

Tasting the Glass

By Lisa Mitchell

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We are sipping Blue Pyrenees vintage bubbly in the Grand Hyatt's Kensington room where white linen tables await our seating. Atop them are glistening sets of glasses with rims so fine a snail might slice his innards out upon them. This is a Master Class "glass tasting", although the wines look worth a swallow too. Our instructor, Mark Baulderstone, hopes to prove that the vessel doth make the wine. Riedel (pronounced Ree-dil) is the name of an Austrian family of glass makers who blow fine "stemware" for wine lovers. Made from fine lead crystal, these glasses are as delicate as fairy breath. Slick a wet finger around the rim and a chorus of angels sings.

Claus Riedel, born in 1925, found that wine glasses were generally too small to allow the full appreciation of the nectar's many aromas and characteristics. He crushed a tradition of squat, ornately cut glassware to introduce the thin-blown, big bellied, long-stemmed lovelies we curl our fingers about today.

Tonight, the Vinum range lines up for scrutiny. There are 22 different glasses (including a water glass) priced between \$30 and \$40 a glass. We're testing only five. How does the glass transform the taste? It depends on how sensual you are. (Rarr.) Our perception of wine depends on three things: sight, taste and smell, says Baulderstone, Riedel's regional manager. Put a red or white wine in an opaque glass and even experts struggle to determine the difference, he says.

Each Riedel glass is designed to reveal the characteristics of a particular grape variety from the diameter of its rim and fullness of its bowl to the thickness of the crystal. Together, these features determine the quality and intensity of the bouquet and flow of the wine.

Seventy per cent of our reaction to wine depends on our olfactory experience of it. Go the big sniff and you'll sense flora and fruit in the top layer, in the middle it's all about oak and earth, and when the bottom's up, the alcohol comes hither. This is why you must swirl to release the aromas, and never fill a glass more than a third full, lest you limit the waft factor. Each level of bouquet preps your palate.

The tongue can be divided into taste zones: sweetness sensed along the tip, acidity along the back sides, and bitterness at the back. Each grape variety offers a different combination of sweetness, acidity, mineral components, tannin and alcohol and a good wine is one that balances these well. Here is perhaps Riedel's neatest trick of all.

A wide open glass forces us to sip by lowering the head, whereas the narrow opening of a bubbly glass forces our heads to tilt back. This directs the flow of the wine along your tongue to the most appropriate taste zones. Clever. A glass with a

cut rim, allows the wine to flow smoothly onto the tongue, while a rolled rim inhibits the flow and tends to accentuate acidity and tannins.

We pour Te Mata Estate 2003 Sauvignon Blanc into the Vinum Sauvignon Blanc glass. We swirl. "Passionfruit, it's soft, aromatic, a smoky character, bit of mineral there too," (Mark's effort, not mine). We sip. "Sweetness that tapers out, acidity on the edges, the length is quite sweet, with a bite on the top of the tongue". So true.

We transfer it to an ordinary tasting glass. Ewk (That's me). It's almost steely on the nose, unpleasantly zesty on the tongue and bone dry in the aftertaste. Back in its Vinum glass, it melts gently across my palate once more. We repeat the exercise with a Diamond Valley Pinot Noir 2002. I'm no fan of earthy pinot and the paddock smells nigh in the Vinum Bourgogne glass. I slop it into Vinum's Montrachet (Chardonnay) glass and the alcohol punches me in the nose, its gritty edge is stripped away. It is smooth and limp, like watery strawberry cordial, just the way I like it.

Poor Mark, it's tough having a dodgy palate like mine to explain away, but he manages well. The result depends always on your preference for grape varieties and even a Riedel glass will not make bad wine better. My palate is thankful for a chardy glass that transforms excellent pinot into an apparition of its former self.

Riedel's stemware, we decide, is a fine instrument that conveys the true essence of each bottle. The message is, drink excellent wine in excellent glassware. Would you serve soufflé in a take away tub? Me neither, not anymore.

Riedel holds master classes around Australia at various venues. Classes cost from \$100 to \$150, but you get to keep the glasses! Visit www.riedel.com for details. The Grand Hyatt offers wine tastings every Friday and regular food and wine events. Contact Tara Bishop 9657 1234.

More information on Lisa Mitchell's writing at lisamitchell.net.au