

A MATTER OF TASTE!

Sensory descriptions of mineral water diversity

“Water is just water!” – an oft-repeated sentence when discussing the sensory perception regarding differences among various mineral waters. If this statement were true, it would follow that any water, including spring water, is interchangeable. In this case the consumer would be left alone with the price of the water as the only guidance to choose the most suitable mineral water for themselves out of the 500 different mineral waters that can be found in Germany. The fact that each mineral water is unique in many perspectives and can therefore be distinguished one from the other, is an experience open to every water enthusiast. In seeking a suitable mineral water, however, finding adequate sensory descriptions is rare indeed.

Taste plays an important role in food enjoyment and influences the purchasing behavior of the consumer. This is, of course, also true for mineral waters, as evidenced by an Ipsos survey, which confirms that 64 percent of mineral water buyers choose their mineral water according to taste. There is no doubt that spring water has taste, so there's no good reason to keep quiet about this fact.

Mineral water has a taste!

Sensor technology designed specifically for analyzing water (especially mineral waters) was not a thing until a few years back. Mineral water was usually marketed only by price. Therefore, there are hardly any published materials on sensory characteristics of water. However, numerous tastings at the regularly scheduled

water sommelier courses and mineral water sensory workshops held at Doemens Academy clearly show that reproducible, sensory differentiation of German mineral waters is indeed possible.

Depending on mineral composition, each mineral water leaves a different sensory impression. While calcium-rich mineral waters have a tart-dry taste, sodium-containing waters leave a more spicy note, while magnesium-containing waters express themselves with a subtly bitter-sweet taste. Balanced mineralized waters usually exhibit the most neutral taste, whereas barely mineralized waters tend to be tart-bitter.

As a logical consequence of these various and sundry taste considerations, mineral waters are often selected according to their sensory aspects, especially in the high-class gastronomy. Food pairings are carefully selected as are wines or mixed drinks, in order to ensure optimal harmony throughout the meal.

Producers' claims

Food producers often describe their products in great detail on labels and sometimes even on the manufacturer's website. This is indispensable for marketing purposes, so that one's own product can be distinguished from that of its competitors – the classic Unique Selling Point (USP) argu-



Variety of mineral waters

ment directed at the consumer. Otherwise price would be the only available sales pitch. However, this strategy does not do justice to the diversity offered in spring waters.

If one glances at the Internet pages of spring water manufacturers or at the labels of mineral waters, however, one seldom finds clear indications regarding sensory characteristics of the product. Detailed taste descriptions are completely absent. If sensory aspects are addressed at all, vague terms such as “harmonious,” “balanced” or “pleasantly neutral” are used.

Strangely enough, the mineral water description often proudly touts its “unique” or “unmistakable taste experience.” This sounds – objectively considered – somewhat contradictory. How can the various spring waters be unique or unmistakable in taste if they are all described as “neutral” and “harmonious”?

All these statements are completely interchangeable and in no way describe the characteristic sensory properties of mineral water. Germany offers a unique variety of

mineral waters with a host of mineral components in varying concentrations, from barely mineralized to mineral-rich waters. The fact is, mineral content has a significant impact on taste, as mentioned above. This perspective is always properly communicated by trained water sommeliers.

This raises the question about why the unique taste characteristics of water are not normally mentioned in product positioning and differentiation. It seems that manufacturers believe mineral water should not have taste, but must always be “harmonious and neutral in taste,” as suggested on the Internet pages of most suppliers. Detailed sensory descriptions, which would effectively highlight the uniqueness of the different mineral waters, seem to be entirely absent.

Opportunities for the gastronomy and for beverage retailers

A clear sensory description of different mineral waters would be particularly valuable for beverage

retailers and restaurateurs, as these groups are in constant contact with customers and could advise them accordingly. In contrast to wine (here the beverage retailer or restaurateur almost always receives a detailed sensory description from the responsible winemaker of the wines being offered), very few mineral water manufacturers issue a sensory description of their natural mineral waters.

How is this valuable information made available? Thus far, the restaurateur and the beverage retailer had to manage this aspect on their own. However, proper preparation of a comprehensible sensory description of one’s own mineral water offerings to the restaurant and beverage trades presupposes a high degree of sensory knowledge and skill.

Many representatives of the catering and beverage trade, who participated in the regularly held water sommelier courses at Doemens Academy, have acquired these critical skills. Sensory characteristics of mineral waters are explored and described in detail during numerous tasting workshops.



Taste plays an important role in food enjoyment and influences the purchasing behavior of the consumer. This is, of course, also true for mineral waters.

A number of trained water sommeliers from mineral water oriented restaurants and hotels have already put these skills into practice. They have also put together a comprehensive spring water menu, which contains brief, yet detailed, sensory descriptions of each natural mineral water on offer, in addition to its brand name, origin, carbonic acid content and price. By means of pairing recommendations that correspond with the descriptive texts, guests can choose the right mineral water for their wine and food selections.

Throughout the beverage retail trade, you can find more and more detailed information about spring water offerings. Sensory descriptions, however, remain rather rare. Getränke-Hoffmann, inc., Berlin plays a pioneering role in this developing trend. In numerous branches of this specialist supplier, so-called "product consultants" (not only for mineral water, but also for beer and wine) are available to customers, not only providing valuable information on geographic origin, mineralization and historical aspects of the spring in question, but also a detailed sensory description with additional information on the suitability of a particular mineral water for various situations involving food, wine, participation in sports, etc.

Sensory assessments by the Water Sommelier Union

In the last few months, the Water Sommelier Union e.V. (WSU is the professional association of all trained water sommeliers) has

developed a sensory assessment protocol specifically for natural mineral water and passes it on to its customers (such as gastronomy and beverage wholesalers). Such an extensive and documented assessment is unique in the industry and provides producers with the opportunity to feature the sensory properties of their products and pass them on to their customers (such as gastronomy and beverage wholesalers).

The first section of our sensory assessment includes a standardized classification of total mineral content according to MTVO (Mineral and Tap Water Regulation), a legally admissible nutritional physiological statement as well as a detailed description of taste, mouthfeel and appearance according to WSU tasting guidelines. To compile the first section, we use the analysis of mineral composition provided by the respective producer.

Specific recommendations are made on the suitability of particular mineral waters for food and wine pairings in the second part of the report. With the consumer in mind, the final draft features a comprehensive, yet simply-worded explanation for the interplay of each water's sensory characteristics.

Both sections of the report can be used separately, according to the client's needs. All assessed mineral waters receive the seal "Tested & Certified by the Water Sommelier Union e.V." Our comprehensive sensory analysis services thus provide producers and consumers with a positive, yet factual and objective assessment of

natural mineral water's characteristics by an independent and neutral third party. The use of the WSU seal is governed by a licencing agreement.

Conclusion

Natural mineral water is nowadays appreciated not only as a calorie-free thirst quencher, but also as a versatile accompaniment to fine dishes, wine, coffee, etc. Depending on the mineral composition, it adapts to the respective food due to its individual characteristics and can highlight and even enhance taste nuances. Whether paired or standing alone, the sensory characteristics of mineral water play an ever-increasing role. This is backed up by targeted surveys of consumer purchasing behavior.

If the owners of mineral water springs attended more to the sensory characteristics of their products, they would have an additional marketing tool that would allow them to set themselves apart from their competitors and more effectively differentiate their product. The Water Sommelier Union, with its sensory assessment initiative is always ready to help with this endeavor. Retail consumers and restaurant guests alike will appreciate finding accurate sensory descriptions of the wide range of natural spring waters offered in the catering industry and the beverage trade.

There is a lot to be said about the unique variety of German mineral waters and their good taste. Take some initiative! □

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