



## You Taste Like Dirt!

- Proprietor/The Mouth, Andy Peay

Last week I tasted with a wine writer I previously knew only by reputation. She is the well-known author of a famous wine book and now, as seems appropriate, she has a robust social media presence. She came out to the estate vineyard on a wet, winter day and after walking out to the knoll and returning through the redwood fairy ring, we went inside to taste.

I had lined up our current wines and threw in a few older vintages for context. It was about 20 wines, in all. The Chardonnays—especially the 2014 Estate Chardonnay—really grabbed her attention. We marveled at its elegance, minerality, and freshness, especially in comparison to the disappointing Chardonnays I recently opened from another country - who will go unnamed - that in their relative youth rolled over and died in my cellar. After tasting our singular Viognier, and before marveling at the soulful 2007 La Bruma Syrah, we tasted Pinot noir. To help explain why we make four Pinot noirs from our Estate vineyard, I mentioned we grow 11 selections of Pinot noir across 35 acres. As we have the benefit of a full-time crew, this allows Vanessa to pick only rows and sections that she feels are at their peak readiness. We built a winery with dozens of small open-top, temperature-controlled tanks so we can ferment and age 32 individual picking blocks separately before blending them into four wines. Over the years we have come to understand the unique character of each lot and a wine may lean more in a fruit-driven direction, or have more intense floral aroma, or emphasize earthy and mineral notes. As a result, each vintage, there are 32 elements—think of them as colors on her palette - that Vanessa can apply when sitting down to paint the four Peay wines. The three Estate Peay Pinot blends are built mainly around one or two of these Colors (selections) and that drives their overall aromatic profile. Other selections and blocks are added to complement the core of the wine and its expression of our terroir. Ideally, floral, fruit, and earth aromas can be found in all of our Pinot noir blends. Each plays a role, harmoniously working together to create a compelling and complex taste experience that changes and surprises you as you take a sip, drink a glass, and eventually polish off the bottle.

Think of a wine as a three-story building. High up on the top floor are the floral aromas flowing about in the breeze making a first impression and complementing the essence of the building like an ornate cornice. They catch your attention, make you stop and focus, triggering your brain to wander to other memories associated with this aroma. Below, in the middle floor, lies the core of the building where the fruit resides giving shape, volume, and depth to the palate. These aromas can often tell you a lot about a vintage or a grape growing region. And, below, on the ground floor, is the foundation, the base; where Atlas carries the wine in the dark and shadows. Most, but not all, complex red wines should have top, middle, and bass notes and they should unfold as the wine is smelled, sipped and lingers on your tongue after swallowing. They will come out at different times in the glass in varying amounts based on their sensitivity to oxidation. After extended exposure to oxygen, the overall balance of these characteristics may shift as more volatile aromas have blown off and less volatile ones have emerged. It is why some people suggest you allow a wine to breathe a little (particularly young wines) to allow some of the less volatile, bass and fruit notes to emerge and balance out the floral aromas. It is my explanation for why some people say the best taste from a bottle is often the last sip. The last sip sat decanting in the bottle for the longest amount of time and likely more bass notes were present and that person liked the musky, earthy aromas best. This process also takes place in the bottle as it ages in your cellar. Over time the bright floral and fruit notes subside and the earthier, funkier, oxidative aromas emerge and take



precedent. Figuring out whether—or maybe, when—you prefer freshness and fresh fruit power versus earthy and oxidative aromas is part of the journey of wine appreciation. There is no right answer for every person or every wine. It is why I equivocate a little when anyone asks me when they should open one of our wines.

You may rightly ask what I mean when I say a wine is floral, or fruity, or earthy. Specifically, if I say a wine has hints of jasmine or turned dirt aromas, are the compounds in those foods the same ones found in the wine I'm describing? Well, in some cases, yes, they may share a few compounds. Often, they are similar but not exactly the same, but it beats saying every wine smells like fermented grapes and moving on. So, here are quick explanations of what I mean when I use these terms and what role they play in shaping a wine.

**Floral:** Floral aromas tend to be most obvious when smelling a wine in a glass (aromas travel up your nostrils outside your mouth in a process called orthonasal olfaction). Think rose petals, jasmine, lavender, orange blossom, patchouli (the hippie aroma I credit to whole cluster fermentation that can be a wonderful floral accent when deftly employed, or an aromatic bulldozer when overdone). These—like all aromas—are also sensed as you sip the wine and smell them through retronasal olfaction, at the back of your mouth. They play a very important role giving wine “lift” or “brightness” or “top” notes and convey lightness and high tone elements that dance around the edges of a wine's core. They also tend to be volatile compounds and hence are most evident when you first expose the wine to oxygen by opening a bottle and then pouring and swirling the wine in a glass. And, not surprisingly, they fade relatively quickly in your glass and bottle as oxygen releases them. It is why floral wines and varieties (think Gamay, Dolcetto, or Muscat) are best enjoyed in their youth as once you get to the end of a bottle, or pull the wine from your cellar many years down the road, they may have long left the party leaving little of interest in their wake.



Floral aroma, wafting about in the clouds

**Fruit:** Oftentimes, fruits are the most obvious aromas in a wine and can dominate the profile of a specific wine, especially when the grapes are grown in a warm climate. You taste them all over your mouth but they are most obvious to me in the smell and also as the first impression at the front and middle of my tongue when I take a sip. I think everyone knows what I mean when I say I smell cherry notes in a wine. But, perhaps, it is only a rough idea. Is it a store-bought cherry or a sun-ripened cherry picked while hanging from a branch in an orchard in June? What variety of cherry, the tart Rainier or the classic sweet Bing? Is the flavor the sugary pulp of the cherry or the tarter, perhaps, more bitter skin? Did you eat it while floating down the Seine on your honeymoon? We all have memories of “cherry” unique to our experience with the fruit. All that aside, we are likely in a similar world when we talk about fruits but there is a wide spectrum of fruit flavors to choose from. For red wines, are they black-colored fruits like cassis, blackberry, and plum or red fruits like cherry and strawberry. Are they tart red fruits like pomegranate, raspberry and apple? For white wines we run the gamut from green fruits (apples, grapefruit) to stone fruits (peaches, apricots and pears) to tropical fruits (bananas, pineapples, guava).

**Earth:** That leaves the bass-noted, earthy aromas. These can be the most fascinating aromas and also the most fraught. If you have ever read one of my tasting notes you know that when describing our Pinot noirs and, specifically the expression of terroir found in our Pinot noirs, I often use the expression “dried pine needle, forest floor”. So often, in fact, that my pre-teen kids mocked me on NYE by asking if a glass of sparkling wine in my hand had forest floor qualities. Comedians. It may seem hard to convey earth aromas as, well, we don't eat earth/dirt. But, we do smell it, which is 94% of what we experience when we eat, anyway (the other very important 6% consisting of sensory sensations like bitter, sour, sweet, salty, and umami and don't forget textural elements like astringency, weight, etc.) My specific taste memory is when

I dropped my backpack at the base of a conifer in the Sierras and the ground released a mushroom, bark, damp, decayed leaf aroma. But earthiness can also be used to describe aromas in the “mineral” world. The smell of slate after a rain. The smell of a pencil when licking the lead tip. The aroma of black tea or dashi broth. Sometimes these bass flavors can be “funky” and have qualities that some find unpleasant: Horse stall, fresh tar, sweat, black walnut, compost. Alas, each to his own.

In addition to aromas found in a wine, I often categorize vintages as a floral, fruit, or earth vintages and credit the weather or some other factor present during the growing season for augmenting that character in the wines. I find it useful for communicating why the “same” wine in a subsequent vintage may reveal a slightly different personality. It is why wine is so darn compelling. It is not the same every year. It is not Coca-Cola you mix in a lab (no offense to Coke, there are few beverages better on a hot day or when feeling a wee bit sluggish due to over-indulging the night before). Vintage variation is the main reason why I drink grower Champagne and not Champagne from the “Great Houses” who seek a consistent “house-style”, year in and year out. It is why I always buy cases from my favorite producers every year despite having “plenty” of their wine. Every year there is a new batch imprinted by the vagaries of the growing season with no doubt something slightly different for me to engage with over the many years ahead.

So, I have classified the vintages below to give you a sense of what, as a whole, you may sense from Peay Pinot noirs due to the weather that year. Floral and fruit vintages tend to be most demonstrative when young and show that nature for a few years after release. Earth vintages may take a little time to unwind and will not have quite the aromatic lift as floral and fruit vintages but may have more density and longevity. Maybe. I hope it is directionally useful to you as you wander to the cellar to grab a bottle of Peay. Most of these wines have changed considerably since release so the direction they leaned on release may no longer be—in fact, is quite likely—no longer the case. And, that, is another one of the pleasures of wine.

**Fruit:** 2003, 2004, 2009, 2013, 2020 **Floral:** 2011, 2014, 2019 (earth, too) **Earth:** 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015 **Harmony:** 2002, 2006, 2007, 2016, 2017, 2018