

Tasting Experiences

The 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 & 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 & 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 to 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 ageing or something similar.

People are generally open to learning new information, but they want it delivered in "bit" 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 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 wine 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 savor the experience. Just like dining in a restaurant, once you've sat down and placed your order, the hard works 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 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 a pen 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 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.

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 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 tasting all 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 will be back shortly.

Before you leave, ensure your guests have at least two wines to compare and give them some pointers of 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 Underwood Chardonnay?" rather than simply "What did you think of the 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.

WFA Wine Industry Tourism Toolkit

Conducting Structured Tastings

The main point of difference between a general tasting and a structured tasting is the method of delivery. Rather than simply allowing visitors to pick and choose the wines and the tasting order, you select a number of wines and present them in a pre-determined order. The term "structured" implies that a basic level of education is also included and leads to an "experience". This method is particularly suitable for large groups and lends itself to either a stand-up or seated tasting. It's a guide only so tailor it to suit your own individual.

Prior to tasting

1. Select a range of wines (6-9) from your portfolio that are representative of:
 - Varietals
 - Vintages
 - Vineyards/Regions
2. Choose a set tasting order starting with light aromatics, sparkling, oaked whites, light reds, oaked reds and finishing with botrytised or fortified wines.
3. Make up a sheet listing each wine accompanied by a brief tasting note.
4. Include any special offers and a brief history if room permits.
5. Limit the information to one A4 sheet (could be double sided).
6. For durability, the sheets can be laminated and re-used, unless you want the sheet to double as an order form/tasting record (be aware that visitors like to take these with them if they can).

Delivery

1. Select a suitable area to conduct the tasting that can accommodate the anticipated numbers comfortably (preferably away from the general public).
2. Welcome the group and attend to any "housekeeping" items (i.e. amenities, spittoons, water etc).
3. Explain how the tasting will be conducted (i.e. in tasting order according to the sheet provided).
4. Provide a brief history / overview of the winery and its facilities/ services.
5. Conduct the tasting in the pre-set order by introducing and explaining each wine as you pour. If customers want to taste something further down the list (i.e. Reds only), politely encourage them to wait.
6. As you are getting ready to pour the next wine, invite feedback from visitors.
7. As each bracket is concluded (i.e. End of the whites), pre-empt sales by asking "Which wine did you prefer?" of different visitors.
8. If you have something special available, such as a back vintage or a barrel sample, introduce it at the conclusion of the tasting.
9. Conclude the tasting with an invitation to purchase, perhaps explaining your methods of delivery and packaging, mailing list opportunities, distribution, etc. Also flag any supporting merchandise at this time.
10. Thank the group and Invite feedback.

Benefits of Structured Presentations

- Efficient use of staff (generally, one person can handle up to 30 people- groups greater than this can require a second person pouring while one speaks)
- Groups remain more focused on the tasting and can appreciate the wines better because of the pre-determined tasting order
- Potential for greater sales as the cellar door attendant will be aware of individual preferences
- Promotes an "experience" rather than just a tasting, with an educational focus
- Winery maintains control of the tasting

Variables

- Depending on your layout, structured tastings might not work well for very diverse groups (i.e. Large coach groups comprising a range of demographics)
- Consider seated tastings if room permits, with wine already pre-poured, perhaps with a food accompaniment. Works well with very large groups (45+) and allows efficient use of staff resources
- Test what works for you and don't be afraid to try something different