

A Nichols Worth of Wine

January 2009

Sulfites - Separating Fact From Fiction

Information can be a good thing - up to a point. Much has been written and discussed, almost ad nauseam, about the benefits and detriments of consuming a glass or two of wine. Little can raise the anxiety level in the human psyche more than dire warnings of some untold repercussion of what we ingest, be it the air we breathe, water we drink, food we eat, medicines we take, and yes, even the wine we consume. Look no further than the never ending controversy of wine and health.

Wine is good for the heart, maybe not. Wine may aid in slowing the debilitating effects of Alzheimers, not enough conclusive evidence. Wine is an aphrodisiac and increases the libido; couldn't prove it by me, but that's another story altogether. But I often meet people who swear they are prone to insufferable headaches they attribute to the sulfites in wine. These chemical compounds can't be good for you can they? After all, since 1986, the FDA has been requiring winemakers to put that ominous warning "CONTAINS SULFITES" right there on the label. I guess you wouldn't be surprised to learn that the US is the only wine producing country in the world that requires sulfite warnings.

Yes, wine does contain sulfites, it is a naturally occurring byproduct of fermentation. And yes, most winemakers add small amounts of sulfites. But, the sulfites in wine do not - I repeat - do not cause headaches, even in the less than 1% of the general population who are sulfite-sensitive. The most likely culprit is over-consumption. Residual sugar (sweet wines can cause more headaches than dry wines), and higher alcohol levels in wine may also play a part. Another myth buster is that red wines contain more sulfites than white wines. They don't.

So why all the hullabaloo? Maybe it's the anti-alcohol lobbying brigade, or maybe it's that a few starving lawyers, who, while proud owners of considerable wine cellars themselves, are more than willing to profiteer by championing the cause of the seriously hungover.

Listen, far be it from me to chastise, or otherwise dispute that minute minority who truly suffer from the unpleasant side-effects of sulfite exposure. I don't know how they manage their day-to-day existence given that sulfites are present in so many of the foods we ingest, including fruit juices, dried fruit, pizza dough, cheeses, processed vegetables, baked goods, fried potatoes, and pickled foods. Imagine life without tater tots and capers!

In all seriousness, grape-loving skeptics of this position need to consider what wine would be like without the miniscule addition of sulfite infusion most winemakers employ. Sulfites serve two essential functions: By binding with oxygen, sulfites prevent or minimize oxidation, which browns wine and imparts stale, flat flavors; they also inhibit undesirable microbial activity.

An overwhelming majority of winemakers consider sulfites essential. Eliminating the minimal addition of sulfites, makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make top quality wines that can withstand the rigors of transportation and that reward long-term cellaring.

Thanks to ingenious marketing and I suspect, some serious lobbying, the FDA recently backed off its intent to prohibit winemakers from labeling wines with the term “*Made with Organic Grapes*” if they added sulfites. Now only those wines labeled “*Organic Wine*” must be made without the addition of sulfites. Confused? Me too!

So for most of us, before we trade in our cabernet for carbonated water, we may want to consider that the crawl to the medicine cabinet for the Ibuprofen in the wee hours of the morning may have much more to do with the sum, not the sulfites, of your wine consumption. That age old adage, “*everything in moderation*” still rings true!

For a list of a few, and very few it is, of low sulfite wines (remember there is no such thing as a truly sulfite-free wine), take a look at this website: <http://www.organicvintages.com>. The one low-sulfite wine readily available in most markets that I am aware of is Frey Vineyards in Mendocino Country, California. I’ve tasted a few of their wines and while I couldn’t tell they were low in sulfite, they are pretty good wines.

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce