In the interest of journalistic integrity, I’d like to be clear about one thing: I’m not a mom. I’m a free agent who gets to go out until two a.m. whenever I want without having to find a well-adjusted teen to care for my offspring. Sometimes I buy an entire box of Fruit Gushers and eat them all myself. But some of my best mother figures are moms, like my mom and her mom, and all of my older sisters who used to pretend to be my mom when I was a kid so I could skip school and rent R-rated movies from Blockbuster.

If there’s anything I’ve learned from my many moms, it’s that the world is constantly trying to swindle them. We are perpetually telling moms that motherhood is the only route toward female self-actualization and that they have the most sacred job in the world. And because moms are so naturally predisposed to do this sacred job, we are constantly letting dads o

We tell women that they have to become moms, and then once they do, we stop hiring them and we criticize how they do their grocery shopping and tell them that their children will only turn out as well as the heirloom-toma-

We give them impossible tasks, like keeping their babies quiet for four-hour flights and telling them to come up with dinner ideas for the week that don’t rely 100 percent on Totino’s Pizza Rolls. We get mad at moms for choosing not to breast-feed their babies and for choosing to breastfeed their babies too publicly.

Moms hustle. Moms get the short end of the stick. Moms can’t catch a break. After all, who needs to let her hair down at the end of the day more than Mom?

The mom-wine trope is inescapable. You can buy custom wine labels to clarify that the wine you have purchased is “Mommy Juice.” You can buy glasses inscribed with relatable messages like, “Moms just want to have wine!” and quippy refrigerator magnets that say, “Choosy moms choose chardonnay.” But this is merely the beginning, folks, because there, too, are actual wines that are designed specifically for this demographic of stressed women in need of a quick, cheap break from the insanity of their lives.

This clever feat of marketing means that Mom can cut out time at the wine store, because the decision’s already been made for her. Should she go with a Sangiovese or a Syrah? Why not just cut the bullshit and head for a bottle of “Delicious Pink” by Mommy’s Time Out? Why give yourself a headache browsing by region or varietal when you can browse by family member instead?

Convenience aside, I was curious to know if these moms were getting sold the quality of wine they deserve. To see how these mom wines held up taste-wise, I invited a group of friends with varying degrees of wine knowledge to help me try a few.
Mommy’s Time Out
2015 Garganega Pinot Grigio
Delle Venezie, Italy
This pinot grigio is honestly everything I could hope for in a reasonably priced bottle of white wine. It’s crisp, with a light citrusy acidity, and not dry necessarily, but not overbearingly sweet, either. If I were trying to cool off after my son lost his third soccer game of the season, I’d be a lucky woman to retreat to the den with a bottle of this and a half-eaten bag of Bar-B-Q Fritos leftover from the last family road trip.

Mommy’s Time Out
Delicious Pink
Italy
This rosé reminds me of a warm summer Sunday afternoon in June, because it smells a little bit like fermenting strawberries and tastes a little bit like communion wine and chlorine. One friend noticed some subtle notes of tomato. If I paid a bartender at a wine bar fifteen dollars and she handed me a glass of this rosé and described it simply as “a funky California rosé,” would I still object to it? Yes.

Pleasure Party
Oh Baby! Pink Moscato
Sonoma County, California
The scent of this wine from California’s Chateau Diana winery—perhaps most famous for making a gross near-wine that is sold in New York City delis to college freshmen because it is not alcoholic enough to be considered wine and it passes muster with the state’s bizarre blue laws—reminds me of the perfume cocktails I used to make as a middle schooler by mixing spritzes of fruity-smelling body sprays. There’s raspberry, a touch of peach, and some honeysuckle. The taste is bright, clean, floral, and over-the-top sweet (it is a moscato, after all). I have a hunch that a splash of seltzer and a twist of lemon would turn this into an unbelievable spritzer.

GIFT
By Kathie Lee Gifford
2015 Pinot Noir Rosé
Monterey County, California
It should be no surprise that Kathie Lee Gifford, the patron saint of motherly wine-drinking, has her own line of wines. The TV personality, along with her Today Show companion Hoda Kotb, has been known to crack open bottles of wine on the air at all hours of the morning, beckoning viewers at home to do the same.

The wine’s catchphrase seems to be speaking directly to those moms at home: “Friendship, love, laughter...It’s a Gifft!” But the wine is much drier (to the point of astringency) and more unusual than quite a few of the other mom-engineered wines that I tasted, even with some unsettling, lingering savory notes. As my partner remarked, “I’m kind of getting some meaty notes at the end.”

Stressed Mommy
2014 Chardonnay
San Luis Obispo County, California
Chardonnay is one of the most mom-ish grapes in the world, so it would be morally bankrupt to exclude it from this tasting. This one starts with some richer honey flavors but has a crisp apple finish, making it surprisingly drinkable for a medium-bodied wine. If the neighbors are having you over for grilled chicken and pasta salad, and you don’t have time to cook anything because you’re a stressed mommy, bring a bottle of this, and you will be off the hook.

Stressed Mommy
2014 Merlot
San Luis Obispo County, California
This merlot tastes like every red wine I remember drinking in college. You get a thwack of tannins at the beginning, and not much flavor development beyond this. Would go well with cigarettes and spaghetti.

Stressed Mommy
2014 Cabernet Sauvignon
San Luis Obispo County, California
This was my favorite of the lot—a wine truly worthy of a mom’s far-too-fleeting downtime. Bright cherry notes at the beginning evolve into a balanced, rich finish. This is what you want to drink on vacation or at the end of a long day as you tuck into a good steak or book, alone, blessedly away from the rug rats.
#Wednesdaynightwineclub Ponders the Question: Are Wine Flavor Descriptions Bullshit?

BY ARIELLE JOHNSON

Wine is fun and delicious and gets you loose in style. It’s also enigmatic, a record of the interplay of humans, landscape, fruit, yeast, and a multitude of other contributors over long periods of time. And so while everyone can agree that wine is delicious, there are many long-standing, passionate, semi-drunken debates over exactly what tastes so good.

Flavor is what we’re all after—it is what separates a mediocre cheese from an amazing one, an indifferent coffee from one worth twenty dollars a pound, and the wine that you drank as a broke college student from what you order at Per Se.

Humans have sensitive biochemical systems for experiencing flavors, but it can be challenging to find the right words to describe those experiences. Anyone who has floundered at a coffee cupping or wine tasting while other participants rattle off “not orange candy, but candied orange” and “peach pound cake” and “reading an old book in a leather armchair in front of a fire” knows what I’m talking about. A paper I like in the Annual Review of Psychology puts it like this: “Humans are astonishingly good at odor detection and discrimination; humans are astonishingly bad at odor identification and naming.”

It used to be that wines were described mostly by metaphor and anthropomorphism—they could be “noble,” “brusque,” “flirtatious,” or “brash,” for example. Nowadays you might see in tasting notes descriptors like “stone fruit.” “vanilla,” “raspberry,” “rose,” “black pepper,” “leather,” and a whole range of other smell names. But, absent S&M shenanigans in the cellar, a wine will not have been macerated with leather before it reaches you, nor have had handfuls of raspberries or vanilla beans tossed into the fermentation vat. So are these descriptors, for lack of a better term, bullshit?

As flavors go, you couldn’t ask for a more complicated, gordian, tricky-to-parse biochemical system to analyze than wine. Everything is in play: the grapes’ genetics; the composition of the soil in which they were grown; the angle and amount of sunlight they received; how much (and when) rain fell during the growing season; the methods employed for picking, sorting, and crushing them; the handling of their juice; the microbiological makeup of the mix of yeast and bacteria active in fermentation, whether wild or selected by the winemaker; the fermentation temperature and the vessel it took place in; how long the juice was left in contact with the grape skins; whether it was stirred or filtered; whether it went into barrels and how new those barrels were; how long it spent in those barrels; when it was bottled and how long it has been that bottle. All of these factors (plus others, including all manner of interventions or additives, or various defect-causing improper handling techniques) will affect how a wine tastes.

But despite all this complexity, wine flavor is quite well studied and its chemistry is reasonably well understood. A lot of flavor descriptions can be tied to specific aromatic molecules that elicit particular sensations in your brain. For example, the structural lignin molecules in oak, which are damaged as the wood is heated or charred in the barrel-making process, will break into smaller fragments that can be extracted by the wine—one of which is vanillin, the chief aroma molecule of vanilla. The Syrah grape will sometimes produce minute amounts of an incredibly potent-smelling sesquiterpenoid molecule called rotundone—the molecule also responsible for black pepper’s characteristic aroma. Sauvignon blanc grapes, particularly those grown in New Zealand, produce large sulfur-containing thiol
DRINK

molecules that smell like passion fruit.

Flavor scientists use two different approaches to understand and verify these relationships. One is to analyze the chemistry of wines, and take note of which ones have unusually high concentrations of specific molecules. If, for example, you know a wine contains a lot of rotundone, you can make a pretty good guess that it will have a black-peppery flavor. Sometimes, however, these smell characteristics change when we smell or eat them with other flavors present. For whatever reason, the molecule that makes basmati rice and popcorn and pandan leaf smell like basmati rice and popcorn and pandan leaf also shows up in wine, but in that context it smells rodent-y.

To take out some of the guesswork and directly analyze flavor—which is a perception, rather than a molecule—scientists employ a second strategy. They assemble a group to taste and smell the wine with their real-life noses and mouths, and supply them physical samples of the things they associate with the smells and tastes they experience as a reference. A taster might smell some honey in a glass of neutral-smelling wine and then evaluate how much other wines actually smell of honey. This creates a pretty quantitative set of comparisons about the flavor intensity of different qualities in a wine. Humans may be bad at flavor identification and naming, but it turns out, if you give them a real example to reference, and ask them over and over, they can get pretty good at it. (Incidentally, this attention and practice is what makes perfumers, sommeliers, and chefs so good with flavors and smells—much more so than any innate sensitivity.)

Perhaps the thorniest and most controversial topic in the world of wine is “minerality.” Geological descriptions and metaphors are commonly deployed to describe restrained, acidic, European styles of white wine. Chardonnays from Chablis are often called “chalky.” Rieslings grown on slate terraces in the Mosel are said to have “crushed rock” flavors. But is this real—or just marketing? And do the rocky soils the grapes grow in make the wine minerally?

This is a question of great vexation among people who study and write about wine. There is difficulty agreeing on what the term “minerality” even means. Wine drinkers from France and New Zealand seem to perceive flavor differently even when given the same set of wines. Some describe minerality as an absence of pronounced fruity flavors; others attribute it to high acidity. Flavor words associated with minerality include “iodine,” “smoke,” “wet pebbles,” and “two rocks banging together.”

Regardless of what you smell or taste, rocks themselves do not end up in wine. A wine-loving geologist named Alex Maltman has pointed out that most rock minerals aren’t water-soluble, meaning that they’re mostly inclined to stay in rock form, in the soil, rather than dissolving and being taken up by the plants growing in the soil. The lack of solubility is good news for vineyards, and the countless buildings built with foundations in bedrock, because it means that the rocks (and the land on top of them) are sticking around rather than washing away. Their lack of solubility also means that most rocks and
minerals don’t have a taste—sodium chloride, or salt, being one notable exception. The minerals that a grape vine needs to live—potassium, calcium, magnesium, etc.—are generally supplied by the soil but only end up in wines in minuscule quantities, usually well below the threshold required to taste something.

While metals and rocks don’t have a smell or taste of their own, they do have the ability to chemically transform large molecules into smaller aromatic ones. The metallic smell of pennies comes from metal ions catalyzing the formation of volatile, aromatic molecules from the oils on our skin. Similarly, the smell of asphalt or stones after it rains is believed to come from the release of organic compounds from the atmosphere and surrounding vegetation that were absorbed and transformed by the stones. So the idea that there are mineral flavors and aromas isn’t wrong, exactly, it’s just not the minerals themselves you’re smelling and tasting.

The flavor studies that have the best chance of making sense of all this use several smell references—pieces of chalk, wet pebbles, chunks of slate that had just been banged together—then look for molecules in the wines that correlate statistically with high ratings of these qualities. Those studies found mineral flavors tend to be correlated with acidity as well as sulfur compounds.

The sulfur connection is particularly interesting, because a wine aroma conceptually connected to minerality—“empyreumatic” flavors, or ones resembling a burnt match or gunflint—is known to come from a sulfur compound called benzyl mercaptan. But this molecule originates not from gunflint or burnt matches in the soil, but from low-oxygen fermentation and aging conditions that allow sulfur compounds—sulfur being notoriously reactive and especially so with oxygen—to form new compounds.

Until recently, I would have ended here, summing up that we don’t really know what minerality is, just what it might be and what it isn’t. But then the great and generous food-science writer Harold McGee heard of my plight and tipped me off to a brand-new paper about mineral smells published by scientists from Firmenich, one of the largest flavor and fragrance houses in the world. The team was not actually looking to develop rocky-smelling perfume, but rather (I shit you not) studying toilet malodors, especially from pit latrines in the third world, in the hopes of developing some olfactory intervention.

These rigorous flavor scientists needed references for these latrine smells, one of which was a rotten-egg-like aroma coming from the molecule hydrogen sulfide. One day they were huffing their hydrogen sulfide toilet-malodor rotten-egg reference and noticed a flinty smell that shouldn’t be there. After some tricky and involved chemical analysis—the flinty smells were highly reactive and couldn’t be measured directly, so they had to be deliberately reacted with something really stable, and then the distinct molecular product of that reaction was measured instead—they identified the flinty culprits as a group of sulfur molecules called sulfanes, which had never been evaluated for their odor before. Investigating further, they found the same sulfanes in flint and pebbles that had been banged together—which, you guessed it, are a chemical present in high-acid, mineral-smelling dry white
wines and, crucially, not in white wines from the same area regarded as having low minerality.

We still don’t have a full understanding of minerality in wine and how it gets there. The sulfanes found in wine probably didn’t come from flint or quartz in the soil, but more likely from complex chemical interactions among trace metal ions, sulfur-containing amino acids, and hydrogen sulfide in the wine during fermentation or its time sitting around in a sealed bottle. But I think the example of minerality is useful in ways that extend beyond wine appreciation. It’s easy to think of science as the cutting edge of knowledge: that it discovers things that no one knew before, refining our certainty about knowledge that was fuzzy or more intuitive before, or adding entirely new pieces to the pile.

Many regions of the pile of knowledge that is science are specialized, codified, and technical, built up over many generations of scientific toil, and generally uninteresting to nonprofessionals and almost certainly, de facto, off-limits to them: the molecular details of the inner workings of the cell, for example, or the nuts and bolts of building a functioning particle accelerator and getting useful data from it.

But food is something nonscientists deal with in an intimate way every day, meaning practical observations by nonscientists can and often do outpace the scientific research. The localization of glutamic and ribonucleic acids in different tissue types within a tomato may sound like a wonky discovery, but the experiment that clarified this mystery started with a question from a chef (Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck) who’d noticed that the fleshy part of a tomato had less umami flavor than the jelly surrounding the seeds. And indeed, the umami-tasting glutamates and ribonucleotides do have a higher concentration in the seed jelly than in the flesh.

What I’m getting at is that you could use science as a smug way to debunk food myths or dismiss “minerality” and other wine-tasting terms as groupthink for swirling-and-sniffing assholes. But I think that the impulses that motivate people to think deeply about making or explaining wine—or any food—have a lot in common with the impulses that motivate people to do science: a curiosity about and desire to make sense of the world. Sometimes the science just takes a little time to catch up.