

What Does ‘Midpalate’ Mean in Wine?

BY [STACY BRISCOE](#)



ILLUSTRATION BY ALYSSA NASSNER

“There are three main stages in [wine] tasting: the attack, or ‘approach,’ the midpalate and the finish,” says Janet Kampen, lead instructional designer at [Napa Valley Wine Academy](#).

The midpalate follows the initial burst of flavor and texture when you first draw wine into your mouth. “Some tasters limit their definition to just flavors, but a more holistic approach also considers mouthfeel and the perception of other structural components,” says Kampen.

A wine with a good midpalate unfolds and develops on the tongue. It will have flavor, but also structure. “That doesn’t mean the wine has to have high levels of tannin, acid, alcohol, etcetera, but there should be enough there to support the flavor development,” says Kampen. “A wine with a great midpalate is one that expresses itself so well in the mouth, you find yourself savoring it, swirling it around your palate to discover more.”

While it's easy to assume the midpalate plays more heavily in red wines versus whites, Mary Margaret McCamic, MW, says that even unoaked white wines can showcase complexity here. She points to Grand Cru Chablis, old-vine cru Muscadets, as well as German and Alsatian Rieslings as examples.

“When a wine has presence in the center, supported to the sides by acid and a suggestion of...phenolic properties pulling towards the back, I am more aware of its role in the middle,” says McCamic. “It’s a very subtle push-and-pull that tells me more is going on in-between.”

Tips to help assess a wine’s midpalate

Make sure you have the wine in your mouth long enough... Swirl, swish and savor that wine for a good 10 seconds at least to truly get a sense of the midpalate.

Draw air in over the wine as it’s in your mouth to help release flavors. Also, breathing through the nose a little while the wine is in your mouth can help too.

Conversely, wines with a “weak” midpalate incorporate very little or no development from sip to swallow. “The flavors remain the same, the structure is static,” says McCamic. “It’s like being drawn to someone for a first date to learn they have charm but no substance.”

These wines are often referred to as “donut wines,” says Kampen, because they’re missing their middle. “Some varieties are prone to this, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, which often shows its hand at the attack, but tannins can tend to disappear on the midpalate, then jump back in on the finish,” she says. This is why Cabernet Sauvignon is often blended with Merlot, a grape that gives more centralized, fleshier tannins. “Blending is one of the best tools in a winemaker’s arsenal to ensure the wine has a good midpalate.”

There are many other winemaking variables that can affect the midpalate, however. “Ripeness at harvest, yeast selection, managing ferment temperature and adding flavor or textural interest through extraction techniques, oak maturation, etcetera, can all aid a winemaker,” says Kampen.

Some prefer to focus on the individual components of the wine, rather than bundle them under one umbrella. “To be honest, I rarely think of the term ‘midpalate,’” says Peter Marks, MW. “When I first taste a wine, my initial thoughts go to the wine’s

structure—sweetness, acid, tannin, alcohol, etcetera. After spitting or swallowing, I pay attention to the persistence of the flavors on the palate, the finish. In between, I consider the wine’s body, depth, concentration and complexity of flavors.”

Marks considers all these components as part of the midpalate, but doesn’t typically use the word or teach it to his students. “If you’re describing the wine’s body, concentration and complexity, you’ve covered all you need to know about the midpalate,” he says. “Wine can be so confusing for students. Why make it worse by having them describe ‘midpalate’?”



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