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raises a glass to the joys of drinking wine, no matter which side of the debate you're on

The Great Glassware Debate

I love beautiful glasses from which to drink wine and, like many others, have collected a few. But a recent brouhaha on social media questioning the need for quality wine glasses led me to examine my own collection. Did I really need multiple glasses of different shapes and sizes to drink wine?

I recalled my travels to France and visits to its *terrasse* cafés and brasseries — none of which have fancy glasses, just simple, delicious food. Your oysters on the half-shell might come with a glass of Premier Cru Chablis, should you want it, most often served in an unpretentious, stumpy glass with a shortish stem. Take it or leave it would be the accompanying attitude. I'd take it, and a delicious wine-paired meal would be had.

So then, is it much ado about glasses? To give perspective to the debate, it is necessary to backtrack a bit. A glassware revolution took place in 1976 when Claus Riedel of Austria's Riedel glassware company created the handmade Sommelier series of wine glasses and revolutionized the concept of tasting wine. The shape of each glass, he claimed, is to optimize appreciation of wine's flavours. For instance, the deep curved balloon shape for Bordeaux red wines would give the wine's powerful aromas and tannins space to unfurl before reaching the nose and palate, while the wide-bowled Burgundy glass would enhance the delicately-nuanced notes of Pinot Noir. On the other hand, the narrow-lipped white wine glasses made for low alcohol, aromatic wines like Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, send their flavours directly

to the nose; while the wide brimmed Chardonnay glass allows its richer aromas greater space.

Buyers of fine wine needed no further encouragement and the glassware collection mania began. Multi-course sit-down dinners featured wine served in hand-blown crystal glasses with gossamer-thin rims and delicate, spindly stems. A delight to the eye, if not all the senses.

Perhaps the biggest validation of this trend from within the wine industry itself came when producers in Champagne discarded narrow flutes and began to serve their top cuvées in tulips, claiming that champagne requires space in the bowl for its complex aromas to develop before it is sipped.

The grape- and style-specific glassware trend was here to stay. But where there is a yea, there is bound to be a nay. The biggest jolt came in the form of a headline-grabbing article called Shattered Myths in *Gourmet* magazine in 2004 in which scientists rubbished the specific glass-shape theory and said their research had proved that "your brain doesn't care where taste is coming from in your mouth. Researchers have known this for thirty years". While the article created a stir at the time, many shrugged off its claims. After all, when you open a very special, expensive wine does it not deserve a receptacle worthy of its pedigree, wine lovers argued? More than anything, a finely wrought, long-stemmed glass adds to the romance, the sense of occasion

of opening fine wine. But that is not to say fine wine is totally incapable of showing itself well in a simpler, mass-produced glass.

Of course, there are innumerable articles and research papers making the case for either side of the argument, causing perplexity and indecision all around. Joe Fattorini, presenter of the popular UK series, "The Wine Show" bemoans in his blog, "In the old days, a glass was a glass was a glass..." bemoaning "that today no self-respecting wine lover can get away without separate glasses at the very least for Claret, Burgundy, Riesling, Nebbiolo...etc"

Perplexed myself, I decided to consult glassmaker Maximilian Riedel, 11th generation CEO of Riedel, for his side of the story. His Instagram page, filled with images of exquisite glasses and decanters, is a magnet for those who crave a charmed vinous life. He was quick to respond. Riedel glasses were not created by designers but the result of workshops and rigorous protocol — teams that included top sommeliers and winemakers. "We taste wine out of differently shaped glasses (at the workshops) — we might start with up to 14 glasses, including prototypes. In the course of different flights for each glass, their functionality — in terms of bouquet, flavour, in-mouth sensation, finish — is reviewed and evaluated. After each wine, a number of glasses is eliminated by a show of hands until finally one glass prevails."

This shows dedication, but what of the poor consumer? Won't too many glasses mean too much confusion — and expense? No, said Riedel. "You don't need to buy every glass in the range, but as a wine lover you should definitely invest in the glasses for your preferred wines." So, a Burgundy lover should invest in a Burgundy Pinot Noir glass but if Bordeaux classified growths are your thing, then a deep-bowled Bordeaux glass is what you need. And for those who disdain fuss and prefer practicality, the stemless Riedel O is his recommendation.

However, Riedel was clear, if it is perfection in wine appreciation that you are looking for, there are no short cuts. "Over the years, Riedel



Photo credit: Riedel

has found interesting scientific explanations as to why the shape of a glass influences the bouquet and taste of alcoholic beverages," he said, "The same wine displayed completely differently characteristics when served in a variety of glasses. The differences were so great that experienced connoisseurs were made to believe that they were tasting different wines. The grape variety is the key factor in determining the relationship between fruit, acidity, tannin and alcohol. As the next step, we created shapes in which the wine, vinified from specific grape varieties, seemed to improve. We began to recognize the complex role that size and shape play in conveying the message of a fine wine."

What about the latest trend for an all-purpose glass designed for both red and white wines and all grapes? Riedel is emphatic: "Each grape has a different DNA, the thickness of a grape's skin varies substantially — to be clear, there is no such thing as a universal, all-purpose glass for wine enjoyment!"

Whichever side of the argument you subscribe to, let us raise a toast to the simple joys of drinking wine.

Maximilian Riedel says he has no favourites, but is currently enjoying the machine-made yet gossamer thin, *Supperleggero* glasses. "I admit I enjoy drinking special wines out of my Riedel *Vinum* glasses. But hey, my all-purpose *Jancis Robinson X Richard Brendon* glass is always at the front of my shelf."

A range of fine wine glassware is available in India, including a range of Riedel. ♦

Maximilian Riedel pouring wine in a variety of glasses from the Amadeo decanter

Today no self-respecting wine lover can get away without separate glasses at the very least for Claret, Burgundy, Riesling, Nebbiolo, etc — Joe Fattorini