

Article Submission

Title of the article:	Lessons learned in wine tasting
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Biography (50–200 words):	<p>Petr Neugebauer is an enthusiastic and over-achieving professional with almost 15 years of total experience in Software Development, Software Testing and Quality Assurance. This includes 8+ years of experience in leading and managing cross-functional teams.</p> <p>He is currently working on the position of Head of Quality Assurance department at Y Soft Corporation. Apart from the consistent hands-on experiences in Quality Assurance and Testing in the field of printing solution, telecommunication and intelligent traffic systems, he is highly proficient in Human Resources Management and Project Management. He also temporarily held the position of Head of Project Management department.</p> <p>He is a member of a local board of ISTQB operating in the Czech and Slovak Republic.</p>
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Article (1300–7000 words):

Lessons learned in Wine tasting

Seriously I am not a wine expert and I am definitely not going to provide here any magic information about wine production, its consumptions or choosing the best wine for your wine-cellar. I am neither eligible to provide any professional advices nor enough experienced in that area. I just like to open a bottle of good wine and enjoy it. But I am highly impressed by small local wine growers who can with enthusiasm talk and evaluate for many hours flavor, aromas and balance among main components.

This article is intended for those QA professionals who want to promote testing and managing quality to make our job more transparent and understandable all around. And I found a lot inspirational tips just in wine tasting. As surprising, isn't it?



TESTING doesn't contribute to better quality

The most of the test professionals are facing the same problem. They must permanently explain people not experienced in testing why they did not catch this and that defect, why they have not improved quality of product or they get many "qualified" advises how to improve testing.

In recent years I held plenty of presentations and workshops about our QA both externally for our business partners and internally for solution architects and customer support. For me personally it became a never-ending story, but I have never accepted the fact that such people will **do not understand** our work and they will still think that all issues and problems in product are **faults of testers**.

How this general problem relates to wine tasting and what's my personal take-away here?

Grape harvest from your small private vineyard is fruitful, you spend lot of effort with processing grapes and controlling every single phase till you produce Pálava, late harvest – a semi-sweet white wine most popular in Moravia. It's time to invite your friends for private wine tasting and check this year's outcomes. Full of expectations you taste it and examine tantalizing aromas, clarity, complexity and variety of flavor, interplay between residual sugar and acidity. And in the end you realize you do not like it. The wine is not as sweet as you expected, you do not recognize banana and vanilla as usual. There could be many factors affecting final product – rains, draughts, sunny weather, grape harvest too early... Tasting (checking / examination in this case) does not guarantee the quality. It is too late. You can just take your lessons for upcoming years and focus on prevention.

In SW testing it is the same story. Testing is performed in most cases by testers – in development teams or in separated organization, doesn't matter – and it is intended to **identify** defects and **report** about the quality; while quality assurance activities are managed through whole SDLC and all roles are involved. Testing itself cannot affect quality, neither positively nor negatively.

For quality is responsible everybody involved in development process, from sales manager and product manager through architects, developers and testers to delivery manager. It depends on skills and experiences, maturity of team members, responsibility. But even more, it could be affected by development tools and frameworks, build management tools, versioning systems, frameworks, collaborative tools supporting effective design, development, release management and maintenance.

Misunderstanding of exploratory testing

In last two year I held almost 200 interviews with different candidates into QA and some of them were highly impressed by testing techniques and approaches adopted by our QA. I have also recognized that especially *exploratory testing* is continuously getting a sexy term for most of skilled testing guys in my team. Next analogy I found in wine tasting is primary intended for senior level QA Engineers, but also for other roles involved in development. I meet often with experienced QA professionals who are tired from formal specifications or documentation and testing activities such as test case design or formal reporting is a boring activity for them. Apart from those people, there many other roles such as product managers, architects, developers who still think that large number of detailed test cases is the only thing which guarantees better quality. Here I see many misinterpretations of essential exploratory testing principles.

There is a famous place in Hungary situated in Eger Wine Region called Szépasszony-völgy (The Valley of the Beautiful Women). This place has numerous wine cellars. Just imagine that you'd visit most of them one by one, and you are tasting and enjoying various wine specimens characteristic for this region. You have recognized that two wines impressed you a lot – Egri Bikavér (Bull's Blood) with aromas of cherry, raspberry, blackberry, rum and chocolate, and Leányka (Little Princess) dominated with fresh lemon, light spices and a hint of mango. So you continue with subsequent specimens of white wine Leányka first and red wine Egri Bikavér after that – late harvest, selection of grapes or selection of berries. Perfect wines and perfect night.

Next morning, are you able to remind which three wines were the perfect ones and why exactly they impressed you? On which attributes did you focus and what were your priorities? Definitely NOT.

My personal take-away:

- (test managers) Exploratory testing is based on intuition and experiences, but not everybody can do it. If you have vigorous and experienced testers use this opportunity. At least a bit.

- (testers) Similarly to wine tasting – you will probably take a sheet of paper just to notice basic characteristic such as color, aroma, taste... for every particular specimen. Do the same during testing – note your ideas, mark your observations and record your results – just to know where to continue and what you already did.
- (other roles) Exploratory testing is very powerful approach to get fast and qualified feedback. It identifies critical problems in effective way if right people are involved. You really do not need to have always only formal testing activities, allocate portion of the capacities to those activities to get freedom your experienced testers.

Targeting and managing expectations

You have ever been on a business trip and decided to take a bottle of exotic wine to your spouse. You examined few specimens based on recommendations and you have definitely chosen a perfect wine. Later on you open the beauty bottle at home and you realize your spouse does not like it at all and asks you why you did not tested wine costing such money. Yes, the wine tastes differently than few days ago when you enjoyed it during your dinner time.

There is not a wine that will be simply perfect for everybody in every situation. You can have a wine which will be consumed this evening while reading a book, but you can also look for wine to be stored in your private cellar for 3 years intended for specific sorts of food. I personally prefer sweet white wines with major portion of residual sugar, such as Pálava, Tramín (Traminer) or Muškát (Muscat), selection of berries. But I know most of my friends do not appreciate that and look for drier wines instead. Someone prefers relative price or might be swayed by an extraordinary beauty bottle. Such a person will never award balance, aromas or provenance.

So how would you promote your wine? First of all you have to understand the different customers / audience. You must think about their expectations and you have to express different attributes they should focus on.

In software development you have to understand likewise your customers. You have to prioritize key benefits of your product and promote them in the way they will fulfill key expectations of a particular customer. Do not spend a lot of effort by presenting advanced features provided by reporting module while customer is price sensitive.

Conclusion

Especially with adoption of agile approaches new opportunities arise. Everybody is interested in delivery faster and with better quality. There are big expectations from tester in the manner of quality improvement.

Testing and Quality Assurance are often used interchangeably, but they represent fundamentally different approaches. Testing if performed in the end of development is very expensive. Testing activities must be performed continuously and together with development activities. Good wine grower also continuously manages every single phase and tastes his wine which should be archived for decade. Quality is assured by collaborative activities. You will have to explain that again and again and again. Find your stories and analogies from everyday life that will help you to make your job visible and appraised.

You should enjoy this challenging job and focus on promotion. Enjoy your wine!

I would like to express many thanks to my colleague Martin Lazznovsky, highly respected testing enthusiast, for the revision and valuable advices.