



THE SCIENCE OF TASTING

Tim Hanni is a pioneer of psycho-sensory studies—and a moving target

KIM PIERCE

Tim Hanni knows what his critics say. “Tim Hanni is dumbing down wine,” he parrots from his office at COPIA in Napa, Calif., where he’s the director of applied psycho-sensory studies. He takes flak for his “Budometer” and gets blasted for promoting progressive wine lists. A restaurateur in Richmond, Va., even called him an “idiot” on one of eRobertParker.com’s bulletin boards.

You can almost hear Hanni (pronounced HAND-eye without the “d”) take a deep breath as he pauses at the other end of the line. He’s accustomed to uphill battles. “Twenty years ago, somebody said, ‘Tim Hanni’s an idiot; there’s no umami,’” he says, referring to what has come to be identified as the fifth taste, for which the tongue has unique receptors. He was one of the first to espouse the concept.

But Hanni's a moving target. One of America's first Masters of Wine, he's got a passion for science that has driven him to bird-dog sensory studies for decades. He's also a recovering alcoholic who stopped drinking 15 years ago. And as a professionally trained chef, he's developed Vignon, a seasoning blend that he swears makes foods more compatible with wine—even in unheard-of matches such as lamb and Riesling or asparagus and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Wine professionals don't know what to make of him. But beneath the jumble of contradictions, Hanni will tell you he's a man on a mission. He's not trying to reshape the wine landscape or fit people into boxes. He just wants to use what is known about the science of tasting to make wine less intimidating and food pairing easier. Bigger bottom lines, he says, will follow.

"Everything I do I frame in the concept I introduced to the industry, called the 'psycho-sensory phenomenon,'" Hanni says. "The two components we look at are what's your sensory anatomy, and the second part is psychological." That's how we subjectively make sense of what we experience, he explains.

Sensory Anatomy

Although taste anatomy varies from one person to another, research at institutions such as the Monell Chemical Senses Center and the University of California-Davis has been unlocking its secrets. For example, studies tell us that some people have as few as 10 taste buds per square centimeter of tongue, while others may have as many as 1,100. "Our taste buds don't change," Hanni says. "It's the psychological, neural synapses and networks that change." Hanni has taken what we know about tasting and combined it with what he knows about wine and food to create the Budometer, an online quiz that determines what wines people might like based on their coffee, beer, cocktail, and soft-drink preferences.

Through trial and error, Sally Mohr, MS, has come up with a similar line of questioning at her Colorado retail store, the Boulder Wine Merchant. "It's turned into my litmus test for people who can't tell me what they like," she says. Mohr starts by asking them, "Do you drink coffee? Put cream in it? Put sugar in it?" If they like it black, she asks them whether they prefer espresso or drip. "Espresso drinkers prefer Old World wines," she reports. "Someone who needs

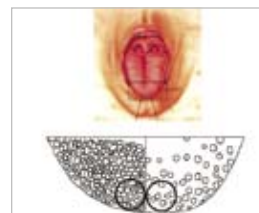


Tim Hanni, MW (above); a Sensitive taster's tongue (below); difference in taste buds between a Hypersensitive taster (bottom left) and a Hypertolerant taster (bottom right).

cream, they'll venture a little into the Old World wines, but it has to be a ripe vintage. It can't be too tart. It can't be too acidic. A sugar person needs full-on oak, full-on ripening, big, lush, and opulent."

Hanni groups subjects into four flavor-sensitivity categories. "A 'Tolerant' is somebody who probably drinks their coffee black," explains G.M. "Pooch" Pucilowski, CWE, who ran the California State Fair Commercial Wine Competition for 20 years. "The more cream and sugar you put in your coffee, the more 'Sensitive' or 'Hypersensitive' you may be." The most sensitive tasters are called "Sweets."

Hanni believes most wine-competition judges are Tolerant or Sensitive tasters. Two years ago, Pucilowski selected judges for the first Lodi International Wine Awards, which were held in 2008, by using an expanded Budometer questionnaire. "We put six judges on a panel," he says—"two Tolerant, two Sensitive, and two



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Sally Mohr, MS, of the Boulder Wine Merchant in Colorado.



G.M. "Pooch" Pucilowski, CWE.

Hypersensitive. Each judge would rank the wine gold, silver, bronze, or no medal. We didn't allow any judge to talk to other judges." Each judge scored the gold-ranked wines from 1 to 15, and the scores were then tallied. The wineries knew the judges were going to be chosen this way, Pucilowski notes. "I think that is one of the reasons we got so many entries," he says, referring to the 527 contenders. "The wineries thought, 'Wow, a different way of judging wines.'"

The Case for the Opposition

Wine blogger Alder Yarrow agrees with Hanni that we all experience taste differently, but that's as far as the agreement goes. "We start vehemently disagreeing on whether it's possible to determine the difference between individual tastes," says the San Francisco-based Vinography.com founder, "and whether it's possible to predict them based on answers to certain questions."

Gary York, owner of Enoteca Sogno in Richmond, Va., was the naysayer who called Hanni an "idiot" online. "Wine has a lot of intricacies," York says. "To say you can come up with a system that captures all this, I don't know if it's possible." As the name of his wine bar implies, York is an Italophile; he uses Chianti as a benchmark in helping customers decide what to drink. "Is

it too dry? Not dry enough? About right? This gives me a framework," he says.

York sums up why he doesn't like the Budometer: "It is too directive in telling consumers what they should drink, which is likely to limit them from trying different things they might enjoy. Part of the enjoyment of wine is the discovery process of trying different wines."

To Hanni, York represents the psychology side of the sensory-psychology equation. "Gary York is right," he says. "He's very passionate. People want to share vicariously through his passion and point of view." They're primed to follow York's advice, he says, and that's fine. But Hanni maintains there's a larger audience who "don't even know where to begin to discover. They would never, ever venture to someone like Gary to ask."

Progressive Wine Lists

This is where the progressive wine list comes in. Hanni didn't necessarily invent the concept, says Gary Spadafore, CWE, director of education for Alliance Beverage Distributing Co. in Phoenix, but "Tim popularized it and took it a step further with some partners called WineQuest." Among other things, the consulting company has generated flavor-profile ratings for some 70,000 wines, making it easier



Gary Spadafore, CWE, director of education for Alliance Beverage Distributing Co. in Phoenix.



Gary York, owner of Enoteca Sogno in Richmond, Va.

to develop and maintain a list that groups wines by style from lighter to fuller, rather than by varietal or region. Winemetrics, a Connecticut-based research firm that operates in 20 states including California and New York, finds that 30% of casual and upscale chains use some kind of progressive wine list, compared to only 4% of fine-dining restaurants.

Spadafore, who's on the Society of Wine Educators' board of directors, says the progressive list makes sense when a restaurant is training servers who may not know much about wine. But he believes it can also be a useful tool in a white-tablecloth restaurant where the clientele is more knowledgeable. For that setting, Hanni recommends what he calls a "selective progressive wine list" that highlights wines a restaurant wants to sell, but doesn't replace the traditional list.

"I think the enlightened sommelier, the progressive sommelier, the person who realizes they cannot possibly be at every table in every situation, would not mind giving up some of the power," Spadafore says, "and training their staff to use this system and make it easier for the consumer to get the kind of wine they want."

The progressive list allows the sommelier to surround familiar wines with less familiar ones and to give the customer a context for un-

derstanding new varieties. For example, says Spadafore, "if you have a category for sweet or blush wines, you can have a Beringer White Zinfandel, and surrounding it would be wines like a Vouvray from the Loire Valley, a Riesling Spätlese from Germany, that people would truly enjoy drinking." Put the Vouvray in "other whites," he says, and you're not going to sell any. With a selective progressive wine list, Spadafore believes, "wines that normally wouldn't sell all of a sudden start selling because people understand what the wine tastes like." For guests who want verticals of Bordeaux, there's still the main wine list, leaving plenty of room for the sommelier to guide diners toward wines that will complement their food.

Umami and Food Pairing

Which brings us back to umami and Vignon, a product made by Hanni's Napa Seasoning Co. It's another sticking point for Yarrow: "Give me any dish, and I can probably make it more wine-friendly. But the idea of it being like Shake 'n Bake for chicken is improbable for me."

Hanni doesn't necessarily disagree. At COPIA and at the Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, Calif., he teaches courses on flavor balancing—which might mean adding lemon juice to a steak so it can match a lighter wine,



Judge for the Lodi International Wine Awards being tested for flavor sensitivity.



Judging at the 2008 Lodi International Wine Awards.

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or using an umami-rich fish sauce to soften the harsh effect of tomatoes. John Ash, so taken with Vignon that he reportedly bought a stake in the company, is among the chefs who have embraced Hanni's flavor-balancing strategy. But for home cooks, says Hanni, umami is the missing link: "That's what most consumers don't know how to use."

On a recent trip to Dallas, Hanni makes a supermarket run and picks up a few everyday

items, preparing to show some local food-and-wine experts how flavor balancing works. He steams the asparagus, then calls for a tannic wine. The host opens a Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. It's flattened by the asparagus. Then Hanni dusts the asparagus with Vignon, which smells like yeast, Parmesan cheese, and mushrooms, among its umami-rich ingredients. We taste the asparagus again and revisit the wine—and the edge is gone. Chef Hanni goes into high gear, announcing, "The theme tonight is 'All the Wrong Stuff.'" He sautées snapper and shrimp with exotic mushrooms, we try it with a Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and it clicks. He makes a tomato-mozzarella salad, and he roasts potatoes and onions to go with the lamb and asparagus. We drink wines with foods that, by all conventional accounts, should clash, but even the Riesling lies down with the lamb.

Tim Hanni wants every food-and-wine professional to experience what he knows about the science of tasting and to find out how this exploration has led to ideas as loopy as a Budometer and as strategic as a progressive wine list. "Come see," he says, extending an invitation to critics like Yarrow and York. "I'll cook you lunch." 🍷