

A Nichols Worth of Wine

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The Debate Rages On

To the angst of many in the industry, and thanks in large part to an ever expanding wine blogosphere, high alcohol levels in wine is a subject that just refuses to go away. The issues are many and I have a few; some from a slightly different angle than the most talked about.

I've made my position on high-alcohol wines well known. I don't like them. I find most to be one-dimensional - all fruit, no character. I find many can be overpowering and incompatible with the dining experience. I want to enjoy that second, and occasionally, third glass of wine over the span of a meal without the need for a nap between courses. There's also the concern of increased DUI enforcement. Many variables determine BAC (blood alcohol concentrations) currently set at .08%. Even factoring in the metrics of body weight, gender, time, and food intake, two glasses of wine can push you close to or beyond this legal threshold. Don't believe it? Try blowing into a breathalyzer after 10-12 ounces of your favorite varietal.

I have been trying to document the parallel between wines with higher alcohol levels and BAC, but in speaking with faculty from UC Davis's Viticulture and Enology department, no formal studies have been done on the subject. Apparently there are so many variables, conclusive analysis would be difficult at best. But personal experience has taught me that a two-point swing in a wine from 12.5% to 14.5% can have a significant effect on acuity and I find it makes wines less compatible with food.

Much of what wine consumers and industry followers hear from the media lately is the supposed influence a few iconic critics have over winemaking decisions. Assertions of vintners pushing hang time to the extremes to achieve ultra-ripe fruit just to please the critics palates and in turn garner higher ratings are hotly debated.

But I wonder if this isn't a classic version of the *chicken and the egg* story? Which came first; the consumer's taste for sweeter, full throttled flavors that the critics played into, or the consumer as lemming, hanging on to every 90-point score? Aren't winemakers, for better or worse, simply producing a style the majority of wine drinkers demand?

These hyper-extracted wines come from ultra-ripe fruit with high sugars, which in turn raise the alcohol level. To combat this problem, many wineries resort to "*dealcoholization*," literally reducing alcohol from the wine either through reverse osmosis or high-tech filtering. This in turn can require adding back in up to 15% water. The controversy between the purists and practitioners over this approach rages on.

Economics can also play a role in how winemakers deal with alcohol levels. Wines over 14% are taxed at a higher level. If you're a small artisan producer making a few hundred cases a year the additional cost may be insignificant, but if you're producing serious quantities of wine every

vintage, employing whatever technology available to bring alcohol levels down may be deemed a financial necessity.

The volleying back and forth between winemakers, critics, bloggers and buyers on the high-alcohol issue is escalating. Proponents, many of them winemakers, would argue the problem (assuming you consider it a problem) is the card Mother Nature has dealt them. Read that as climate change has led to riper fruit, requiring adjustments in the winemaking process. The industry is quick to contend that as long as a wine's components, acidity, tannins and flavors, are all in balance, then the higher alcohol levels are justifiable. To a large degree, this is true, but that does not address the DUI issue, or that these wines tend to overpower many foods.

Opponents contend this manipulation robs the wine of its character and structure and the wine's terroir, or sense of place. This "natural, less-is-better" camp argues that while the average alcohol level of wine in many growing regions jumped more than two points (from 12.5% to 14.8%) between 1978 and 2001, UC Davis studies presented at a Napa Valley Grapegrowers Association seminar in 2007 showed that the mean average temperature in Northern California decreased by one degree in a recent 18 year period.

And the consumer? Well, my sense is that outside a small group of wine bloggers, the average consumer really only cares whether they like the wine or not, and whether it offers value to suit their palate and purse.

So who's right? I doubt this issue has an immediate answer. Critics continue to assign numerical ratings. Winemakers will (hopefully) continue making the best wines possible, albeit with an eye to market forces. So it is you and me, the consumer, who will ultimately shape the future on how much alcohol is in our wines. The good news is that all the cyber-chatter is raising our awareness of this issue and there is now talk of a trend to more "reasonable" alcohol levels.

The question I keep coming back to is: *If wines can be "made" with alcohol levels in the 13% range that manage to retain their identity and flavor profile, as in many wine regions of the world, why aren't we seeing more of them?* I'm still searching for that answer.

In the meantime, we do have options. Many of them. Just check out the mandatory posting of the percentage of alcohol listed on every label before your next wine purchase. There are many wines under 14%, although choices are fewer with California brands than the imports... for now.

Remember,

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce