

SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY

Loss of smell is a symptom of Covid-19. Jeni Port and Nicole Bilson learn more about it — and discover what can be done if you lose your sense of smell.



when she leaves her London flat and cleaning boxes of samples that arrive for tasting. Having lost her sense of smell in 2008, she is in no hurry to relive the experience.

In the US, wine educator Evan Goldstein MS has taken to wearing a mask at all times when not tasting. "When I have been involved in indoor tastings it has been solo, with social distancing when with others," he wrote in an email, adding that his tasting practices "would make Dr Fauci smile".

Wine judging presents its own set of problems in a Covid world. Many competitions have been postponed or cancelled for the year. With an eye on the future, new hygiene guidelines that minimise the risk of infection for those involved in the running of Australian wine shows were released by the Australian Society of Viticulture and Oenology on 25 May. Hand sanitiser and hand-washing feature prominently among a raft of recommendations, which include taking the temperatures of wine stewards and judges each morning prior to judging, air-drying glassware rather than using cloths, and removing glasses and spittoons



Sarah Marquis, winemaker, Mollydooker

In mid-March this year, the Robertson family gathered at home in Calatayud, Spain. Norrel Robertson MW was chef for the night. His eldest son James was home from Edinburgh after an abrupt end to his school term due to Covid-19, because on 11 March the World Health Organization had announced the breakout had become a pandemic.

Chicken a la plancha was on the menu.

As he prepared the food, Robertson — the founder/winemaker behind El Escocés Volante, The Flying Scotsman — suddenly felt a stinging sensation in his nose. It was immediately followed by rising fear.

Was that smoke?

He could smell smoke. He checked to see if he was burning the dinner. He wasn't. Within 30 minutes, the winemaker had completely lost his sense of smell.

When the worst happens

Loss of smell (anosmia) and taste (ageusia) are now officially recognised as symptoms of SARS-CoV-2, the dangerous strain of virus from the coronavirus family that is the cause of Covid-19, the disease. But unlike other members of the coronavirus family, such as the

common cold, which often causes loss of smell and taste, this new virus can be devastating.

As in Robertson's case, loss of smell can be sudden. It can also last for up to two weeks but, more worryingly, sometimes it's longer. One study published in the American Journal of Otolaryngology in April this year put the rate of anosmia in Covid-19 positive patients between 33.9 percent and 68 percent; not everyone with anosmia has Covid-19 and not everyone with Covid-19 has anosmia.

As far as researchers know — and this part is so new as to remain theoretical — anosmia connected to Covid-19 has to do with a group of proteins with the racy name of ACE2. They are found on sustentacular cells that support the olfactory neurons. When the inflammation from the disease is acute, nearby cells, including olfactory neurons, can be damaged or destroyed. The good news is that olfactory neurons can regenerate, but it takes time.

No one is immune from Covid-19, and that includes wine professionals whose livelihoods depend on a fully operational nose and working tastebuds.

"I am constantly on my guard," said Jancis Robinson MW via email. For the UK's leading wine communicator that means wearing gloves

with the aid of rubber gloves and face masks. And the traditional buffet lunch — which in Australia traditionally features a small mountain of sausage rolls and meat pies — is out.

In Portugal, wine promoter and wine judge André Ribeirinho is taking no chances. “As wine professionals, my team and I are fully aware of the level of danger of Covid and have not only protected ourselves but have also taken the hard decision of cancelling a big summer event, the two-day Adegga Festival,” he wrote in an email. As for getting to and from wine events, he added, “there’s almost zero chance I’ll be participating in any wine travelling this year”.

Loss and recovery

The ability to taste wine and fully appreciate the intricacies of what is before you in the glass relies on a human nose that has the potential to distinguish between 10,000 different aromas and detect minuscule amounts of molecules. It requires nose and taste buds working in unison.

“We know this from the point of view that if you have a cold, food tastes more bland and things don’t smell as good,” said Dr Eric Levi, a specialist otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat) based in Melbourne, Australia.

With “Master of Wine” attached to the end of his name, Alistair Cooper MW is obviously very good at what he does. The writer, consultant and educator based in Henley-on-Thames in England regularly attends — or did — a dozen or more wine events a month, tasting 500 or so wines. “It’s a fundamental part of what I do,” he said during a recent video interview.

In March this year, that all changed. It started with a sore throat and headache and quickly progressed to fever, chills, high temperature, cough and night sweats. He endured flu-like symptoms for five days then, suddenly, Cooper lost the ability to smell and taste. He was just beginning to feel better, when he had a relapse. Food held no interest and wine was “very unpleasant”.

“I remember the alcohol standing out (when tasting wines) and a pronounced metallic note.”

Twenty-one days later he was on his way back to normal. The spark returned when he opened and poured an Anarkia 2017 Tannat from Uruguay. It tasted of fruit!

“In all honesty, I panicked,” he said. “For me, the sense of smell and taste, obviously considering what I do, is so important.” In his panicky state

he picked up everyday objects around his house — mustard, vinegar, deodorant — and, sniffing them, willing his senses to return. Instinctively, it was the right thing to do. He was retraining his nose.

“Olfactory training is a therapeutic approach that involves repeated and deliberate sniffing of a set of odorants on a daily basis over a number of months, usually three to nine months,” explained Dr Levi. “The four main odorants are phenethyl alcohol (roses), eucalyptol (eucalyptus), citronella (lemon) and eugenol (cloves).”

Given the importance wine professionals attach to smell and taste, Dr Levi suggests smell training might be worth considering. “Whatever olfactory retraining you can do, do it by all means as long as it is not harmful.”

In June this year, two experts in their respective fields, writing in *The Conversation*, recommended smell training — what they called “physiotherapy for the nose” to assist with the regeneration of olfactory neurons. “There is solid evidence that many forms of smell loss are helped by this repeated, mindful exposure to a fixed set of odorants every day and no reason to think it won’t work in Covid-19 smell loss,” wrote Simon Gane, ENT surgeon at the University of London, and Jane Parker, associate professor in flavour chemistry at the University of Reading.

In the midst of his Covid-related loss of smell, Norrel Robertson ordered two smell kits from German manufacturer Dos Medical. He and his children, who also suffered loss of smell, would use them morning and night. “I think it’s probably worth trying,” he said, “to force yourself to rediscover neuro pathways.”

When smell vanishes

In March, on the snowfields of Beaver Creek in Colorado, Australian winemaker Sarah Marquis was finishing her skiing holiday when Covid-19 forced the closure of the mountain resort. She arrived home on 17 March and headed straight into a 14-day quarantine on her farm at Mt Barker, outside Adelaide. But she was feeling flat, suffering from nausea and lethargy. It wasn’t until her son, Luke, returned from the USA soon after and was notified by the airline he had travelled on that eight of his fellow passengers had developed Covid-19, that Marquis decided to be tested for the virus.

It came back positive. Then came the reckoning.

“All of a sudden I’m like, ‘I don’t like the taste of wine,’” she said. “It was like, ‘Ugh, this is no good.’”

Vintage 2020 was under way in McLaren Vale where Marquis’s winery, Mollydooker, is based and the company’s chief winemaker had lost her sense of smell. She sat the vintage out, leaving her team to work while she managed via video conferences and phone calls. Unlike Cooper and Robertson, Marquis opted to do nothing special to aid her recovery, which took 14 days.

But a loss of smell, especially in the long-term, can be devastating. Australian winemaker Viv Thomson of Best’s Wines couldn’t smell after a bout of flu back in the mid-1980s. He was due to be a judge at the Royal Hobart Wine Show and went, furiously working his way through the wines on instinct alone. “My points were coming out all right, but I didn’t know why I was pointing the wines I was pointing,” he remembered. His confidence rocked, he never judged again.

Smell dysfunction affects 20 percent of the general population. Normal ageing, menopause, sino-nasal disease and head trauma are common causes. However, up to 45 percent of all anosmia in the general population is due to post-infectious causes following a common cold, upper respiratory tract infections and the like. Covid-19 is different, worryingly so, for the simple reason that so much still remains unknown about the virus, its long-term effects and associated problems such as reduced smell (hyposmia) and change in taste (dysgeusia).

It is well known that the loss of smell is closely associated with the loss of joy in life.

Something to contemplate when you sniff and taste your next glass of wine.

Norrel Robertson MW, Alistair Cooper MW and Sarah Marquis all report a full return to health, including the ability to smell and taste. ■



Alistair Cooper MW, UK wine consultant