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The Sommelier Says....

Hello and welcome to the newsletter for <http://www.wine-sommelier.com/>

Is High Alcohol in wine a flaw?

In this day and age, we are seeing wines from California being made of higher and higher alcohol content. I know personally that when a wine hits 15% I 'feel it' in my nose. And the wine then becomes "hot".

As with some other wine flaws, it's difficult to say that high alcohol is always a concern. A wine with 14.5% or even 16% alcohol may not be faulty: it depends on the context and, to some degree, the taster. You might ask yourself, "Is this wine faulty?" but rather, "Would this wine be better with less alcohol?" I'll explain why I think high alcohol levels are such an issue and what can be done about them.

The Average alcohol levels in wine seem to be on the rise. When I began drinking wine in earnest some 20 years ago, it was quite common to find table wines at 12% alcohol, and 13% seemed high. Now, levels of 14% are seen as normal, and even 15% alcohol isn't particularly unusual. These anecdotal observations are backed up by what little data are available. In one study, the Australian Wine Research Institute examined alcohol levels in a large sample of Australian wines. For whites, the average increased from 12.2% in 1984 to 13.2% in 2000 before falling back to 12.5% in 2004. In reds, the level rose steadily from 12.4% to 14% over this period. A comparable study in California showed a rise from 12.5% in 1978 to 14.8% in 2001.

There are several factors contributing to this increase, but the driving force seems to be stylistic. Winemakers have come to believe that consumers prefer the easy-drinking, ripe-fruit flavors that come from later harvesting, and rising vintage ratings have reinforced this notion. Later picking means higher sugar levels in the grapes, and with all else being equal, that translates to more alcohol, since the vast majority of table wines are fermented to dryness.

Consequently, grapes are often picked at the end of summer instead of during the fall, meaning that as harvest approaches, sugar levels can be rising fast. In recent years, growers have developed a better understanding of the two types of ripeness: sugar ripeness and phenolic (or physiological or flavor) ripeness. Sugar ripeness refers to the way sugar levels in grapes rise and acidity levels fall in a sort of tandem process. Phenolic ripeness refers to the process in which the tannins in the grape skins soften, the green-tasting methoxypyrazines disappear, and the seeds brown; thus, the grapes develop more flavor. In an ideal vineyard, in an ideal vintage, phenolic ripeness would be achieved with a sugar ripeness equating to an alcohol level of 12-13% and acidity that is neither too high nor too

low. Unfortunately, in many warm wine regions, this never happens. Growers harvest only when physiological ripeness is achieved, which can mean potential alcohol levels of 14.5-15% and acidity levels so low that they need a hefty whack of tartaric acid to bring them back into balance.

High alcohol content is more than an esthetic issue: it can lead to other flaws and winemaking problems. Alcohol is actually toxic to yeasts, and it raises the toxicity of other compounds present in the ferment, such as medium-chain-length fatty acids.

Can you reduce the alcohol in wine? Yes there are a number of ways to reduce alcohol levels, some involving work in the vineyard, others involving manipulation in the cellar. The simplest is to add water to the must. This has several advantages: water is cheap; you get a little more wine. But adding water in any appreciable quantity is illegal (California regulations allow a small volume increase in wine from solid additions or from the water used to clean hoses, for example). It also results in some dilution, but that doesn't necessarily stop vintners from doing it.

Reverse osmosis is one method of reducing the alcohol levels; it is a type of filtration system that works in a similar way to the kidneys. You need a considerable number of long filtration tubes bundled together, making reverse osmosis more expensive than standard filtration systems.

Winemakers could also use yeasts that are less efficient in converting sugar to alcohol. These yeasts utilize metabolic pathways, meaning they produce less alcohol per unit of sugar by redirecting sugars to other metabolites, such as glycerol.

There's a general principal in winemaking that the earlier the intervention, the better. So the front line in the fight against high alcohol is in the vineyard. The easiest way to produce lower-alcohol wines is to pick the grapes earlier, but many winemakers are reluctant to sacrifice flavor development for a degree or two of lower alcohol.

If alcohol's only role in wine were as an intoxicant, any perceived problem of high alcohol levels could be offset by user behavior: just drink less! But this is clearly not the case. Alcohol has a profound impact on the flavor of wine. In deciding whether high alcohol is actually a flaw, it may be useful to remember that quality can be lost when alcohol levels are too low, as well as too high.

It will be interesting to see whether the backlash against ever-rising alcohol levels in wine, particularly red wine, results in a trend toward lower alcohol levels.

Looking ahead

- *- March 7/8-Sonoma Barrel Tasting Weekend*
- *- Coming soon to Wood Ranch..... a NEW wine bar... and a great Sommelier doing all the selections! That's all I can say for now ;)*
- *- Do you want to take a cruise on the Windstar and have a Sommelier your guide through Spain and Italian wineries? I am setting up a cruise this Summer and want you to join me! Details in the next issue!*
- *- May 16/17 Wine Spectator Grand Tasting in Las Vegas*

Cheers-

Tim

**If you would like to be removed from this list, please reply to me at tim@wine-sommelier.com and request removal from this list.
If you know someone that wants this list, please have him or her send me an email requesting to be included too!**