



TIP OF THE TONGUE

Riedel claims the shape of its glasses can shift the flavour of your drinks. **Georgina Wilson-Powell** visited the group in London as a skeptic. She left a believer

I'm sitting with three large empty wine glasses in front of me, a glass of water to the side, in a long row of people. People sit in front of me as well. It is as if we're in some adult education class about to learn how to play the water glasses. Yet we are here to 'play' with wine under the master tuition of Georg Riedel, the Riedel family's 10th generation glassmaker.

Riedel, as a company, are rightly famous for producing incredible glasses and decanters that actually change the taste of wine. Having started in 1678, each generation has built on previous skills and experience to make Riedel one of the most fascinating glass and design companies in the world. I sat down as a skeptic; two hours later I was a believer. Where as other glassmakers focus on aesthetics or even ergonomics, Riedel's mastery of taste sits firmly in physics.

"When designing wine glasses, you have to take in the physiology of swallowing and how this affects taste," explains Georg as he commands the stage at Vinopolis, London, with the air of a seasoned pro. He gives a select number of tasting evenings around the world every year, inviting wine enthusiasts to change the way their view their glassware.

"Glasses are actors: it's all about how it performs," Georg states dramatically. "The aesthetic is added value."

We start with a water tasting. Essentially the narrower the rim of the glass, the higher you have to tip it, which sends the liquid more directly

down your throat, using the centre of your tongue like a funnel. A wider rim allows for water, or wine, to circulate your palette, gather at the tip of your tongue and ignite different taste buds with the bouquets of oak, berries, tobacco and everything else red wine is infused with.

We pour a thin-skinned grape variety into each of the three glasses. What follows is a Goldilocks-style evolution: drinking from the narrow glass, people's mouths twist and grimace; from the middle glass, their lips purse to allow a small swallow and then a smile; from the last glass, the right glass for this wine, they break into wide grins and reach again for the stem.

I am amazed. We have gone from undrinkable to 'un-put-downable' by changing the shape of a glass. Having had this realisation, I wonder why on earth every other glass manufacturer hasn't followed suit. It's like learning about a whole rainbow of colour in a world previously made of black and white. We repeat this act with a medium- and a thick-skinned grape, each one finding a perfect home in the other two shapes of glass.

"Glasses deal with physics, decanters deal with chemistry," states Georg from his stage. Riedel's decanters are like elegant abstract swans, all long bending necks and low-slung bodies. Inspired by Chinese zodiac signs and other symbols, the Riedel decanters could double as works of art on a coffee table, and they're as collectable as many modern artists. Georg pours a bottle of wine into one and then manages to turn and hold it

“ Glasses deal with physics, decanters deal with chemistry ”

upside down without spilling a drop. It's important to decant wine to allow aeration, releasing the CO₂ that builds up, which then loosens the flavour, he explains.

"I am not a wine expert but I am an architect," says Georg with the satisfaction of a man who knows his product is the best. And it's not just for wine that Riedel has facilitated a transformation of taste. Arguably the biggest brand in the world, Coca-Cola, hired Riedel to create the ultimate glass from which to drink the world's most popular soft drink. Sat on the table in front of me, it looked like a sleeker version of a British half-pint glass, thinner at the bottom before widening at the top.

When we tasted the difference between Coke in this special little number and an ordinary glass, it was like being flung back in time to my childhood holidays when Coke came in glass bottles – and when it tasted good. Coke presented a challenge similar to Champagne, reveals Georg. The CO₂, which creates the effervescence (or bubbles) had to be persuaded to sit at the front of your tongue, allowing the rest of the palette to taste the other flavours, other than just that of over-riding sweetness. The wider 'headspace' of the glass and the smooth sides allows this to happen effortlessly, and voila – an average can of Coke is transformed.

Georg might say it's architecture. For me, it's sheer magic. ♦