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HEATED DISCUSSION

A lot of people read wine writers' columns. Well, a lot of wine writers wish a lot of people would read their columns. But it doesn't always happen that way. On the other hand, you're reading a wine column. And wine writers read wine columns. Other than their own, that is.

They—we—check out the competition, to see how we're doing in comparison. We also look for ideas for our own literary efforts. Not plagiarism, exactly, but more like intellectual ferment. And sometimes we

use these other columns as a debating point. Wine writer number No. 1 says something, so wine writer No. 2 must say the opposite. Not to be ornery, mind you, but because any two wine writers will rarely agree on anything. It's the principle of the thing. That's what's going on here.

I recently read a wine article by a respected expert, one much more famous and better paid than I. He was on a tirade about the serving temperature of red wine. I disagreed with just about everything he said.

Well, not the basics. He observed, accurately, that too many restaurants and too many people serve their wines at a too warm temperature, 75 degrees or more. This tends to show off the alcohol in any wine, making it taste flabby and harsh at the same time. As we live in a time when far too many red wines are as high in alcohol as they are low in acidity, choosing the right serving temperature can be crucial. So on a warm day, or in an overheated house, it's a

good idea to chill one's red wine a bit.

But this expert declared that all red wines should be served at no more than 65 degrees Fahrenheit, regardless of setting. His argument was that the classic "room temperature" for drinking wine, as opposed to "cellar temperature" for aging the stuff, was much colder a couple of hundred years ago.

He's right that not many of us keep our homes at 65 degrees Fahrenheit these days. And restaurants that tried to do so would retain very few customers.

My objection is to his didactic declaration that all people would like all red wines served at one temperature. My wife Chris and I, for example, prefer our reds at something like 70 degrees, a temperature that lets the fruit show without unleashing the alcohol.

As with everything about wine, the issue is one of balance. I believe that wine is all about fruit—at a too cold temperature, the fruit sleeps and the tannins are all you can taste. At a too warm temperature the fruit blossoms but the alcohol takes over, turning the wine harsh. And the "sweet spot," the point at which the wine tastes best, varies from individual to individual.

I once met a gentleman, a fine and experienced taster, who could not enjoy his champagne unless it was icy cold. He declared bubbles that didn't frost the glass were flat and blowsy, out of balance. At the same temperature, I could barely taste the wine at all, let alone enjoy it.

And I taste with a group that favors pinot noir, particularly red Burgundies. They like to chill the bottles for an hour or so before tasting them. It takes me nearly half an hour of swirling the wine to warm it to a level where I can evaluate it.

The pleasures of wine are like that; each of us has our own—entirely valid—perspective. That's why I get riled when "experts" try to tell us what, and how, to enjoy our wine.

Don't believe 'em (or me, for that matter). Taste a lot of wines, note your favorites and proudly stick to your smarts if any wine snobs try to tell you you're wrong. Remember, you can only drink wine with one person's mouth—your own.