



PHOTO: MAX SCHULZ

The panel for this day consists of the leader Yassine El Allaz (l.) as well as Markus Huber, Dirk Ehle and Saskia Kirstätter (from left to right).

Excellent sensor technology

The Cologne-based company Sensatory GmbH is the only accredited pure sensory laboratory in Germany - and capable of objectifying the senses in the best possible way. A look behind the scenes.

So I sweat the last time I took my driving test - can I still pull in before the black off-road vehicle? In the four-
On the third floor of a downtown Cologne house, there are three black glasses that I can't help but sink my teeth into. Which of these wines is different from the other two? This is not about a driver's license, but it is about a tasting license. Sensatory is the name of the laboratory where I am visiting on this Tuesday morning. It specializes in sensory analyses. And even if "Laboratory" in the context of wine-

tasting sounds a bit technical, then in this case it is certified. On the wall next to the entrance to the tasting room hangs the official certificate of the German Accreditation Body (DAkkS) - I am in a "testing laboratory for sensory tests of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Large wineries, vineyards and importers come here to Cologne's Lindenstrasse to have the wines they want to offer in the supermarket certified as being of impeccable quality. Through the accreditation, Sensatory is attested a higher objectivity than other tasters. How come?



The certificate

This inconspicuous leaf on the wall makes Sensatory extraordinary

The basics. I failed the sensory test just as I had failed the first attempt at the driver's license - I was too nervous. In an emergency, i.e. if I had been scheduled as the examiner for the panel, this would have meant that the examination of the upcoming wines could not have started. After an hour, I would be allowed to try the three wines again. Or someone else steps in, of course only after passing the test.

"In that case, I probably would have sat on the panel," says Christian Frens. He is managing director and co-founder of Sensatory, but at the same time also on the board of the Sommelier Union and Ge-

Managing Director of the Sommelier Consult agency. The 49-year-old started out in the restaurant business, but became self-employed years ago with his passion for tasting. Sensatory is the latest company with his involvement. Frens and his business partner Hanswerner Bendix founded the labor when Master of Wine and entrepreneur Markus Del Monego announced at the end of 2018 that he was closing his company CaveCo, which until then had performed quality control for Aldi. That was the gap in the market Sensatory stepped into. "As part of Aldi's quality assurance, we are commissioned as an external service provider by retailers, importers, bottlers and producers. In addition, customers send us samples for their own quality assurance in order to compare them with sensory profiles," says Frens. The customer base also includes some other laboratories that cannot provide sensory analysis themselves. In total, 180 customers from all over the world send wines to the Sensatory laboratory in Cologne.

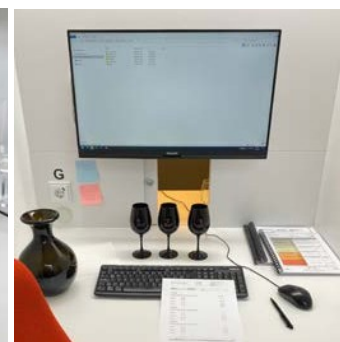
Not all Sensatory customers supply Aldi, but all suppliers to Aldi, whether North or South, must have their wines analyzed here. Frens and his team thus provide quality assurance for one of the largest players in the wine market. About every fourth bottle of wine in the food retail trade is bought at Aldi. And Sensatory ensures with a large part of its up to 5,000 tests per year that the wines not only have a reliable quality, but also correspond to a defined taste image.

Frens sits behind me on the window sill, leaning back, half on the edge.

and observes what is happening in the laboratory. The narrow, rectangular room is white and extremely brightly lit. This helps me to assess the color of the wines. A thin wall serves as a privacy screen and separates the room lengthwise. I sit next to the wall with the other tasters. Our seats are separated by partitions, which is somewhat reminiscent of voting booths. But we are not here to vote, but to analyze.

And that's the crux of the matter: often enough, not even the experts agree on which wine in a similar category is better than the other. Much boils down to personal taste. "In sensorics, there is always a challenge: the subjectivity of the individual." Frens knows there are the varied reasons why someone fails the first sample, he calls it calibration. But in order to achieve resilient, repeatable results with the lab, the testers have to be in shape so that the demand for the best possible objectivity is actually met.

"Potential tasters have to take part in several tastings as guests. In this way, it quickly becomes clear who is suited to the work as a panelist," says Frens. It goes without saying that you have to be sensory fit. WSET Level 3 is the standard, and many tasters have additional qualifications, such as oenologists or sommeliers. Currently, there is a pool of 15 tasters, who are continually recombined into panels. "It's good when the group is mixed. The different perspectives give the



Through the flap I get the wines for the tasting pushed, whose results I enter on the computer

you get the best, most accurate results." But the most important thing is that you can put your personal taste aside.

Measure reproducibility. To put his tasters to the test again and again, Frens smuggles test bottles into the tastings. This allows him to see how reliable and reproducible the results are. As in a scientific test series with imprecise measuring instruments, he tries to get as close as possible to objectivity in this way. In 2020, he started measuring reproducibility, which was a prerequisite for the accreditation of his laboratory. The results were amazingly precise right from the start and have improved steadily over time, according to Frens.

In the best case, the measuring instrument is refined more and more from many noses and palates. Training is also used to improve the accuracy. These take place, for example, when a panelist feels uncertain about a specific topic. Sometimes, however, it is also the statistics that sho

Everything is sober and tidy at Sensatory - as befits a laboratory



If exams on a certain topic are particularly often invalid because the examiners have judged too heterogeneously. Or if the results of the injected test bottles differ greatly from one another.

Since my sensory perceptions will not be included in the laboratory results, I will be allowed to participate in the panel as a guest, despite the incorrect calibration. So I stay. On the table at my place is a keyboard, above it is a screen on which I enter my results. Between them is the small hatch through which the wines are served to me.

The Sheet. The second stage, before it really starts, is a blind tasting, in which the wine is to be guessed classically. From now on, the wine is tasted from transparent glasses, after all, the color of the wine is also to be used for evaluation. A glass of white wine is pushed through the hatch and immediately I hear people sniffing and slurping next to me. I swirl the wine in the glass and look at it. Not all that old. Now I put my nose in the glass: a light wood aroma, but also nuttiness and ripe fruit. I immediately enter all impressions into the Excel tasting sheet. Vegetable is written there. Good keyword, I can perceive a slight herbal aroma. So: 3 out of 12 points. After everyone has given a hint, there is an eager discussion before we



Behind the scenes, the wine is poured, while on the other side of the partition, the tasting is concentrated

get the resolution: Chardonnay from St. Véran. The most important effect of this warm-up: panel leader Yassine El Allaz now knows how to assess the tasters. "This is the most popular part of the job. And at the same time, it helps us all to get on the same level," confirms Frens.

After that, it's on to the real analyses, and I dive in with the ver-

tasting tunnel, in which I lose all sense of time. More and more new wines are passed through the hatch and evaluated in the form according to predetermined criteria. We work our way through color intensity, nasal impression - fruity, spicy, vegetal - palate structures and specific aromas, which are determined individually for each wine. At the end, it gets a total score on the 100 scale.

The ratings of the four tasters are averaged in another automated Excel sheet and compared with a sensory profile. If the wine meets the criteria defined in advance, it has passed. In this way, a uniform taste profile can be guaranteed even in the case of a multi-supplier strategy. An example of this:

Aldi wants to add a new wine to its range and has found one that meets its expectations. However, since the discounter works with several wineries whose products are sold under the same label, it must be ensured that the wines from all suppliers are as similar as possible to the original ideal image in terms of color, aroma, taste and quality.

The first wine is therefore taken as the basis for establishing a sensory profile against which the rest must measure up. If it is particularly fruity, this is recorded in this first analysis, and if it is particularly good, it receives a corresponding rating according to the 100-point scheme. In this way, the basis is formed which the other suppliers' wines should later correspond to as best as possible. This also means that the requirements for a rosé can be completely different from those of the other suppliers.

to a Barolo.

After a good ten wines, I say goodbye to the panel to take a look behind the scenes. The first thing that catches my eye is the light: On this side of the partition, it's not so bright, a little cozier. Many washable stainless steel surfaces and large carts on which the tasting glasses in green carriers are waiting for their use, along-

Figures, data, facts:

Managing Director:
Hanswerner Bendix, Christian Frens (in picture)

Sensetory GmbH was founded in February 2019, and **accreditation as a testing laboratory by DAkkS** took place in August 2022.

Sensetory employs **15 testers** and a total of around **20 employees**. Per year, the laboratory in Lindenstraße produces **4,000 to 5,000 sensory tests** carried out. Of these, approx.

75 percent to the group "wine, wine-based and wine-like beverages and their non-alcoholic variants".



There are two refrigerators filled with wine bottles. Most of them are intended for today's rehearsal, some are ready for the next few days' Schulung or the calibration. A lanky young man in a white T-shirt brushes his hair out of his face and listens to see if the next wine is requested. He's a student, as are most who do the job on this lab site. "In fact, even someone who doesn't know anything about wine can do it, because every step of the accreditation process has been documented in detail and written down," says Frens.

Accreditation. In the office next door, Frens pulls a bulging black file from one of the cabinets. It contains working instructions, for example, the exact temperature at which the samples are to be stored and what happens if a refrigerator fails. Frens would be able to report his actions in the event of an over

temperature fluctuation is automatically alarmed. These processes are also regularly checked by a DAkkS representative. A lot of effort, but in return the test results of Sensory are reliable thanks to accreditation according to the "DIN EN ISO/IEC 17025:2018" highofficially identified as competent, impartial and above all "valid". This official confirmation is the decisive difference between Sensory's work and that of other tasters.

It takes time for the accreditation to pay off. For example, one full-time employee is almost exclusively responsible for accompanying this documentation of the work processes. Of course, the regulations can sometimes be a pain, Frens admits, when it comes to things that have little to do with sensory analysis, such as the form in which jobs have to be advertised. When it comes to wineanalysis, it's precisely this small-scale nature that offers



To set the mood each day, a wine is tasted blind "out of competition". This brings the tasting panel to a common level.

also safety. The lighting during tasting is precisely defined, as are the glasses and everything that goes with them. Frens' measurement of reproducibility is also documented and checked by DAkkS. In this way, Sensory can offer customers the greatest possible objectivity.

It has become quiet in the lab. The testers are finished, and a colleague from Frens sends the test reports to the clients by e-mail. Did the wines tested meet the benchmark? The customers receive feedback on the submitted wine, broken down according to the individual criteria, and if the test is passed, they can get approval from the retailer to deliver the wine.

When I say goodbye, Frens reveals which wines were used for the calibration. Twice Müllerrebe, one semi-dry, the other dry. The fact that I didn't recognize this annoys me for days to come. MICK SCHULZ