Extract from ***Cork Dork*** by Bianca Bosker

"Morgan, who seemed to like having me as his captive audience, volunteered to tutor me in the fundamentals of tasting ……...

Morgan plunged into the five key attributes that make up the "structure" of a wine: **sugar, acid, alcohol, tannins, and texture,** also referred to as "body." These contribute to our overall impression of a wine, and are in certain ways the Esperanto of wine-speak. Morgan and Jon could spend all day—and probably have—debating whether Viognier smells more like hot dog or rubber chicken. But qualities like the acidity or alcohol in a wine are measurable, objective, and immediately understood.

So how do you distinguish these traits?

Imagine you've got a glass in front of you.

Step one: Look at it. Even before involving your nose or tongue, you can pick up clues about structure and flavour. Pinch the stem of the glass with your fingers, then rotate your wrist in a few swift circles, swirling the wine so that it coats the sides of the goblet. Watch the speed and width of the droplets, or "tears," that roll down after you've stilled your hand. Thick, slow tears with clear definition suggest the wine has higher alcohol levels, where thin, quick tears, or wine that falls in sheets, hint at lower alcohol levels.

Next: Smell. Always. And not just in one spot. Hold up the glass so it's nearly parallel to the floor—that way more of the wine's surface area is exposed to the air—and sniff while making the sign of the cross over the liquid with your nostrils, just to be sure you've hit the aromas from every angle. Some people swear by opening their mouths while they sniff, so they pant like a dog. So much for wine being "civilized."

Now you can sip. Swish the wine around your mouth, then purse your lips like you're about to say "oh no" and—*oh no* is right—suck in air over the wine so it feels like it's bubbling on your tongue. "Aerating" the wine, the official term for wine snobs' slurping, helps release its odour molecules, which combine with taste to form flavour. You'll look ridiculous and probably lose friends, but you'll get more from your wine.

Next, spit it out or swallow. Place the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and pay attention to how much you salivate. A lot or a little? Swimming pool or sprinkler? If you're not sure, tip your head forward so your eyes are facing the floor. If you opened your mouth right now, would you drool? If so, you're tasting a higher-acid wine. If not, it's likely a lower-acid wine. (The former tends to hail from cooler growing regions, and the latter from warmer areas.) To be sure you know what you're looking for, think of a lemon. A sour lemon that you cut in half. A sour, yellow lemon wedge that you squeeze over an empty glass. Now, take that sour lemon juice and raise it to your lips for a drink. Not to get too personal, but how much saliva is in your mouth? You should feel drool pooling on your tongue. That's how our mouths react to sour tastes (or even the thought of sour tastes): We produce saliva, which acts as a buffer to neutralize the harshness of the acid.

Prepare yourself for another sip when you're ready to gauge the alcohol. Table wines generally range from 9 percent to 16 percent alcohol (tequila is around 40 percent, by comparison). A precise sense for alcohol is key: A 1 percent variance could make the difference in whether a blind taster guesses a Riesling is from France or Australia. Alcohol can tip you off to where a bottle's grapes were grown (and much more, like the temperature during a growing season). If you're wondering why, keep in mind that every wine begins its life as a sweet stew of grape juice, called the must, that's all mashed up with grape skins, seeds, stems, and pulp. (Contrary to tasting notes, nothing like honeysuckle, peach, or orange Tic Tacs is added to the wine to flavor it, though some stray spiders, rats, mice, and snakes scooped up from the vineyard can accidentally get mixed in.) Fermentation of the must is kicked off by yeast—whether naturally occurring or added for desired effect—that then converts all or some of the grapes' sugar into alcohol. Warmer climates lead to riper grapes with a higher concentration of sugar, which, by the laws of fermentation, will produce wines with higher alcohol. Grapes from cooler climates generally have lower concentrations of sugar, yielding wines with lower alcohol. So which is it—high or low? Swallow a mouthful of wine and exhale, as if you were trying to check whether your breath stinks. (Spitting will rob you of the full effect.) Take note of how far into your mouth and throat you can feel the burning heat of the alcohol. The back of your tongue? It's probably lower alcohol—around 12 percent for reds.

The back of your throat, near your jaw? Medium, closer to 13, edging on 14 percent. Are you warm all the way down by your sternum? Could be 14 plus—high. Alcohol is a feeling more than a taste. Try to remember to your last tequila shot, which set fire to your tongue, throat, oesophagus, and belly. The more a drink burns, the more alcohol it contains.

Take a sip again. Feeling good yet? On to tannins. These are natural compounds—polyphenols, if you want to get technical—that can come from the skins, stems, or seeds of grapes, as well as the wood barrels in which a wine may have been aged. (The latter is more often responsible for the tannins in white wines, which usually spend less time than reds soaking in skins and seeds.) Tannins are more a texture than a taste, and therefore distinct from whether the wine is "dry," which refers to the absence of sweetness. And yet, confusingly, tannins leave your mouth feeling dried-out and grippy—more like sandpaper for tannic wines (like young Nebbiolo), or like silk for low-tannin wines (say, Pinot Noir). Some tasters swear they can differentiate between tannins that come from grapes, which make their tongues and the roof of their mouths feel rough, and tannins from oak barrels, which dry out the spot between their lips and gums.

The so-called body of a wine, also more touch than taste, derives from its alcohol and sugar content. Think of the difference in viscosity between skim milk, whole milk, and heavy cream. Better yet, hold each in your mouth. That's along the lines of what makes a light-, medium-, or full-bodied wine.

Go ahead and have another sip. Finally, sweetness. Like the other attributes that make up structure, sweetness exists along a spectrum. But instead of "high" on one end and "none" on the other, which would be altogether too reasonable, an early wine-loving sadist decided to label the scale from "sweet" to "dry" with terms like "semi-sweet" and "off-dry" in between. That's right, the erudite wine connoisseur must describe a wet liquid as "dry." Think back to that messy grape sludge, the must: In a "dry" wine, all the sugar was fermented into alcohol. But winemakers will sometimes opt to halt fermentation, so there's sweetness, or "residual sugar," in the final product.

Sweetness should be easy to recognize, since we've all had sugar. Here's where it gets interesting: If the acid in a wine is high enough, we can be fooled into perceiving much less sugar than there really is, or even that there's none at all. Go back to that imaginary lemon juice you squeezed into a glass. Now pretend you've got a second glass with sugar water. Taste the sugar water alone. Ugh, sweet. Try the lemon juice alone. Blech, too sour. Combine equal parts lemon juice and sugar water. Delicious. A touch of acid can transform a saccharine mouthful into a delightful drink, and vice versa. This is Coca-Cola's secret. The ten cubes of sugar contained in a can of Coke would be foul if drunk with tap water. But they become delectable in soda, which pairs the sugar with phosphoric acid in levels that give Coke a pH on par with some animals' stomach acid. A similar logic gives white wines high in acid *and* sugar, like certain Rieslings, the invigorating tension in their tastes that makes them so delightful. An "enlivening energy," Morgan declared when he tasted one such wine, like "balancing a thousand-pound barbell on a tight rope." So how do you tease the two tastes apart? The drool test can alert you to high levels of acid, so you're aware you might be underestimating the sweetness. And since residual sugar can make wines more viscous, you can also sense sweetness by feeling out the weighty thickness or pillowy softness of a wine.

Morgan was taking only two sips of the wines we tasted for every four gulps that I did, and I realized later that professional tasters know to budget their sips and sniffs. "Tasting the same samples many times in succession is useless, such repeated attempts simply result in a total loss of sensitivity," states the famed oenologist Émile Peynaud in his handbook, *The Taste of Wine.* Prolonged exposure to a scent makes our noses temporarily "blind" to that odour, a process known as olfactory fatigue. By the third or fourth whiff of a wine, your nose might be saturated with its perfume, so you're no longer sensitive to its smell. This is annoying when you're fighting the clock to guess White Wine Number 3. It's a blessing when you're assigned the middle seat next to a guy who hasn't discovered deodorant. "So long as they have been carefully registered, first impressions are the best," insists Peynaud. (He also frowns on drinking water while tasting wine—it throws off our palates—and I resolved to save hydration for before or after tasting only.)

Morgan and I hadn't even made it halfway around the floor of the distributor tasting. But I'd repeated my analysis of structure—**sniff, swish, drool, exhale, spit**—so many times, with so many wines, I'd lost count. I was spitting, double-spitting. And yet the alcohol still seeped in through the surface of my mouth. I was feeling ill and a little green."