



A Nichols Worth of Wine

In the Vineyard September 2007

Can't we all just get along... If there is a wine subject more controversial today than alcohol levels, then I'm not aware of it, and I spend a lot of time researching, studying and yes, occasionally tasting the stuff. Bear in mind of course that "tasting" is a very subjective term.

Given all of the press these days, you would think that high alcohol wine is a new subject. In fact, "too high" alcohol was a very contentious issue back in the late 60's and early 70's when California zinfandels were climbing into the then unheard of 15% to 16% alcohol stratosphere. Consumers responded by avoiding these wines. Sales plummeted so deep and so fast that had White Zinfandel not exploded on to the scene, the varietal might have disappeared altogether. Up until about five years ago, only a handful of winemakers in the decades since the 60's had purposely pushed alcohol levels above the unwritten benchmark of 14%. Most partnered with Mother Nature and modest technology to stay below this arbitrary yardstick.

Today however, these high octane targets are not only becoming somewhat commonplace, they are aspired to. Therein is the difference. The question so hotly debated from Sonoma to South Australia is, "*Is Bigger Better*"? It is the consumer, or at least a new class of wine buyer, demanding these super-ripe fruit bombs. An all too-large, too-willing group of grape growers are keen to meet this demand. Further fueling this debate are wine writers who support this fuller flavor furor with high ratings. Chefs are chastising their sommeliers for overloading their lists with bottles that overwhelm even the boldest menu ingredients. Nationally recognized wine merchants refuse to stock their shelves with wines over certain thresholds while health and public officials have joined the fracas with outcries of an ever increasing inebriated public. Not since the Mondavi brothers, Robert and Peter, parted ways four decades ago, have we had such an enological duel. I'm sensing there may be a reality TV opportunity here – *Grape Lovers Gone Wild*".

I'll skip the fifth grade science lesson regarding grape's sugar conversion to fermenting alcohol and Wine 101's chapter on riper grapes equals higher alcohol levels. There is plenty of finger pointing in the industry as to the whys of this movement. Many would have us glance to the sky telling us Al Gore is right, it is global warming. Without a doubt, escalating temperatures are a mounting concern, but surprise, surprise; this is a story of economics. Given the cost of producing a bottle of wine these days, it's no wonder. But it is extended hang time, allowing grapes to develop on the vine far beyond what was done a decade ago that is driving this change. This practice is producing big, ripe, juicy grapes that soften the wine's tannins, making them infinitely more drinkable soon after release. These higher sugar levels also elevate the alcohol levels. Unfortunately, extended hangtime also produces wines that are much more homogenized. Don't think so? Open a bottle of 14% plus cabernet, merlot and syrah, taste them blind and see if you can determine a significant distinction in their "varietal character".

Did I mention that this is primarily an American phenomenon? Unlike anywhere else in the world, we are a “more is better” society and this mantra apparently has devolved to our preference in wine as well. Sadly, we are beginning to export this trend to the other wine producing regions of the world. Oh sure the Aussies churn out blockbuster shiraz frequently exceeding levels of 15% and more, but the majority of their wines seem to be better at balancing the interplay of sugar and acidity. Regrettably, the French, in an attempt to recoup some of the tremendous market share they forfeited in the last decade, are too experimenting with their alcohol concentrations. But for the most part, this is a local issue confined to wines produced on this side of the pond. Reflecting on my recent months in Europe visiting the vineyards and tasting the wines of Provence and Tuscany, I couldn't recall a single wine, with the exception of a few Amarone's, that were over 14%. Sure enough, in going back over my tasting notes, virtually every single wine –and there were a few– was 13.5% or under!

In all likelihood, most wine consumers do not give a whole lot of thought to alcohol levels when they are pondering their purchase. Perhaps they should. If there is a single argument I would make in support of lower alcohol wines, it is that we should keep in mind that just a two percent increase in the alcohol level of a bottle of wine, say from 13.5 to 15.5 percent, there is a corresponding, significant jump in our blood alcohol concentration. No one wants to face the possibility of testing the legal limits of driving with unsafe levels of alcohol in our systems. Nor do we want to fall asleep before we see the bottom of our first glass of wine when out to dinner. Another reason to consider wines that fall in the 14% and lower range is their tendency to better pair with most food. Lower alcohol means higher acidity and this balance of acidity and pH, or alcohol level generally results in wines that are crisper and better suited to the wine range of flavors in many of the foods we eat.

And so, the question that begs to be answered: *“Is all this wrangling over alcohol levels good for the consumer”?* How many wine drinkers really care how long the grapes hang on the vine or what cellar wizardry the winemaker might employ to produce wines that satisfy our palates? There is growing sentiment that what we need are two styles of wine. Big fruit-forward, lush “cocktail” wines meant to be enjoyed on their own and leaner, more-structured, food-friendly wines exemplifying terroir. Perhaps this is the answer, but at a time when wine is enjoying its most celebrated success since the days of the Roman Empire, I am concerned that yet another new category will only serve to further confuse an already baffled consumer as they stand at the merchant's shelves deliberating their wine purchase. Maybe we need to just stop arguing about it. Ultimately, it is the consumer who will direct this course. I suspect the pendulum will swing once again and winemakers will figure out a way to trim down these obese wines to a more reasonable level without compromising flavor. Until then, be sure to read the label.

Did you know...

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) allow wines with a 7%-14% alcohol level a 1½% variance and wines over 14% are permitted a margin of 1%.