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Drink, Memory: How to Remember That Wine

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By LETTIE TEAGUE

Albert Einstein apparently had as faulty a memory as the average Joe—he famously claimed that he never memorized anything he could look up. I often feel that way about wine. Why bother committing vintages, production numbers or even names to memory when all those things can be looked up so easily?

Illustration by Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal

Of course wine professionals are held to a higher memory standard than regular drinkers—or even Mr. Einstein. How would you feel about a sommelier who responded, "Hang on a minute, let me go look it up," when you asked for some details about a wine on the list?

Wine journalists have similar, perhaps even more daunting obligations; we function as a collective memory for everyone else. I can't count the number of times a friend or a complete stranger has asked me to identify a wine that he or she consumed the week before based on a few details about the bottle in question, such as, "It had a white label and a 'w' in the name."

Why do people remember the wines that they do in the way that they do? And why are there so many (more) wines that they forget?

I decided to seek some professional insight into the matter, so I called William Hirst, a professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York and a creator of the school's Memory Studies program. Prof. Hirst offered a wine memory of his own. "I have a very clear memory of a friend who had a fight with her boyfriend and decided she deserved a really good bottle of wine from his cellar," he recalled. "I remember it was Château Latour."

I could think of several collectors who would never speak to their significant other again if the loss of a Latour was involved, but Prof. Hirst steered me back to the point of his story: "Although we have good visual memories, people actually remember things best in a context," he said.

The phenomenon is known as semantic memory. "We may remember a nice label with a flower

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on it, but it doesn't tell you much about the wine," Mr. Hirst said. "However, if you remember the wine in the context of the dinner and the people at the dinner, you're more likely to remember the wine. There are a lot more rich clues to get down to the taste of that particular wine."

This made sense to me; in fact, "semantically" is typically how I remember wines most vividly. The wines that stick with me are often made by winemakers I've actually met, or produced in places I've actually visited—or they are consumed on memorable occasions with friends. These things ensure the wine resonates long after the bottle is gone.

For example, I've never forgotten a wine that I found on a trip to Alto Adige, Italy, some six years ago. Made from the Müller-Thurgau grape and planted in a vineyard more than 1,000 meters high, the Tiefenbrunner Feldmarschall was a gorgeously minerally white wine made in an extraordinary place. I later introduced it to my husband, and Feldmarschall is now his favorite wine. Prof. Hirst was right: Context was everything—at least for my wine memories.

A drinker's particular passion can also shape his or her memories. For Eberhard Müller, formerly a chef at New York restaurants like Le Bernardin and now a full-time farmer on Long Island, the most memorable wines are those that pair well with food. He rattled off the names of several German Riesling producers (he is from Germany himself), describing their food-friendly properties. He was particularly keen on the Rieslings from Zilliken, a producer from the Saar Valley. The 2007 Zilliken Saarburger Rausch Kabinett Riesling—a bright, delicate wine with intense floral aromas—was one that he remembered particularly well.

When memory fails, it's best to take notes. My friend Andy, a wine collector from Scarsdale, N.Y., writes notes on scraps of paper that he later types into his computer and posts on CellarTracker, a website that serves as a kind of community of tasting notes available to all. He admits his is an imperfect system: He has "about 40 scraps of paper stuffed in a notebook that I haven't found the time to post online." And he doesn't always remember the wines until he reads his notes.

Andy's wife, Holly, relies on the less effective if more common strictly visual approach. At a recent dinner, she tried to remember the name of "a really reasonably priced" Champagne that she liked. "It has a really distinctive label. I buy it from Zachys. Do you know the one I mean?" she asked me. (It turned out to be Charles Ellner Brut Prestige Champagne, whose label depicts four women in period costumes clustered around a man. In this case, the retailer was the clue: I'd actually bought the wine there myself.)

What about sommeliers, the professionals who are expected to keep thousands of wines in their heads? I put the question to Aldo Sohm, the celebrated wine director of New York's Le Bernardin.

"In big tastings I take notes because I have to taste too many wines in a very short period of time," Mr. Sohm wrote in an email from vacation in Austria. He added that he doesn't do this when he is eating out, lest he disturb other diners with his notes (Mr. Sohm is a very polite man). In that case, Mr. Sohm said he "just memorized" the wine—sometimes augmenting his memory with a picture from his iPhone.

I was heartened by this admission, since I've taken iPhone photos fairly often myself. A photo can't provide the tasting details of a written note, but it's an easy, handy reference.

But notes and pictures only go so far. If the information is filed away in a notebook or phone, it doesn't reliably remain in my memory for long (see: Einstein). The wines that truly resonate are the ones that I've shared with others; they're not just wines that I've admired or enjoyed but wines that have truly enhanced my life.

Oenofile: Wines I'll Never Forget

2010 Tiefenbrunner Feldmarschall, $35

This lovely white from Alto Adige, Italy, is made from the usually undistinguished Müller-Thurgau grape. But grown at a high altitude on limestone soil, it acquires brilliance and depth. Years ago I visited the vineyard where Feldmarschall comes from, and that memory, coupled with the taste of the wine, has led me to drink it over and over again.

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About Jay McInerney

Jay McInerney, the author of seven novels, including "Bright Lights, Big City," is one of the country's best-known contemporary fiction writers. He has also emerged as one of the freshest voices in the wine-writing field. His monthly wine columns for House & Garden magazine are collected in two books, "Bacchus and Me" and "A Hedonist in the Cellar." In 2006, he was the recipient of the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award. A collection of his short stories, "How It Ended," was published in 2009.

About Lettie Teague

Before joining The Wall Street Journal in 2010, Lettie Teague was the executive wine editor at Food & Wine magazine, where she wrote the monthly column Wine Matters. She received the James Beard Foundation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award in 2003 and won a 2005 James Beard Award for magazine columns. She is the author of "Educating Peter: How Anybody Can Become an (Almost) Instant Wine Expert," published by Scribner in 2007, and the illustrator and co-author of "Fear of Wine: An Introductory Guide to the Grape," published by Bantam in 1995.

Email Mr. McInerney and Ms. Teague at wine@wsj.com.

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2009 Dehesa Gago G Toro Spain

2009 Dehesa Gago G Toro Spain, $12

Telmo Rodriguez, the creative genius behind Dehesa Gago G and other Spanish wines, is a man with a lot to say. I'd barely gotten off the airplane in Madrid a few years ago when Mr. Rodriguez began telling me about his vinous vision. That memory has remained with me, and I continue to be impressed by Mr. Rodriguez's well-priced wines, like this concentrated, lush red from the Toro region.

2009 Domaine Huet Vouvray Clos du Bourg Sec, $30

My friend Scott and I took a trip to the Loire several years ago with one thought in mind: to taste the wines of the great Vouvray producer Domaine Huet. The weather was terrible but the wines were spectacular. The 2009 Clos du Bourg is a white wine so concentrated it's almost voluptuous, but marked by a firm acidity and a minerally finish.

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2007 Zilliken Saarburger Rausch Kabinett Riesling

2007 Zilliken Saarburger Rausch Kabinett Riesling, $24

Chef-turned-farmer Eberhard Müller loves great German Riesling, and the wines of Weingut Zilliken (aka the star of the Saar) are some of the wines he loves—and remembers—best. The nose of this off-dry Riesling is a veritable floral cloud while the wine itself is fairly delicate, almost filigreed, with a long, stony finish.

2010 Domaines Ott Château de Selle Rosé, $40

This wine is reliably remembered by just about anyone who's ever had it—in large part because of its distinctive bottle, which is shaped a bit like a large perfume flagon. Fortunately, this Provençal rosé isn't memorable only for its packaging: With notes of red (read: strawberry) fruit, it's lively and lithe—a good wine with food.

Corrections & Amplifications

CellarTracker is an online community offering tasting notes on wine. An earlier version of this column incorrectly gave the name as Cellar Tracker.

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

2010 Domaines Ott Château de Selle Rosé

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