care, initially from the lip of a glass, held steady in the hand and not twirled as is usual with wines. Otherwise the release of alcohol may temporarily anaesthetize the sensory organs in our nose, bite our tongue and burn our throat rather than serve to increase the mouth feel, provide a lovely warm feeling in the throat or to increase the overall depth and complexity of our experience.

Alcohol in spirits, or the lack of it, is key to defining our taste experience. It may enhance and accentuate the flavours in cocktails and long drinks. It may help to enrich texture and to extend the finish. Equally, an unbalanced level or lack of alcohol may well diminish all of these experiences.

What is certain is that a spirit's level of alcohol by volume is high

compared with wines but the quantity of alcohol actually consumed when drinking a spirit by the glass compared with a wine is usually significantly less. For example: a 175 ml glass of wine at 14% ABV holds 24.5 ml of alcohol whereas a 35 ml measure of spirits at 40% ABV holds 14 ml of alcohol.

Tasting is a very personal and subjective exercise. Sometimes our descriptions may help others to find the words they are looking for to describe their own experiences, but they are just as likely to confuse. So, the key to tasting spirits must be to record and share our experiences in a basic language and according to a recognizable structure. Only then can any more personal and creative thoughts add useful weight to our description of the experience.

When tasting spirits it is also wise not to look for winners or losers but to search instead for differences and to apply our knowledge of how the different spirits are made to understanding why each tastes the way it does. It may also be helpful to memorize key characteristics that broadly describe the individuality of each spirit category along with those that help to differentiate between spirits within each category.

What must never be forgotten is that the word 'tasting' is a misnomer. The true challenge in tasting spirits must be to use all our sensory organs to evaluate an experience. On our palate we can taste only five things: salt, sour, sweet, bitter, and a tongue-coating, long-lasting, savoury taste that a Japanese term, umami, is now used to describe. Flavour, however, is a perception that interprets information received from all five of our senses. Flavour is the cognitive, post-sensory perception that forms in our brains. In summary:

- Taste is made up of five pieces of information.
- Flavour is infinite.
- Taste is chemical.
- Flavour is an entirely personal experience created in our mind which we use words to communicate to others.

Our eyes see only three primary colours, but we are careful not to communicate too broad a description of what we see. Many so-called white spirits have hints of colour. Brown spirits are many shades of brown, from beige to mahogany. Also, our eyes can detect more than just colour. Indeed, the colour itself should be our last observation.

First assess the grip a spirit has to the glass; the greater the grip of the 'legs' that drop down the glass and the slower they fall, the greater the potential level of alcohol and/or quantity of congeners (flavour compounds). Before describing the colour itself, assess the clarity of the sample and then the intensity of the colour. Remember, we rarely describe a setting sun as red or a sky as blue. More likely, we say something like deep red or light blue. With spirits too, some are pale in colour while others are deep and intense.

Next we should recognize that our nose is our most useful sensory organ. Compared with those three primary colours and five tastes, there are thirty-two primary aromas. Our nose has five to ten million receptors capable of detecting aromas whereas our tongue has only nine thousand taste buds; thus, our nose is estimated to be ten thousand times more sensitive than our palate.

When we say that something tastes nice it is probable that 80% of the experience is detected in our nose. Certainly the nose provides excellent opportunities to test the initial judgements we make, based on colour. For example the nose can assess whether the colour is more likely generated by the addition of caramel or by maturation in wood.

As with our eyes, we must try to be precise with our observations on aroma. For example: freshness could be youthful, refreshing, raw or unbalanced. Again, we should leave specific descriptions of the actual aromas until last. First it is better to note whether the nose is open or closed, neutral or pungent, spicity or balanced, simple or complex. Only then should we assess the specific aromas, be they floral or phenolic, fruity or spicy, or any of the other aromatic qualities that can be found in spirits across and within the individual categories.

For the tasting itself, we should use the whole of our palate, looking for sweetness on the tip of the tongue, bitterness towards the

back and salty and sour characteristics to the sides before assessing whether length and finish extends the experience or disappoints. As with the eyes and nose, any specific characteristics should be left until last. Assess sweetness, alcohol, woodiness, texture, balance and intensity. Only then, as with the aromas, record the specific taste characteristics.

Sometimes experiences will develop as expected and sometimes not; sometimes, primary sweetness can become dry; sometimes a rich, full colour can contrast with a featureless, thin nose and a disappointing texture on the palate. Only by using all our senses to appreciate the overall character of a spirit can we make fair and useful judgements on overall quality. Employing a descriptor like 'premium' is lazy and unhelpful. Both a memorable and a disappointing drink experience warrant a description based upon our sensory experiences. Only then might there be additional value in assessing whether the experience justifies premium pricing or not.

Many spirits are truly great products, some with origins that have helped to mould history itself. Many have existed for generations and some for centuries, distilled by families devoted to capturing the very best from their local environment. They are luxury purchases for most and so should be enjoyed, like wines, with passion, with knowledge, and through informed and entertaining recommendation.