

TASTING EXPERIENCES

Following are some of the different kinds of tasting options you can utilise

Tasting Option	Delivery	Description	Suitable for
Informal	Hosted casually	Tasting at the bar with others present; pre-bookings not required; usually Free of Charge (FOC) or minimal tasting fee	General winery visitors
Formal	Guided	Conducted in a separate area or section of the bar, perhaps with a senior staff member or winemaker; may focus on a specific range of wines; FOC or tasting fee applied	Mid-high involvement wine consumers; Trade; Wine & Food Clubs
Structured	Guided	Specialised group tasting focusing on particular styles or varieties; usually follows a pre-set order to provide visitors with an overview of the range; FOC or set fee for service chosen	Day tour coach groups; Charter groups; Wine and food clubs; Large private groups
Combined	Guided or self-guided	Wine and food matched tasting; perhaps in cellar door, on a balcony or in a dining area; fee applied	General winery visitors and groups
Segmented	Guided	Tastings of specific wine ranges in separate areas of the cellar door or winery; FOC or fee applied depending on number of wines and price point chosen	All visitors – each area caters for different levels of interest
Educational	Guided or self-guided	Usually takes the form of wine flights: vertical (same wine, different vintages); comparative (same style, different wines or different oak influences, etc); contrasting (different varieties of reds, whites, etc); tasting could form part of a site tour with barrel samples, etc.	Mid-high involvement wine consumers; wine and food clubs; trade; private groups; possibly general visitors

Irrespective of the format you choose, the wine won't generally sell itself – you need motivated, passionate, knowledgeable people to do that.

It is important to remember that you're actually providing a "tasting experience" – it's not simply a sales pitch for you to sell wine. That experience needs to be delivered in a welcoming and relaxed manner: wineries have long been maligned for being too "high-brow" in their approach to tastings. De-mystifying wines and the tasting process should be one of your major goals.

It Doesn't Matter what YOU Think

It's easy to get caught up in tastings and start "telling" people what sensations they are experiencing. But tasting is subjective – even the best wine judges in the business can't agree, so what makes you think you can second guess what a less experienced visitor might be detecting? It's highly likely your tasting notes will have many descriptors included in the text, so use this as a guide if you need to – to lead rather than tell – and ask your visitor what they detect. A laminated tasting guide is also a useful tool to help educate visitors who show a real interest in trying to decipher the range of sensations they are experiencing.

Since tasting is so subjective there will also be times when visitors criticise your wine, so it's important to remain objective and not take it personally – no matter how erroneous the statement is. Like the time the rather snobbish lady said to her women friends, "This Riesling tastes far too woody for my liking". Yes, it's easy to come up with a quip like "the last time this wine saw wood, lady, was when it was still a grape attached to the vine". Instead, use the remark as an opportunity to explain that the character she's detected is likely to be from its extended aging or something similar.

People are generally open to learning new information, but they want it delivered in "bite" sized pieces (or small sips in this case). By all means explain the entire winemaking process, but be aware that most people will only recall snippets of information later. Respond to questions with short, succinct answers and only elaborate if you're pressed for more information. Tell people what **they** want to know, not what you **think** they want to know.

Take your Seats

Throughout the world, one of the most effective strategies for delivering an exceptional tasting experience is while people are seated. The reasoning is pretty simple: people that are sitting down are generally relaxed and more inclined to take their time to savour the experience. Just like dining in a restaurant, once you've sat down and placed your order, the hard work's over. It's time to sit back and enjoy the experience.



This concept is easily applied to tastings. Here are some simple ideas:

- Provide some small tables in the cellar door area and encourage people to partake in a self-guided wine flight. Your staff can do the rounds and check on each group in much the same way they would at the bar, still keeping tabs on who likes what. Create some structure by providing tasting mats, self-evaluation sheets and order forms (with pens of course).
- Set up a dedicated room for seated tastings for groups and special experiences. Tastings could be scheduled to occur at set times during the day if demand allows, or reserved for pre-booked tour groups. The advantage of this type of format over others for large groups is that it allows one person to conduct the tasting. Wine is pre-poured and arranged on a tasting mat, along with water and spittoons, and supporting information (plus pens of course). Towards the end of the tasting, order forms can be collected and processed for packaging or delivery.
- Add a little food to the experience by including a small portion to accompany the tasting. Shaw & Smith in the Adelaide Hills offer a simple cheese plate to accompany either of the wine flights chosen, as does Domaine Chandon in the Yarra Valley.

Boschendal Winery in South Africa prefer to host guests in a relaxed, seated tasting environment, either within Cellar Door or outside under a huge tree canopy. Visitors arrive at the reception desk, after which they are escorted to a table to sample their chosen wines. Order forms and accompanying tasting notes are provided to encourage purchases.

Coping with Busy Periods

Conducting a tasting experience takes time and keeping tabs on several groups at the same time is a special skill required of cellar door staff. Busy times really test the ability of staff to maintain a high level of personalised service and ensure that everyone leaves happy.

Peak periods can occur around Easter, Christmas, and Public Holidays and in conjunction with regional events (i.e. Winery Walkabout; Grape Grazing). The increased number of visitors can place a huge strain on resources if not catered for adequately, but even more important is to recognise that the type of visitor during these periods is different to normal off-peak periods. Research indicates that wine-focused visitors generally prefer to visit during off-peak periods, which leaves the occasional or infrequent consumer a likely visitor during peak periods.

People skills are far more important at this time than sensory ability, so staff must be able to anticipate the needs of a wide range of people all tasting at once. This will necessitate brief absences away from individuals and groups to attend to others, so exit strategies are important. Most people will be happy to be left tasting a couple of wines for a few moments, if you let them know you'll be back shortly.

Before you leave, ensure your guests have at least two wines to compare and give them some pointers or reference material to refer to while you're attending others. When you return, ask a targeted question, instead of general one. For example, "Now, I remember you liked the Sauvignon Blanc earlier, what did you think of the Unwooded Chardonnay?" rather than simply, "What did you think of that last one?" Being able to move easily between groups – and remember likes, dislikes and where in the tasting individuals are up to – are essential skills, especially in busy periods.

To Charge or not to Charge? That is the Question!

This is a common question among winery operators and one for individual – or even regional – consideration. Some figure that the tasting should always be free and charging a fee alters the 'relationship' from host-guest to seller-customer. Proponents use the 'obligation' factor to sell wine, in other words visitors feel obliged to buy as an outcome of their experience and by charging that obligation is removed and the visitor can simply exit without feeling pressured into purchasing.

There's merit in this way of thinking, but it's worth arguing the opposite point too. There are very few businesses in the world that give away free samples of their product without an expectation – or indeed a guarantee – of a purchase. And let's face it, there is a real cost in providing tasting samples at the cellar door. But it's not the cost of the wine that's the issue here (in reality, the cost should be regarded as an expense within the marketing and promotions budget) – it's the cost of providing the experience. This includes labour as well as fixed and variable costs associated with running a cellar door. Of course, if you're good enough at what you do, profit from sales will cover all of these costs.

If you're considering charging for an experience, make sure you're really offering something of value – a product that's worth paying for. This means creating tasting experiences that are different to standard offerings. Think about it from the consumer perspective too. Yes, many Australian visitors expect to taste for free – because it's traditionally been done that way. International visitors, however, are quite used to paying for service.

Many wineries approach it this way: a limited number of wines are available for free; anything beyond that is charged according to its value. This approach has the advantage of segmenting your visitors into those who are serious and those who are not. It also taps into the inherent desire of people to 'trade up' to an enhanced experience. It does not mean treating people differently in terms of quality of service! It's about respecting what their requirements are and catering accordingly.

Another advantage of charging for certain tasting experiences is that you now have a product to offer to tour operators upon which they can earn a commission. This is particularly relevant if you are looking to work with day or charter tour operators who can bring regular groups to your door. And it does cost more to provide dedicated staff to service these groups. The key is to offer value for money and an experience that is clearly different to that which you provide for independent travellers. If your range is limited and it's not possible to provide an entirely different experience, consider including a tour or a tangible educational element to add value.

Combining tours and tastings is a forte of the great Champagne Houses of France. In fact, many of them don't even offer access to the tasting and sales area without visitors having first completed the tour. The package being sold is a complete experience, designed to educate, entertain and ultimately result in sales.

Domaine Chandon in the Yarra Valley offer a very comprehensive and educational tour (which can be led or self guided) that leads to the sparkling wine tasting area, where all guests are seated at tables. The atmosphere is more akin to a fine dining restaurant than a bar and indeed table service is the primary delivery method. This tasting experience is predicated on the fact that sparkling wine cannot be enjoyed fully from a small tasting sample – so visitors purchase a full glass, which is accompanied by a small tasting plate.

Alternatively, three one-third full flutes of different sparkling styles can be substituted. A more traditional tasting experience is available for the still table wines – differentiating not only the winery experience but also the experience of drinking sparkling wine and table wine. A large range of hand crafted ceramics and other merchandise is also available in the separate sales area.

Meadowbank Estate in Tasmania offers nine wines in its range – six 'standard' and three 'premium'. The six standard wines are available to taste free of charge. A selection of other experiences attracts a fee. For example:

- Taste the full range including the premium wines for \$5 refundable on purchase
- A self-guided tasting includes cheese, six wines and tasting notes for \$7.50
- A blind tasting whereby wines are randomly placed on the tasting board for the visitor to guess the varieties. Accompanied by a cheese plate, the cost is \$7.50 and if the visitor correctly guesses each of the wines they receive a 10% discount on any wine purchased.
- "Black Glass" tasting using black Riedel glasses. Conducted in the cellar, wine is poured into the glasses for tasting and visitors are asked questions about the wine. Gerald Ellis says the experience confirms that people don't taste with their taste buds but with their eyes and brain. He says, "One glance at the label is worth 20 years tasting experience."

The Black Glass tasting is the ultimate educational tool because it requires that people rely only on their sense of smell and taste.