

# How to be a vinosopher

For as long as he can remember, Corné van Nijhuis has been fascinated by the world of wine. Combining his love for wine with an interest in philosophy has given birth to a unique pursuit he calls vinosophy.

By Johannes Richter

Corné van Nijhuis calls himself “the world’s first self-declared vinosopher”. His dad used to make his own wine and seeing him practise his hobby left a deep impression on the young boy. “The promising smell of fermenting grapes in the wine cellar has always stayed with me,” he says. Many years later, after leaving behind a successful career in the financial sector to pursue other interests, these childhood memories came flooding back at a memorable wine tasting. Not long after, Corné registered for a course in oenology at the Dutch Wine Academy.

His other lifelong interests, philosophy and metaphysics, prompted him to relate the study of wine to perennial questions about life’s most fundamental truths. “Vinosophy is essentially the quest for understanding the more fundamental truths about wine,” he says. “It is about exploring aspects such as the inherent essence of wine, the relationship between wine and reality, and the symbolism of wine. This means delving deeper than just its physical properties.”

## The life of a vinosopher

Like traditional oenophiles or wine connoisseurs, vinosophers are passionate about wine in the sense that they appreciate, study and often collect wine, while sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm with others. What makes vinosophy different is its wider, contemplative focus.

A vinosopher is someone who not only enjoys drinking wine, but also ponders its meaning and significance in life. “Vinosophers like to think deeply about the cultural, historical and environmental aspects of wine, and about making, consuming and appreciating it,” Corné says. “They ponder questions such as the role of wine in society, the ethics of wine production, the relationship between wine and the environment, and the sensory and emotional experiences associated with drinking wine.”

Corné traces the symbiotic relationship between wine and philosophy back to the classical world. “It wasn’t only the case in the Western world, with Greeks like Epicurus and Romans like Seneca, but also thinkers in the East, such as the Persians Rumi and Hafiz, who thought more deeply about the significance of wine. The ancient Greeks called wine the nectar of the gods as they believed the deities on Mount Olympus consumed it and associated it with immortality, magical power and divine favour.”

Wine’s connotation with the mystical was probably reinforced by the fact that the transformation from grape juice to wine wasn’t well understood, making it seem like a process managed by the gods themselves. “The process intrigues us still today,” Corné says. “Even as a natural process, winemaking remains intriguing – an art, especially when compared with more industrial processed alcoholic beverages. It’s this somewhat elusive nature that inspires many in their quest for understanding.”

## Myths and misunderstanding

Some myths about wine are blatantly misleading. For example, the notion that red wine should be served with meat and white wine with seafood, or that red wine should be drunk at room temperature. “Myths that are corrected from a vinosophical perspective are quite different,” Corné says. “For example, the perception that champagne ‘sparkles’. Carbon dioxide clusters reveal the shimmer of light in the liquid behind them as they rise upward, before they meet the air on the surface of the wine. We don’t ‘see’ the bubbles as such, which are transparent; we only see the edge of what’s around them. The sparkle is an illusion.”

With South African wine increasingly trading on the global stage, producers must carefully consider their brand identity and the intangible qualities of their wines. After all, few questions are more philosophical than “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” Dispelling certain persistent illusions and outdated myths, such as pencil shavings in Pinotage or Chenin being a workhorse may require a vinosophical approach. “And while consumers may be dazzled by the sparkles, as vinosophers, we must also pay attention to the realities behind them,” Corné says.

“In a global market where the competition is getting fiercer all the time you need to focus, focus and focus to maintain a position. “South Africa has done this with its own distinguished grape varieties and typical blends reflecting its distinct combination of local climate and terroir. My advice is to foster this identity. High-quality wines from regular international grape varieties can then float on such a recognisable South African cork.” ■

Corné van Nijhuis, vinosopher.



“Taste invites reflection  
– Voltaire.”