

FLYING BLIND

When it comes to blind tasting, Senior Editor Jameson Fink considers what it means to be “wrong.”

As an oft-anxious person, nothing amplifies my self-doubt more than blind tasting. Two situations illustrate how my overactive brain got in the way of my palate.

The first took place late one night in a Seattle restaurant. A host of sommeliers (including one of the world’s most famous, Rajat Parr), winemakers and local wine personalities were gathered around a large table. Each brought a mystery wine and passed it around, then passed judgment as to what each bottle might be.

As the conversation devolved into macho posturing, I tuned out, waiting for my wine to run the gauntlet. I snapped out of my funk, however, when I tasted a wine that was very interesting. Everyone was guessing it was a top-shelf Bordeaux. I thought it was an old-school Napa Cabernet, aged about two decades.

I kept it to myself, though. Sure enough, when the bottle was pulled out of its brown paper bag, it was an early 1990s Silver Oak Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. Why hadn’t I spoken up?

A similar situation occurred after my move to New York. I was at one of the city’s top wine spots, Racines, and the sommelier came over to help us select a white. My friend and I were hemming and hawing, so we decided to have the sommelier pick a bottle in our price range. No other direction was given.

The sommelier brought his mystery selection to the table, poured our glasses and walked away. I smelled the wine, got a bit of its nutty, oxidized notes and said, “white Châteauneuf-du-Pape.” Boom. But after drinking it a while, I began to second-guess myself. The wine had a lively character and a bit more fruit than I expected from a white from this region.

And so, the doubting began. When the sommelier returned with the bottle, we had completely circled France and ended up in the Loire Valley. We guessed Chenin Blanc. Or was it Sauvignon Blanc?

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Of course, when we saw the bottle, it was Châteauneuf-du-Pape blanc.

I was 0-for-2 when it came to trusting my gut. Lesson learned. Go with your first instinct, and don’t outsmart yourself.

But even if I piped up, what would it really have meant? Bragging rights? So what. I’m resolved to relax and enjoy those contemplative moments getting lost in a glass. My notion of victory in this situation? Sharing the rest of the bottle with friends.

