



# How To Host A Beverage Tasting *Without* Losing Your Mind!

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## *CONDUCTING A BEVERAGE TASTING EVENT*

Joel's father loved to entertain and we were often included in the festivities of a group of friends that met every Thursday evening for dinner. After all, being new to the family I was a new ear who hadn't heard the same tales a hundred times. I enjoyed the company of this group of distinguished senior professionals and they enjoyed reminiscing and embellishing the tales again.

One of the stories they loved to share was of the time when they did a blind tasting to determine which whiskey should be used to make their cocktails. They allowed that if it was good "sippin'" whiskey, then it should be the best for their Manhattans, or whatever it was they were concocting. Trust me, they were good at concocting. Several of this group had definite opinions as to what was best based on price and reputation. So, a tasting was proposed.

A bottle of each of the favored whiskeys was presented the night of the tasting, one brought by each couple. Styrofoam cups were marked on the bottom indicating the bottle and then were filled with the whiskey. The cups were then mixed like the old shell game and sampled. The winner, much to the dismay of some and delight of others, was good ol' Dickel 8.

There are three things to note about the infamous "Whiskey Taste Test." The first was the use of Styrofoam cups. While it was convenient for marking, the Styrofoam in itself lent an undesirable taste to the tasting. The second, knowing this group, they were feeling "just fine" by the end of the event, if you get my drift, because I am sure there was a fair amount of debate and further sampling to come to a consensus. Fortunately, all arrived home safe and sound. And the third, it was an event that stayed as a favored memory of good times and good friends.

So, why not consider your own tasting event, be it wine, tea or coffee? It can be a lot of fun without much effort or an even more elegant, yet fun, event with a little more preparation. You might want to include it on the annual programming of your civic or social club, or as a quarterly event for your wine, tea or coffee club.

Do you think you would find a tasting event fun? It certainly can be and is also an easy, relatively inexpensive way to entertain. The following guide is just that. As you become more expert, you may wish to research the topic more. There are several excellent books and websites that can help.

A tasting event can be as simple or elaborate as you and your group desires. Of course the easiest way to host a tasting event is to make arrangements for a private tasting for your group at a winery, tea room or coffee shop. However, should you decide on the "do-it-yourself" method the following guide will

give you some ideas on how to conduct a great event. Consider the group's true interests and avoid making it too technical if the group is not seriously into tasting. You will want to allow 1 ½ to 3 hours for the event. The cost of the event can be quite affordable. If a club is formed for the tastings, ground rules for equalizing the costs to each member can be set. Also, research assignments can be made in advance. Each couple or member could be asked to provide a short lesson on the test item. For example, research topics could include the history of the test item, how it is graded and processed, the region or estate from which the item comes and terms associated with the tasting.

P. S. As you read, the subject of the famous tasting event was not coffee, tea or wine. Perhaps your group desires to test which cheese goes best with your favorite wine or which lemon curd recipe goes best with Susie Homemaker's blue ribbon scones. The general idea is still the same - having fun while learning.

**ESSENTIALS NEEDED:**

- Four or more different examples of the test item (Consider time and money. More than eight is probably too many to compare in one sitting.)
- Something to cleanse the palate between tastes
- Tasting vessels (Stemware with bowls large enough for good swirling, tea cup, coffee cup, etc.)
- Pitchers of water for rinsing the tasting vessels (if limited in number) and to use to cleanse the palate

- Dump bucket (receptacle for the water used to rinse the vessels or for any test subject not being consumed.)
- Waste receptacle for other trash
- Tasting sheets/papers and pens for note taking
- A white background for examination of colors such as a plain white tablecloth or white card stock
- Plain white bread or plain crackers for cleansing the palate
- A few friends (never more than 8 for an intimate group)
- Plates
- Napkins
- Eating utensils
- Food, if more social than a serious tasting

*Other items that may be needed:*

- Plain paper filters for tea or coffee
- Timers
- Soup or table spoons

***A note about the tasting vessels:*** Styrofoam is not recommended for tasting beverages, as mentioned earlier. Paper and plastic may not be your best choice for beverage tasting, either. Some recommend that each participant have the requisite number of wine glasses or cups so that there is no chance of cross contamination. This can lead to a large number of glasses or cups. If you have formed a club, perhaps the group would want to invest in a few dozen inexpensive tasting vessels and designate a "keeper of the cups" or there is the option of rental. The glasses should be clear without patterns painted, etched or as part of the glass design. Or each person can be expected to bring their own tasting vessel(s). The rules are up to you or the club/group.

If you opt to reuse the glasses or cups during beverage testing, it is recommended that they be well rinsed and dried. Detergent should be avoided as a film can build up that will coat the vessel and alter the taste of the test item. As for tea and coffee testing, clear glass or a clean white interior is recommended so that the color of the liquid can be examined accurately. Styrofoam, paper and plastic are fine for foods and utensils and may save clean-up time. If the item tested is a food item, then Styrofoam can be used for the beverage as well.

***As for food:*** If you are conducting a serious tasting, you probably do not want other foods to interfere with the flavors of the test items, so save the crudités and the meal for later. Unsalted, plain crackers or plain bread along with water is used to cleanse the palate between tastes. On the other hand, if you are selecting wine, tea or coffee for food pairings, you will want to have small bite-sized samples of the food. It is best if each cheese, crudités or fruit is served separately so those flavors do not intermingle. If the tasting is just for fun, the sampling can take place as part of or between meal courses. Again, the idea is to have fun while learning and to keep entertaining simple and affordable.

***About taste and flavor:*** What you taste is actually a mixture of flavors from chemical reactions in the taste buds of the tongue and how they are interpreted by the brain. To interpret flavor, the brain not only uses the sensations from the taste buds, but from the smell, touch and temperature of the item tasted. Seventy to seventy-five percent of taste may actually come from the sense of smell and there is also a genetic factor to taste. Some people are “supertasters” with a heightened sense of taste from a higher number of taste receptors. Others have inherited genetic traits that make certain foods taste unpleasant to them. So opinions about the test items actually have scientific reasons for the differences. And because scents can interfere with the tasting event, please ask guests to avoid wearing colognes and perfumes and do not use scented candles, arrangements or room fresheners.

***There are four steps in tasting a beverage:*** See, Smell, Slurp and Size-up

**See:** Examine the sample visually. Note the color. You will want to use a white background. Take notes as you go.

**Smell:** For wine in particular, swirl the liquid around in the tasting vessel and sniff. What is your first impression? Now really smell the sample. What does the aroma remind you of? Do you detect any subtle notes?

**Slurp:** Yes, slurp. Not sip. Slurp. You want to aerate the sample and cover the entire tongue. Don't swallow, yet. Allow the sample to coat your mouth for a few seconds. Note your reactions and the subtle flavors you may taste. Now either spit or swallow. Note the aftertaste. It is clean? Pleasant? Any final flavors? How long does it last?

And finally, **Size-up.** Evaluate the sample and journal your results. Take notes for future reference. Done on a regular basis, this will give you quite a bit of information for future comparisons. You will know what you like and whether you would purchase the same sample item again.

## **VARIATIONS OF THE TASTING EVENT**

There are several variations to a tasting event and all can be fun. Here is a list to consider:

**Blind:** The container is covered so that there is no way for the tasters to identify it. This is to allow for comparison without prejudice or for the tasters to identify region, grape or vintage.

**Combination:** Select more than one of these variations on the tasting.

**Competition:** Each couple or guest brings an item for tasting. The wines are usually tasted blind. The one judged best wins, prize optional.

**Country/Regional:** Each test item comes from a specific place such as Ohio River Valley Appellation.

**Cross-regional:** A sampling of the same beverage from different regions or countries, for example, a Merlot from California, New York, Oregon and Ohio manufacturers.

**Cross-varietal:** This is fun for beginners or for a group with mixed experience levels. Taste items in the same price range from the same base ingredient. At the end, you may do a blind tasting of one of the earlier items and see who can identify it. Award prizes, if desired.

**Double Blind:** No one knows the name of the test item that each one brings. Like the story above, the items are prepared, presented in identical vessels and shuffled so the host can take part as fully as the guests.

**Fun Label:** Choose items that have appealing packaging.

**Horizontal:** Wines are from the same year, but different manufacturers

**Informal Gathering:** The host provides the venue and atmosphere. The guests provide the rest.

**Meal:** The host puts the meal together based on the item being served. Each person or couple may be asked to bring a test item to pair with the course.

**Price Level:** Compare the same item at different levels of price. The group may find that cost does not necessarily mean the best product.

**Price Limit:** Guests supply the wine with a limit to the cost of each bottle, such as no more than \$15.

**Progressive:** The same guests attend each event and rotate who hosts or plans the event.

**Type Specific:** Blends, Spicy or a descriptor that can be used to define the selection are used to select the test items.

**Varietal Specific:** All test subjects are from the same base item, such as all Merlot

**Vertical:** Compare the same item over several vintages or years. This can show the effects of weather on the crop.

## **TASTING WINE:**

About 50 types of white grapes and 40 types of red grapes are grown throughout the world in large scale for wine production. Those of the *Vitis vinifera* grape make up the largest majority, although wine is also made from *Vitis labrusca* grapes and other fruits such as apples and berries as well as honey. This certainly gives a large test population.

First and foremost, since alcohol will be served, please be sure that the drivers are safe to drive home or that transportation and/or rooming has been arranged and that all those consuming alcohol are of a legal age to do so. And don't forget the corkscrew!

The normal sample size for wine is about 2 ounces of wine and the average 750 ml. bottle of wine will provide approximately 12 samples or 5 five ounce servings. You will want to have the wine at the proper temperature for serving. For those that want to be totally proper about it, there are specific temperatures for different types of wine, but in general white wines should be served chilled to 50 to 60° Fahrenheit, reds at 65 to 68°F and rosés in between reds and whites. An easy way to accomplish the desired temperature is to chill the whites in the refrigerator until about 20 minutes before serving and to put the reds in the refrigerator twenty minutes before serving.

If you want to be specific, Rieslings, Ice Wines, sweet fruity wines and dessert wines should be served at 40-45°F and Chardonnay, Viognier and Sauternes are improved in flavor at 48-64°. Vintage Ports are served at 66°. Beaujolais and Rosés should be served at 54-60° and Tawny Ports and Madeira like to be served at 57°. Medium bodied or spicy reds such as Spanish wines, Pinot Noir, Chianti and Zinfandel do better served at 60-68°. Full-bodied reds such as Bordeaux, Shiraz, Cabernet and Merlot are served at 64-68°.

Depending on the variation chosen, the tasting should move from the lighter sparkling wines, to white wines, then to red wines and finish with the more powerful fortified wines. Often when tasting at a winery, you will be led from the driest to the sweetest. You may follow this example, too. If you are not sure which wine should be tasted first, as in a blind tasting, the color and legs of the wine may help you choose. The lighter and less leg there is, the greater the chance of sweetness.

## **Tasting the Wine**

### ***Examine the Wine:***

You can tell much about the wine just from the appearance. This is where the white background comes in. Pour the sample into a clear stemmed glass and examine it against the white background, holding the glass at a 45 degree angle. Older reds tend to be paler than new reds. With a white more color can indicate more age and flavor, although brown can be a sign of a wine gone too far. Again this is a general guide and there are exceptions. You can guess the age of a red by looking at the color of the wine at the rim of the glass. A purple tint is associated with young wines, while and older wine is orange to brown. Swirl it around in the glass. Note the “legs” or “tears”, those streaks of wine that coat the glass and trickle down it after you stop swirling. The longer the legs last, the more likely the wine is of a thicker body and more likely the wine is to be either sweeter or a have a higher alcohol level.

### ***Now allow your olfactory senses to further examine the wine.*** (Swirl and Smell)

Swirl the wine one more time. This releases the aroma (also known as nose or bouquet) of the wine. Smell the wine either by taking a quick whiff to get an initial impression and then a deeper whiff or by just taking a deep whiff to begin with. Consistency is the key here. However you sample, do it the same way each time. Think about what you smell and make notes. Take your time. You may smell several different elements in the aroma. If the wine smells too vinegary or corky (moldy, musty, dank) or of too much sulfur, the wine may be defective.

***Taste:*** (Slurp and Savor)

Finally, it is time to taste the wine. Emily Post aside, this is the time to slurp the wine. There are three steps to tasting the wine. The first is the initial taste at the front of the palate to awaken your taste buds. The second is mid-palate. The slurping allows air to mix with the wine and cover the tongue. This is where you discover how smooth and light the wine is. Don't swallow or spit, yet. Allow the wine to coat the tongue. Consider the flavor, the acidity and the sweetness. What do you taste? Are there notes such as berry or grapefruit? Is there a good balance? What is the tannin level? Now you can swallow. The final part is the "finish" or after-taste which is the taste that remains after you swallow or spit out the wine. How long does the taste last and is it pleasant? If it lasts one to three minutes with all the components in harmony, you could have a great wine.

**Final Steps:** (Evaluation and Journaling)

Now take some time to examine the overall flavor and balance. Does it taste the way it should? You may take a second sip. How does it compare to the first? Was it light, medium or full-bodied? How were the acidity and the tannin levels? Is the wine ready to drink or does it need some more time to mature? What flavors did you taste (for example, apple, grapefruit, berry, oak)? What kind of food would you enjoy with the wine? For the taste, is it worth the price? Is it a wine that personally appeals to you? Make your final notes on your paper. You may even do a scorecard. Cleanse your palate before moving on to the next sample.

## **CUPPING TEA:**

Tea comes in a variety of types, just as wine. Black, Oolong, Green, Pu-erh, White and Yellow are all made of the leaf of *Camellia sinensis*, an evergreen bush. They are the same leaf, just processed differently. “Tea” made from other substances such as flowers, spices, berries and herbs are “tisanes.” The term “cupping” is used to describe a tea tasting. Again, consistency is the most important part of the tasting. Whatever system you use to taste tea, use it for all teas. While you may conduct a tea cupping using tea bags, for this event we will be discussing loose leaf tea.

### ***Specific items you will need for tea cupping are:***

- Timer
- Purified water (not distilled) at temperature specific for the type of tea being examined
- Tea kettle
- Measuring spoon or scale
- Soup or Serving spoon
- Favored vessel in which to prepare the tea (cup, Gawan, Teapot, infuser basket, paper filter, French Press) Avoid the use of a small tea ball, basket or filter as the leaf cannot expand properly.
- Honey, milk, sugar or lemon, if you must

***Examine the dried leaf:*** Note the appearance and smell. Is the leaf loose or tightly rolled? Does it spring back into shape when squeezed? You may wish to put a teaspoon of each of the teas to be tested on small plates or each in a separate ramekin.

This way the participants can more closely examine the leaves. These leaves will be discarded so just a teaspoon will do. Be sure to label the test items if this is not a blind test event.

***Preparing for cupping:*** Bring the water to a full boil. Fresh, cold water is the best to use. Reheating water over and over diminishes the water quality so use fresh water for each test. Likewise, microwaving the water releases the oxygen in the water in a rush and alters the taste. Let the water cool to the correct temperature for preparation. (See below.) Preheat the infusing vessel (Gawain, cup or teapot) by pouring in hot water, letting it sit a minute and pouring it out. Measure the required amount of tea into the large infuser basket or, the preferred method for cupping, directly into the tasting vessel. This is usually two grams of tea. Others use one rounded teaspoon. Again, be consistent. Cover the leaves with 6 ounces or  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup hot water. Cover the vessel, set the timer and let it steep. Pay close attention to the infusion time. Too long and the tea can become bitter.

***Recommended temperatures and infusion times:***

**Black:** 190-212° for 3-5 minutes

**Oolong:** 185-190° for more heavily oxidized Oolongs and 175-185° for lightly oxidized leaves. Infuse for 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 minutes. This tea is often infused multiple times. Allow an extra 30 seconds for each subsequent infusion.

**Green:** 170-185° for 2-3 minutes

**White:** 170-185° for 2-3 minutes. (Whites are forgiving and may need as long as 10 minutes to bring out their full flavor)

**Pu-ehr:** 190-212° for 3-5 minutes. This tea is also infused multiple times. A bit of experimentation is needed to bring out the best flavors of your tea.

**Yellow:** 180° for 1 to 2 minutes. This tea is very rare and almost unheard of in the western culture. You may want to become familiar with other teas before trying to obtain samples of this variety.

**Tisanes:** Infusion is best for tisanes from leaves, flowers, berries or seeds. Boil water and cover the tisane. Steep 10-30 minutes or as directed. The longer time may be needed to release the medicinal properties. Decoctions are best for roots, bark and woody sources. Simmer this material in a covered non-aluminum container for 20 minutes or again, as directed. If it is a mixture of woody and leaves, decoct the woody portion first then add the leaves and simmer for another 10 minutes. For fruited tisanes blended for flavor infusing for 3 to 5 minutes is usually sufficient for flavor. Longer and the tisane may become bitter. Avoid using milk in these as it tends to curdle in a tisane.

***Cupping the Tea:*** Once the timer goes off, remove the infuser from the teapot and pour them into a small bowl for examination wet. Pour the tea from the teapot into each cup and taste as with wine, examining the liquor (liquid), smelling, slurping and making notes in your journal. If tea leaves were added directly to the pot you will want to pour out all of the tea at the beginning of the tasting or it will continue to infuse in the pot. If using an infuser basket or sock, remove it when the timer indicates infusion is complete. If using the Gaiwan, pour the liquid into cups. The tea leaves stay behind in the Gaiwan. This is especially useful if further infusions are going to be made with the same leaves. Instead of slurping directly from the cup, you may opt to slurp from a soup or serving spoon. This will help to cool the tea slightly and prevent burns.

For serious events, cleansing the palate with water and dry plain crackers is recommended. If this is a more informal cupping event, serve with scones or tea biscuits or even a luncheon. It is up to you and your group. The main thing is to be consistent. Do not let the liquor sit in the leaves while you taste. This just infuses the tea more and may result in unfavorable qualities to the sample.

## **CUPPING COFFEE**

Two species of the coffee plant are generally used in coffee production. The first is *Coffea canephora* or robusta and the second is *Coffea arabica*. Arabica is usually considered more suitable for drinking, as robustas tend to be bitter and have fewer flavors. Therefore, about three-fourths of the world's production is arabica. However, robusta is less susceptible to disease, foams better and has 40-50 percent more caffeine. It is therefore used as an inexpensive substitute for arabica in many blends. Other species include *Coffea liberica* and *Coffea esliaca*. Varietals of the coffee bean include Columbian, Java and Kona. As with wine and tea, interest is growing in ecologically sound production methods and in single origin products.

### ***Specific items you will need for coffee cupping are:***

- Fresh whole coffee beans
- Timer
- Coffee grinder
- Purified water (not distilled) at temperature (about 200°F.)
- Tea kettle
- Tablespoon
- Coffee or Serving spoon
- Favored vessels in which to prepare the coffee (porcelain coffee cups are best)

**Examine the beans:** Note the color, the texture, the smell of the bean. Now grind enough of the bean to provide 2 heaping tablespoons of medium coarse ground coffee for each person sampling. Again, look at the grind, smell the ground beans.

**Preparing for cupping:** Heat cold, fresh, purified water in a tea kettle until close to boiling (about 200° F.) While it is heating, place 2 heaping tablespoons of ground coffee into each tasting vessel. Pour the water over the grounds and let it steep for 2 to 3 minutes. The coffee should form a crust.

**Cupping the coffee:** Use your spoon to push aside the grounds and collect the freshly brewed coffee. As with wine and tea, look at the liquor. What color is it? Is there a color undertone? Smell the coffee by cupping your hand around your nose and inhaling deeply. Slowly breathe out. Do you detect any subtle aromas? Now slurp the coffee from the spoon into your mouth, leaving the grounds in the cup. Let it coat your tongue. Do not swallow, yet. What flavors do you detect? Either spit or swallow. Note any after-taste and the length of time it stays in your mouth. Are there any new flavors? Journal your findings and cleanse your palate with water between tastings. If you have problems with caffeine, spit out the sample instead of swallowing.

As you can see, you can be as scientific or as informal as you desire. By each person or couple sharing the expense of the venture, it becomes an inexpensive way to entertain. You also have the added advantage of a wider sampling without as much chance of spoilage of the product as it is consumed more quickly. A tasting event can be fun and educational. Make a resolution to try a tasting event in the near future.



## About Unicorn Wine Guild

The story of the winery is a long one, dating back to the **dating days** of Barbara and Joel, the owners of Unicorn Wine Guild, when they would stop and visit wineries on their travels. ( In fact, the purchase of a few bottles of wine in Canada was a highlight of their honeymoon recollections. (Ask them about it sometime. It's really a funny tale.)

Experiments followed and the spare bathroom came into use as we made what Barbara called “Bathtub Wine.” The wine fermented in containers in the bathtub – where the containers could safely drain in case of accident. Joel hobby led him to begin thinking about what he wanted to do in retirement. Suddenly, the idea of the winery was born. The couple agreed to investigate the concept and spent many months looking at options, space and land. When a suitable site was found, it was also realized that it was a very large space.

So, Barbara allowed her dreams a voice and informed Joel that she had always wanted to have a tea room and provide the town with a meeting space brought about by her childhood memories and her work in the local woman’s club. She had also collected unicorns for years and the business was to be a gathering place for enthusiasts of wine and tea. Hence, Unicorn Wine GUILD. Why not Unicorn Wine and Tea Guild? Timing. The idea of a tea room surfaced after the name had been submitted to become a Limited Liability Company.

So, classes and seminars followed for both owners and the space underwent a MAJOR rehabilitation - Months and Months of rehabilitation. The winery became a topic of conversation throughout the town because Belpre is dry. Yes, dry. But, the winery is legal. Ask and we’ll tell you about it. There is space for patrons to make their own wine – especially nice for those living in tight quarters or who wish to try out the hobby without spending a fortune on equipment they may never use again. There is space for the owners to make wine, space for dining and sales and space for future private seminar rooms. Right now, space is available, but there are limitations on use.

A tea society, wine enthusiast gatherings, seminars and events are being planned as Barbara and Joel want to share their knowledge and enthusiasm with you. Come join the magic of the Unicorn Wine Guild. Because there is magic in every sip – no matter which beverage you choose.



Thank you for your interest in beverage tastings. Please continue to visit our website

[www.UnicornWineGuild.com](http://www.UnicornWineGuild.com) for more ideas!

Meet You There!

