

Liquid Assets: Some tips for making it a peak Experience

By Bill Ward, Star Tribune

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So many wines, so little time. That's an even bigger quandary than usual at the Twin Cities Food & Wine Experience this weekend at the Minneapolis Convention Center, which has added a reserve tasting to its already burgeoning array of wines while cutting back from three days to two.

For \$20 (on top of the \$65 entry fee at the door; see www.foodwineshow.com), attendees can sample 99 higher-end wines (which retail for up to \$120 apiece, although most fall in the \$20 to \$40 range) from noon to 4 p.m. each day. But there are tons of worthy offerings in the big hall for the regular admission price.

Locate the loos. First off, pinpoint the whereabouts of the bathrooms. If you're going to be sampling a good bit of wine, you should plan on drinking even more water.

Eat, drink and be merry. Besides lots of water, imbibers should nosh. Some wine tables will have crackers or bread; otherwise, just hit a food stand occasionally to avoid not only too much of a buzz, but the dreaded hiccups.

Drink like you eat. Approach this as if it were a meal. Save the sweet stuff -- dessert wines and the fruit wines that are a forté of several Minnesota wineries -- for last. I often go with white wines first, then rosés, then reds. I sometimes start with the priciest wines, while my palate is freshest. Sparkling wines can be first or last, preferably not in the middle.

Perhaps the best approach is to "body up." Start with light-bodied wines (dry rieslings, pinot grigio, pinot noir, Beaujolais), then try the medium-bodied varietals (chenin blanc, sauvignon blanc, malbec, sangiovese) and move up to the "big boys" (chardonnay, viognier, zin, syrah/shiraz).

Master the "spit take." Yeah, spitting is unseemly, but there are two good reasons to practice it occasionally: avoiding overindulgence and eschewing big gulps of mediocre to bad wines.

For years, my rationale for not spitting was that I found it impossible to fully assess the wine's finish without swallowing. But recently, local wine savant Annette Peters shared her secret: While swishing the wine around in your mouth, let just a smidgen of it slide down your throat.

It actually does work, as a little practice with water proved. If you're an inexperienced spitter, you might want to work on that technique at home. Regardless, wearing a white

shirt is not advisable.

Think local. There are some fine wineries from elsewhere represented here. But this is a good chance to check out the ever-improving wines from Cannon River, Falconer, St. Croix Vineyards and other nearby wineries. Local distributors such as World Class Wines, New France and -- for those who like their juice red, white and "green" -- Etica Fair Trade will be on hand, as well.

Quiet time. Don't like crowds? Be there at the outset (10 a.m. Saturday, 11 a.m. Sunday). Maneuvering is usually manageable, and several studies have indicated that our palates are at their peaks between 10 a.m. and noon.

Can the "smart talk." When chatting up the person pouring wine, it's never a good idea to act like a wine savant, even if you are one (or play one on TV). Besides, there's little chance he or she knows less about wine than you do, and even if that's the case, you will impress no one.

Read Ward on Wine at www.startribune.com/blogs/wine.

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