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WINE CLUB NOTES



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Love That Alcohol

California winemakers continue to talk about the high alcohol content of today's wines, although with lowered voices. Made anxious by more competition than they have ever experienced from both inside and outside of the U.S., the consensus among them is that high alcohol wines are the ones that sell, and this is not the time to take a maverick direction, whether or not they personally approve of such wines.

Winemakers blame Robert Parker for the high alcohol trend, because he is the most influential wine writer in the world, having created the 100-point system for evaluating wines, and Robert Parker likes dense, high-alcohol reds and rewards them with high scores, which winemakers court. But even though Parker may have initially set the alcohol conflict in motion between those who favor traditional lighter alcohol levels at 12.5% and those who prefer what are now considered modern wines that have taken a colossal jump to 14.5% and higher today, the fact remains that many, if not most, consumers have come to prefer high alcohol wines. Why?

My sense is that hoards of new American wine consumers, who have become enthusiasts over the last 15 years, are drinking wine with meals, but they are also drinking it without food like they might previously have consumed cocktails. And high alcohol red wines taste way better in the absence of a meal. Such wines are smoother, because the alcohol creates an unctuous sensation. The tannins in the grape skins, which contribute to that gritty sensation that we call texture, are softer too when grapes are riper. Even though all of the fruit sugar ferments into alcohol, riper wines taste sweeter and also have less acid, another reason for the sensation of sweetness. Of course these qualities are less important, if not negative, when we sit down to dinner. We want the acid and the texture that the tannins create to refresh the palate, and we want the ab-

sence of strong fruit flavors, which compete with food flavors.

Another behavior that is now typical of American wine drinkers is that they are less likely to reach for white wine, which can be a fine aperitif and can happily be consumed without food. For whatever reason, this is a red wine market, maybe because of the perception that red wine has more health benefits or that white wine is for "girly men," a term that sprung from the artistic mind of our movie star governor, Arnold Swartzenegger.

So what difference does any of this make anyway? Well first, the alcohol content of wines could have a huge impact on your wine cellar. I recently talked to a wine club member who told me that he has 900 bottles in his cellar. After he told me about the Paso Robles Zinfandels that he loves, I warned him that he should start opening some of those bottles because at 15% alcohol or more, which is now common for Zinfandel, those wines won't last because acid is the single most important element that contributes to the longevity of a wine. Secondly, if you expect to drive home after dinner at a restaurant or a friend's home, you'll have to drink much less of a 15% alcohol wine than a 12.5%. And finally, wines that are around 15% alcohol tend to lose their varietal character and all taste alike. In other words, Zinfandel, Cabernet, and Syrah are likely to be indistinguishable from one another. You get distinct varietal taste only at lower alcohol levels. So if you love Cabs, you'll get more Cab flavor at 13.5% than you will at 15%.

Most California wines are at least 14% alcohol and not unusual at 16%, as are Australian, Chilean, Argentinian, or South African wines, which are made according to the same model. But Italians along with winemakers from other parts of Europe are likely to be more loyal to the past. Their best, most expensive, and most age-worthy wines hover around 13%

See **ALCOHOL**, *on flip side*