Philosopher Michel Serres’ book on the “Five Senses” tells the story of a man from Burgundy who was so infallible in identifying vineyards and vintages that his friends decided to set a trap for him. They secretly paid a vintner to plant a few rows of ordinary vines on mediocre land that had never been used for growing grapes.

Years passed and finally the mischievous friends were ready to present their vintage to the wine oracle. He tasted it, and after a long silence declared, “Messieurs, I am terribly sorry, but this wine does not exist.”

There’s more to this anecdote than humor. Without question, the Bourguignon taster knew wine better than anyone. But what is most surprising is his elliptic comment. He doesn’t say why the wine does not exist, nor can he describe it, yet clearly his knowledge of wine is enormous. At the same time, wine enthusiasts did not name their gustatory impressions; they merely said, “it’s good” or “it’s bad.” They intuitively knew how to judge wine and their sober evaluations were of an exemplary precision.

Today, however, the wine-tasting vocabulary is falling victim to verbal inflation: “A note of stock picked at dawn?” “A scent of faded acacia?” This is progress? How many people really know what stock smells like? As for acacia, its flower clusters fade so quickly that you’d better pay close attention if you hope to catch a whiff. Unfortunately, ever since pedants and snobs began to venture into wine cellars, wine has become a pretext for all sorts of vain and ridiculous exercises.

Remi King, one of the famous Champagne family, recently commented that he is often struck by the fact that wine tasters write page after page on his wines whereas he is incapable of describing them. “But I know them from within,” he adds. The richness of vocabulary can detract from the actual tasting, unless everyone agrees on the meaning of the words beforehand.

Therein lies the problem: The basis for a modern tasting method and standard vocabulary was established by Andre’ Vedel, who reigned for many years over the Institute National Des Appellations D’Origines (INAO). In 1972, in his “Essay on Wine Tasting”, he warned against abusive tasting practices. We seem to have forgotten his admonitions, however. Those who engage in wine tasting today should be reminded that it is not considered a science, or if it is, then it is the most inexact of sciences. Human senses are not instruments of measure, and the scientific rigor that should be applied to wine tastings is invalidated by interpretations that are all too human and subject to fluctuations and errors.

One of the most extraordinary tasters of this century was Emile Peynaud. He revolutionized oenology and revived several vineyards, the most famous being Chateau Margaux. Peynaud admits that tasting is a decidedly difficult art. “In the beginning, you are completely lost. It takes years to develop a basis, a language of reference, without which you don’t know what you’re tasting.”

Actually taste is difficult to describe and even more difficult to remember. When you are tasting a wine, you are looking not for a single taste but for a series of tastes. Wine evolves in the mouth and the description of this evolution is essential. Otherwise, you have nothing to say, or very little.

Taste is dynamic because the taste-buds on different parts of the tongue have different functions. The tip of the tongue tastes salt, the area behind tastes acids, and the sides taste sugar. Bitterness is picked up on the back of the tongue. But how many people actually pay attention to this?

A distinction should be made between two types of wine tastings: the technical and the hedonistic. The objective of the first is to judge the commercial qualities of the wine. The second is more concerned with the pleasure of drinking and implies a knowledge of “appellations,” the winemaker’s trademark.

Wine is a troubling mystery, but do we have to reveal its elusive secrets? As a certain Burgundy vintner used to say, “When I see a beautiful woman, what do I care to know her blood type or her pulse rate?”