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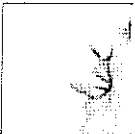
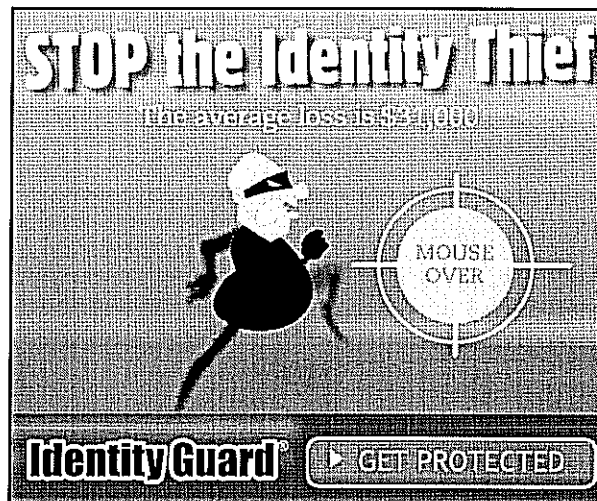
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Unconventional wine expert says the number of taste buds determines your wine preferences

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Wine expert Tim Hanni tells me I'm a closet White Zinfandel drinker.

Oh geez. If word gets out, I'm finished in this town.

Hanni, one of the first two Americans to pass England's prestigious Master of Wine exam, assures me that it's not my fault. He believes that taste in wine is physiologically predetermined by the number of taste buds on the tongue. Besides, he says, there's nothing wrong with White Zinfandel.

"The wine industry has convinced people what they have to drink to be sophisticated," Hanni says. "We're making mistakes from false assumptions and from not knowing how drastically an experience might vary from one person to the next."

Many leading scientists agree with much of Hanni's taste-bud theory. Some of the movers and shakers in the wine industry don't.

Of course they have doubts, says the 56-year-old Napa resident.

"Everything we ever thought we knew about wine is wrong," says Hanni, who wants not only to change the way wine is enjoyed, but how it's sold.

It's a tall order. But Hanni has decided to start small: First in Lodi, then the world.

Next Tuesday, judges will descend on the San Joaquin Valley city to rate wines from all over the world. But for the first time, says Hanni, they'll do it his way. Every judge will be required to take an exam. Not the kind that tests knowledge of terroir, ampelography or even varietals, but one that determines what type of taster each judge is.

Hanni breaks it into three categories: hypersensitive, sensitive and tolerant. He also has a fourth category for people who have a sweet tooth and may also be hypersensitive. Those are the folks who are predisposed to liking White Zinfandel and wines with similar characteristics.

Hypersensitive people, also known in the science world as supertasters, have the most taste buds, which results in heightened sensitivity to bitterness and other bold flavors.

"They experience a very vivid, high intensity - a cacophony, if you will - of sensations," says Hanni. "It makes it more difficult for them to find things they like."

Sensitive tasters have fewer taste buds, but still have a sharpened reaction to flavors.

And the tolerant taster, who has the fewest number of taste buds, is "more likely to like everything," says Hanni.

To determine which category each of the judges falls into, Hanni will swab their tongues with blue food coloring before photographing them under a magnifying glass. The fungiform papillae, small mushroom-shaped structures on the tongue that hold microscopic taste buds, will remain pink. By counting them, he will know who is hypersensitive, sensitive or tolerant.

The technique was pioneered in the early 1990s by Inglis Miller, a scientist who researched taste-bud development. The science is different from the widely debunked tongue map, a century-old idea that different areas of the tongue taste bitter, sweet, salty and sour. Scientists now believe that the entire tongue can taste all these flavors.

Hildegard Heymann, a viticulture and enology professor at UC Davis who specializes in sensory evaluation of wine and food, says that while Hanni's ideas are based in science they're "not as clear-cut as he makes them out to be."

Impact of life experience

She says life experiences play a big role in a person's culinary likes and dislikes.

"Supertasters tend to dislike broccoli, alcohol and chiles," she says. "Yet I know someone who is a supertaster that loves chiles. It's probably because she grew up in a home where they were frequently used."

But Linda Bartoshuk, a professor of taste and smell at the University of Florida in Gainesville who coined the term supertaster and is a leading authority on the subject, praises the way Hanni has applied the research to wine appreciation.

"I think Tim is a real hero," says Bartoshuk. "What he's doing is applying sensible science. The truth is, we live in different taste worlds. To try to say that one wine is better than another is just not sensible."

She says the food-color experiment can be done by anyone at home. Besides painting your tongue blue, Bartoshuk suggests using a hole puncher to cut two 6-millimeter circles out of a piece of paper. Position the cutout holes on the right and left sides of the tip of the tongue. With a magnifying glass count the number of fungiform papillae. If you have an average of 35 or more between the two openings, you're a supertaster. Fewer than 35, but more than 10, means you're a taster, says Bartoshuk - or sensitive in Hanni's terminology. Fewer than 10 puts you in the tolerant, or nontaster category.

Or you can skip the messy process altogether, says Hanni, and just take his free survey online (*budometer.com*). He says the quiz takes into account psychological factors, such as attaching wonderful memories to a certain food or drink even though technically you're not predisposed to liking it.

He calls it his "yumyuk" test. Questions include whether you enjoy salty foods, strong coffee, diet sodas, Coors beer over an imported Pilsner or a margarita more than single-malt Scotch.

Within seconds your results appear on the screen with a list of the kinds of wines you're likely to enjoy. For example: If you're a hypersensitive or a sensitive taster you'll probably gravitate to wines with "delicate flavors, lower alcohol and often sweetness," according to the Web site. "More tolerant tasters tend to favor wines with intensity, higher alcohol and more oak aging," it states.

Sweet Riesling, French Chardonnay, German, Austrian and Alsatian whites, and New Zealand, American and French Pinot Noirs are some of the suggested wines for hypersensitive tasters, according to Hanni. Sensitive tasters almost certainly will like Sauvignon Blanc from the United States and Chile, Viognier, Syrah, Merlot and Merlot blends and red Zinfandel.

Tolerant tasters usually prefer reds, according to Hanni. They like Cabernet Sauvignon, Rhone and Rhone-style blends, old-vine Zinfandel, Brunello, Barolo, Italian Amarone and intensely flavored reds from France, Spain and South Africa.

In the next month, Hanni says he expects to add a second more-detailed survey to the Web site that will eventually contain a database of 90,000 different wines to help consumers make choices.

Meantime, he's hoping that the Lodi judging will shake things up in the wine world. Each judging panel will be made up of pairs of hypersensitive, sensitive and tolerant tasters, and the wines will be rated in those three categories.

"A wine could potentially earn three gold stars if all three pairs on the panel really like it, or just one gold star in the tolerant tasting category, etc." says Hanni, who is eager to see if his unique approach takes off.

Carmen Castaldi, senior vice president of sales and marketing of Rodney Strong Vineyards in Sonoma, is dubious. His wines are entered in the competition, but he says he's not putting too much stock in the results.

Although he says the competition "seems like fun," he believes it's more directed toward consumers than the trade.

"I don't see it replacing the traditional way of judging," says Castaldi, who believes that there is an art to evaluating wine. "There are people with very experienced palates who taste 1,000 wines a month. They are truly professionals at this."

Then why do they rarely agree?

"There are wine critics who say this is a 98-point bottle of wine," says Peter Marks, the senior vice president of wine at Copia, the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, a nonprofit center in Napa. "And others who can't stand it. Tim is able to verbalize why, in a way that makes sense."

Marks says the center started teaching Hanni's approach a couple of years ago and believes it will revolutionize wine education and marketing.

"It takes the snobbishness out of it," he says. "And I have yet to find someone who can disprove what Tim is doing."

'Brainwashed' consumers

Unfortunately, says Marks, many wine drinkers "have been brainwashed by the wine industry," and believe they should follow the critics rather than make their own choices.

Hanni says it's up to educators, the hospitality industry and retailers to turn that around.

"We want this to become Wine 101 for everyone," says Hanni, a beverage consultant to chain hotels and restaurants such as Ruth's Chris Steak House and P.F. Chang's China Bistro.

For starters, he says, owners should organize their stores differently. Instead of arranging bottles by varietal and origin, they should categorize them on a scale of mild to strong, he says.

Every sommelier and server should be taught to evaluate whether a diner is a hypersensitive, sensitive or tolerant taster by asking a few simple questions similar to the ones on Hanni's survey, he says. Then they should know how to direct them to the right wines.

"I definitely think it is the way of the future," says Marks. "We're doing it at the wine shop here at Copia."

Hanni also suggests that traditional tasting notes, comparing wines to tobacco, chocolate and Bing cherries, go the way of the garbage can. He says the assessments are only beneficial to people in the industry and don't do consumers a lick of good.

As far as White Zinfandel, Hanni says it's time for me to come out of the closet.

"In the early 1900s, sweet wine was more expensive and more favored than any other wine," he says. "Do you know that a 15-year-old Spatlese Mosel Riesling sold for \$7 more than a 15-year-old Lafite Rothschild?"

This reporter is still a bit skeptical. So I've taken up Hanni's offer to judge the Lodi wine competition as a hypersensitive taster with leanings toward sweet things. I'll get back to you with the results.

Types of tasters

The following are some characteristics of different types of tasters, according to Tim Hanni:

Hypersensitive

- Has the most fungiform papillae.
- Two-thirds of hypersensitive tasters are female.
- Loves salt.
- Prefers coffee with cream and sugar.
- Detects a bitter taste from artificial sweeteners.
- Wine preferences skew toward lighter, more delicate and often sweet wines.
- Rarely acquires a taste for Scotch and Cognac.
- Alcohol frequently tastes like gasoline.

Sensitive

- Has slightly fewer fungiform papillae.
- Females also dominate this category.
- Prefers a touch of cream or sugar in coffee.
- Likes salt.
- Open to a wider range of taste experiences than the other two categories.

Tolerant

- Has the fewest fungiform papillae.
- Prefers dark roast coffee that's strong and black. Rarely adds cream or sugar.
- Typically doesn't add salt to prepared foods.
- Perceives alcohol as sweet.
- Can tolerate spirits and higher-alcohol wines with strong flavors.
- Demands intensity of flavor.

Sweet

- More than likely a hypersensitive or sensitive taster who prefers sweeter wines.
- Is sensitive to bitterness and alcohol.

-- Likes fresh, fruity flavors.

Lodi wine awards

Wine enthusiasts are invited to attend the Lodi International Wine Awards on Tuesday. Deadline for reservations is 5 p.m. Monday; call (209) 365-1195. The cost is \$35 a person. The fee includes a behind-the-scenes tour of the competition, an evaluation of your taste buds and wine tastings. Tour times are 8:30 a.m., 10:45 a.m., 1 p.m. Tours depart from the Lodi Wine & Visitors Center at 2545 W. Turner Road, Lodi.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/07/WI0UVB2AL.DTL>

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