

Five books for learners. From amateurs to MWs, these books address learning from every angle, some more successfully than others.

Anyone Can Taste Wine

You just need this book

Cees van Casteren MW

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I met Cees (pronounced ‘case’) van Casteren at Wiesbaden this year. He was the only other person to plonk down on the mercifully cool grass where Paula Sidore, Anne Kriebiehl MW and I had set up a picnic supper, eschewing the beautifully laid, tablecloth-, silverware- and flower-bedecked tables where everyone else was seated. It was a hot night. It had been a brutally hot day. We were dressed up but we didn’t care. High heels in a pile behind us, much-needed cold (really cold) glasses of Riesling in hand, there was gossip to be had.

A quiet, smiling Dutchman appeared on the fringes of our chattering and asked if he could join us. Anne and Paula lit up with warm welcome. Introductions were made. It was Cees who went to purloin a bottle of our favourite Riesling when the wine ran out. The next day, after a marathon morning of tasting GGs, I headed to find sustenance before the afternoon session. Hesitantly walking into one of the allocated restaurants, not sure of the official protocol, I saw someone waving at me from a table. It was Cees. ‘Come join me!’ he called, and then, ‘Can I get you a glass of wine?’

We chatted over lunch, about wine, our jobs, tasting, tasting vocabulary. ‘I’ve written about it’, he told me, ‘A method. I wrote a book.’ I’d love to read it, I said. I didn’t realise at the time that this kind, thoughtful person, who’d come across as modest and unassuming, was the second Dutch MW, author of 12 books, Dutch Vinologist of the Year twice, chairman of the United Vinologists, and consultant for Errázuriz and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands, among others. Prior to his wine-writing career, which began in 2004, he’d spent 14 years in the chemicals industry, specialising in oenological yeasts and enzymes.

Like Neel Burton and Nick Jackson MW (whose books are reviewed below), van Casteren believes that it is method and practice that determine wine-tasting skill rather than any innate ability or physical number of receptors on the tongue. Like Jackson, van Casteren developed his method while facing the massive challenge of passing the MW tasting exams. Unlike the offerings of Burton and Jackson, this book is aimed at wine lovers and enthusiasts rather than MW students trying to pass exams. As a result, the tone is much more relaxed, even playful (it kicks off with one of Roald Dahl's wickedly cynical but hilarious short stories) and the book is gorgeously bright. A much-needed splash of colour in a run of black-and-whites.

Where Burton focuses on knowledge of grape varieties and regions, Jackson on structure and sensation, van Casteren's method focuses on vocabulary (with US spellings): 'The difficulty that most besets inexperienced tasters is a lack of suitable vocabulary that would enable them to name and describe the flavors and scents that they taste and smell. This vital skill, being able to describe flavors and aromas in words, remains a common problem, even for the most experienced of wine tasters.' Struggling with this very problem, van Casteren decided he had to come up with a user-friendly method to help him analyse and identify wines.

It's called CHARACTER, a mnemonic for a step-by-step wine-tasting process. C stands for colour; H for harvest aromas; A for aromas of winemaking; R for ripening aromas; A for acidity; C for candy (sugar levels); T for tannins; E for ethanol (ie alcohol); and R for relative fruit intensity. Mnemonics are cute, memorable and all very well but they are often limited in terms of usefulness. However, in the chapters that follow, van Casteren proves that his is not a superficial gimmick.

Coaching the process at two levels in parallel (novice and advanced) and using examples of specific wines, he takes the reader through each step of seeing, smelling and tasting. In terms of providing vocabulary, van Casteren has created a straightforward, gloriously colourful, strongly visual aroma wheel based on Dr Anne Noble's wine aroma wheel, but different – one of the best I've seen, to be honest. It actually looks *fun*, but examine it closer and it doesn't take much to realise how very, very clever this wheel is, and how much thought has gone into designing something this crystal clear, clean, user-friendly and memorable. Corresponding to his CHARACTER method, the wheel picks up on the three broad categories of 'harvest aromas' (aromas/flavours coming from variety and

vineyard), ‘aromas of winemaking’ (aromas/flavours coming from oak, yeast and malo), and ‘ripening aromas’, which might be better described as maturation aromas but that wouldn’t fit the mnemonic (oxidative, evolution in bottle). Following on from this are equally careful, crystal-clear, graphically illustrated guidelines for assessing acidity, sugar levels, tannins etc.

That’s part one. Part two (‘Knowledge’) dives into analysis of vineyard and winemaking impact on wine flavours, directly relating the information provided back to the process, back to wine-tasting observations and deductions, enriching vocabulary. Part three (‘Combine method with knowledge’) tackles the question of quality, drawing the information gathered from CHARACTER observation into another method-tool mnemonic: CACHET. Part four (‘Practice’) has two brilliant chapters: The G-20 (the big internationals) and Local Heroes (around the world in 80 wines), guiding the reader through the application of the CHARACTER method to 100 wines.

The person who has written this book comes at this with the mind of a scientist, the soul of a teacher, the eye of a graphic artist, the disciplined organisation of a librarian (or data scientist), the heart of a wine lover. Interspersed throughout the book are nuggets of gold – information presented in crystal-clear, creative, graphic-cum-textual formats that are startling in what they reveal and the memorability with which the data are revealed. There’s the tannin tower, the micro-oxidation spectrum, the residual-sugar scattergraph, and the pH-scale comparison with other beverages and fruit on one side (Coca-Cola 2.4 to milk 7.3) and wines on the other (Riesling Eiswein 2.8 to Châteauneuf-du-Pape 3.9).

From explaining the Laing Limit (David Laing, Australian psychologist demonstrates that the human nose cannot on average pick up more than four aromas when multiple compounds are combined in a mixture) to Marangoni’s Tears (those wine ‘legs’), polymerisation to hydrolysis to sugar levels v alcohol in sweet/fortified wines, van Casteren introduces the reader to some pretty complex aspects of wine tasting – but every single time, without exception, in the most exquisitely simple, clear way, without a shred of condescension or pedagogical clumsiness, often illustrated with brilliantly conceived graphics.

I found one weakness (whew! I thought I’d been snake-charmed there for a moment). There’s no basic vocabulary given for shades of colour, which would be very useful.

Other than that, the book is the perfect adjacency between all the elements that must come together to create a powerful teaching tool. It's beautiful to look at, has tactile elegance and weight, is instinctively easy to use, and is visually powerful in a neurological and emotional way (both of which are important for imprinting memory). The delivery of complex information is not only crystal clear (I know I'm repeating those words – they sum up my strongest impression of this book), beautifully logical, measured and bite-sized, but it comes with white spaces that allow for the assimilation of masses of information, new concepts and the linking of new concepts. It's a book that meets the learning needs and styles of systems-thinking brains and linear-thinking brains. It will work for all learners, whether creative, visual, word-based or logical.

Before I finish, there are people who must be acknowledged, because behind a book of this calibre there is always a team. Huge kudos goes to Studio Christa Jesse for the illustrations and to DATbureau.nl for the design of the book. If I ever write a book, I know who to call. Likewise, credits to Heather Wilson and Cees van Casteren for the translation in English and Jamie Goode and David Ramsay Steele for editing. The book is immaculate, from start to finish.

This is *the* book, hands down, which I would give to someone who came to me saying, 'I want to learn more about wine. Where do I start?' It's the book I would give to the new WSET student. It's the book I wish someone had given me in 2003. In fact, scrap that. The author gave this book to me in 2022, and I am going to go back to scratch and learn a few new things from it in 2023. It is *the* best 'learn to taste wine' book I have ever come across.

Thanks go to Paula and Anne. If it wasn't for you two and your 'damn protocol!' spirits, I'd not have met Cees. Here's to cool grass on a hot night, impromptu lawn picnics at posh dinners and stealing bottles of Riesling from the bar.