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THE POUR

In Defense of Wine

Sales are down, and health concerns are up. But wine's history of providing beauty, joy and affirmation should not be forgotten.



By **Eric Asimov** · Published June 25, 2024

Around the globe, much of the wine world is feeling besieged and stigmatized.

Sales are down, way down for some. New studies suggest that any consumption of alcohol is unhealthy. New diseases are preying on grapevines, older maladies seem more prevalent and climate change — which has caused subtle and violent changes to weather patterns and more frequent catastrophic events like spring frost, hail, drought and fire — poses a threat to the existence of small growers and producers.

I don't want to speculate here on the systemic reasons that wine sales are down, or question the credibility of the World Health Organization, which published the 2023 study asserting that even moderate consumption of alcohol was unhealthy. Others have tried to do that.

Instead, I want to stand up for the beauty and joy of wine, which has been embraced by humans since the dawn of civilization. Wine has played a role in religions and been a beloved element of many societies. It is often integral to people's cultural identities. For centuries, wine was a necessity for many people, safer to drink than water.

It's not essential to survival any longer. People in countries like France and Italy drink far less wine than they once did because it's now a choice, not a necessity. Wine endures because of the deep and subtle pleasures it offers.

Yes, wine is an alcoholic beverage. Good wine is far more. Wine drinkers enjoy the buzz, but if that were the only element sought, wine would be no more than an intoxicant.

Sadly, many in the wine industry fear that, as marijuana has become easier and less risky to obtain, wine will lose out to legalized cannabis as people trade one high for another.

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The notion of wine as solely an intoxicant is reinforced by popular culture, which so often portrays wine as self-medication, something to drink to relieve anxiety or to unwind at the end of the day.

Good wine transports as it refreshes. It's an invitation to visit other cultures and worlds, to learn about history and geology, agriculture and environmentalism. Aged wine offers a journey through time. It can be a gateway to philosophy and to contemplation.

Though skill, vision and humility are crucial to the creation of great wine, it is not a work of art that springs entirely from the imagination. Rather, it is a beautiful craft. It takes no special skill to appreciate or enjoy. It's fun, and it's delicious, and if you give a glass of good wine to a dozen different people you are liable to get a dozen distinct opinions.

I want to make clear that I am not part of the wine industry. I simply love wine. It has given me more pleasure over the decades than I can quantify, as I've shared bottles at the table with friends and family.

Wine's gift is to enhance meals and gatherings. It brings people together, amplifies a sense of well-being and can comfort in times of sadness. Wine can also transfix, captivate and inspire, touching people's emotions in ways that can range from simple happiness to profound wonder. If they wish, people can discuss and debate the quality and meaning of a profound bottle with language that paradoxically struggles to articulate its mysterious appeal.

At the same time, the humble, everyday bottles are often the most important. Great wines occupy an exalted place because of the discussions they provoke and the context they provide; they will never overshadow the simpler pleasures that we enjoy most frequently with friends and loved ones, just as masterpieces in museums will never eclipse the daily joy we take in our children's artwork on the fridge.

Yes, wine, like all alcoholic beverages, can be dangerous. Out-of-control consumption can be a menace. Societies struggle to balance the benefits and dangers of alcohol in cycles that have ranged from outright bans to over-the-top permissiveness. With the recent reports, many people are wrestling with what is right for them.

It's too easy to lump all alcoholic beverages and their dangers together. While wine can be abused like any other, its role as an accompaniment to food and its long-term cultural importance must be considered. In wine-producing societies, no other beverage has been as entwined with cultural rituals and reaffirming social bonds as wine. We toast to declare love, affection, trust and to reinforce our ties. We raise glasses to celebrate births and to mourn deaths. Wine makes people feel closer to one another.

How important has wine been? Grape vines were among the first crops cultivated by humanity. Scientists have dated the earliest domesticated grapevines to roughly 11,000 years ago, which means that early humans considered grapes and wine significant enough to give up their nomadic lives and settle down in what would become communities.

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Over the centuries, with a few exceptions, wine grapes were not only grown in isolation. They were often part of mixed farms that also grew grains and vegetables and raised animals, everything necessary to sustaining life. The food crops would go in the most fertile terrains. The vines were often planted in places where other crops might not prosper.

These vines might sometimes grow in places that were onerous and exhausting to farm. Visit the Mosel and Rhine valleys in Germany, the Northern Rhône Valley in France, the Douro in Portugal and Ribeira Sacra in Spain. These are ridiculously steep, rocky places where farming was both arduous and terribly dangerous. Vineyards were created on these sites many centuries ago, which required digging out boulders and grading sites to create stone terraces — backbreaking, grueling tasks before mechanization.

Why would people subject themselves to such labors? These choices of vineyard locations may also indicate acute senses of discernment. Centuries later, these sites are recognized as among the best possible places to plant vineyards. It was not simply that wine was necessary. Those people wanted the best wine possible.

Even in more modern times, as in the 19th century, the importance of wine has inspired people to do mind-boggling things, like planting a vineyard at Monte Bello in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California. I drove up there for the first time around 20 years ago, taking a steep, winding road that scared me in both directions. How did people do that with horse and mule? And why?

Wine was that important. It served social, spiritual and aesthetic roles that other foods and beverages never did. And, if the grapes were planted in the right places and skillfully fermented into wine, it was delicious.

I've been writing about wine for more than 25 years. If anything, I'm more fascinated by the subject than ever, and more in awe of the people who dedicate themselves to making wines that are the best expressions of their vision and heritage, whether their bottles cost \$20 or \$200. These wines have enormous cultural value. They will always have an audience.

Wine producers who are in business simply to sell a product face the biggest threat. An audience that doesn't see the value in wine — their audience — will be the most likely to go elsewhere.

I have never consumed wine because I imagined it was healthy. But I don't fear it in moderation, just as I continue to do other things that are not without risk, like drive, fly, eat meat and train in martial arts.

Everybody ought to feel free to make their own choices about wine. In assessing the risks, please take its beauty, culture, history and joy into account as well.