

# *The Society of Medical Friends of Wine*

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

[www.medicalfriendsofwine.org](http://www.medicalfriendsofwine.org)

**NEWSLETTER**

**MAY, 2019**

## **A REVIEW OF RECENT MEDICAL LITERATURE**

**BY Daniel Bikle, MD, PhD**

### **How Many Cigarettes are there in a Bottle of Wine?**

**Hydes, T.J., Burton, R., Inskip H., Bellis, M.A and Sheron, N.**

**BMC Public Health 19:316, 2019**

Now that is a grabber title, and one that has led to a fair amount of public discussion. But is it a good comparison? The SMFW was founded to promote the health benefits of wine. It seems that increasingly the notion that alcohol has any health benefits has come under attack, with a number of reputable organizations, including the World Health Organization International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the World Cancer Research Fund, and the American Institute for Cancer Research saying NO. In a previous newsletter I discussed the Lancet article from the Global Burden of Disease Alcohol Collaborators, a massive study with data from 195 countries, demonstrating that with the possible exception of a slight decrease in cardiovascular disease with moderate drinking there was not much good with respect to health attributed to alcohol consumption. I am not discounting its social and culinary attributes.

But comparing drinking a bottle of wine/week with smoking seems harsh. What did these authors do?

They used the life cancer risk data from Cancer Research UK to calculate the possible life time risk associated with consuming a bottle of wine/week (10 units by their measure) with that of smoking 10 cigarettes/week. The study made an attempt to use data only from smokers who did not drink (a minority) and drinkers who did not smoke (the majority). Those who both drank and smoke had greater than additive risk of cancer and were not part of the reported analysis. They found that nonsmoking men had a 1% increased life time risk of cancer from drinking 1 bottle of wine/week. This increased to 1.9% with 3 bottles/week. Women had a higher life time risk—1.4% for 1 bottle, 3.6% for 3 bottles. This increased risk in women was due almost entirely to their increased risk of breast cancer. For both sexes the increased risk of cancer other than breast cancer was mostly GI, upper and lower. This was compared to smoking. For men 10 cigarettes/ week carried a 2.1% increased life time risk but was only 1.5% for women. Although lung cancers were increased by smoking, unlike alcohol consumption, both smoking and alcohol consumption were associated with increased colorectal and other GI tract cancers.

There are a lot of caveats here. Life time risk is not well defined with respect to duration. When do people start smoking, start drinking? How variable is the level of smoking/drinking over time? Data for smoking only 10 cigarettes/week are essentially nonexistent. Smokers typically

smoke every day, but moderate drinkers are less likely to be daily drinkers. Smoking clearly has a number of other negative side effects. As the authors state” smoking kills up to two thirds of its users, and cancer is just one of many serious health consequences”. So, to make smoking equivalent to wine is a bit disingenuous. But the main point is there is an association between alcohol consumption and cancer, even moderate alcohol consumption. It is important we recognize the risks.

**2019 Appellation St. Helena Trade Tasting  
Charles Krug Winery Carriage House  
February 21. 2019**

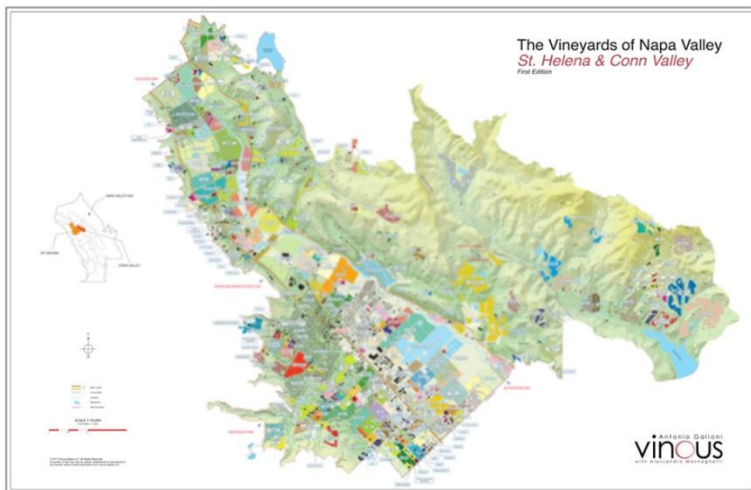
**A Report by Jim Gallagher, PhD**

• Appellation St. Helena (ASH) is bounded to the south by Zinfandel Lane and to the north by Bale Lane. The eastern boundary is the intersection of Howell Mountain and Conn Valley Road, while to the west the appellation extends to the 400-foot elevation line in the Mayacamas range. It comprises approximately 12,000 acres of land, of which 6,800 acres are planted to vines in over 400 vineyards. This makes St. Helena the largest AVA planting in Napa Valley. The ASH AVA was approved in 1995 by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

The annual ASH Trade tasting coincides with Premiere Napa Valley, the winter gathering of trade

and wine lovers to enjoy the new release of vintage wine and special one-time unique wines crafted specially for this annual celebration.

This review will not consider these special wines in that they are only available during the Premiere period. The new released wines about to be discussed are either available or will be shortly released.



## AXR Napa Valley:



Figure 1 Jean Hoefliger

A foursome, Kelly Trevethan, Mark Schratz, Don Van Laeken and Jean Hoefliger partnered to purchase V Madrone and are now producing wine under the brand “AXR Napa Valley”. Hoefliger, a veteran of the wine industry, most recently, as the winemaker for Alpha Omega, serves as the Winery’s wine consultant; the remaining three hail from backgrounds in Technology and Finance. Dan van Laeken is the Director of Hospitality and is pictured below with Deven Paniagua. Their selection of the Brand name emerged from a business 101 type brainstorming session wherein the

letter “A” was put on a blackboard to start the consideration of a Brand name. “A” seemed like a good starting point as it held an array of attractions such as heading lists, as well as being associated with quality. Almost humorously, X followed.

The final letter, R, was less clearly provided. The influence appears to have been Hoefliger, whose conceptual vision stems from the late 1980s Phylloxera infestation which required almost a complete replanting of the vineyards in the Napa Valley, thus producing a new beginning. The “new beginning” captured the imagination of the three other participants.



Two Cabernet Sauvignons were poured, the 2015 AXR ‘V Madrone Vineyard’ (14.2% al.) which had a dark red hue with a classic purple lemniscus, a bouquet including a range of scents from black cherry to freshly picked blackberry, a medium body, and superb fruit with a well-structured acid balance. The finish was lengthy, lush, accessible with an abundance of soft tannins—a lovely wine that will benefit from several years of bottle age.

The most recent release, the 2016 AXR ‘V Madrone Vineyard’ (15.4% al.) expressed many of the same characteristics, dark red hue, purple edge; bouquet of black cherry, blackberry, light truffle, and toast; with a luscious aftertaste with a greater degree of accessibility than the 2015. Little doubt that the level of alcohol contributed to the luxuriant finish.

2017 Chenin Blanc, **Ballentine Vineyards** 'Betty's Vineyard'. I cannot remember the last time I reviewed



or was impressed by a Chenin Blanc. Admittedly, I was very fond of this varietal thirty-five years ago, and a very memorable **Bonny Doon**, 1984 Chenin Blanc comes to mind. Unlike the aforementioned Bonny Doon, the Ballentine Chenin was fermented in Stainless Steel and did not go through malolactic fermentation.

I was immediately struck by the quality of this lovely wine which displayed a peach blossom aroma within a mild lemon-honey background, a medium-light body, and in the mouth was nicely balanced, with refreshing apple-pear flavors suitable for a multiple range of pairings.



**Corison Winery:** Undoubtedly, Cathy Corison has been one the most reliable winemakers within Napa Valley. Her wines are consistently signature-like in terms of style, character and finesse, demonstrating both accessibility and longevity. The present wines, 2015 Sunbasket and 2015 Kronos, sustained that view. The 2015 Corison Cabernet Sauvignon 'Sunbasket Vineyard', is the first vintage presented as a single vineyard from Corison. Grapes had been sourced from the vineyard for 25 years and the vineyard was purchased by Corison in 2015. The wine exhibited a bouquet of cherry and blueberry fruits within a nonintrusive background of light toast; medium-light body, balanced with sustainable acids, a superb long and luscious finish. It is certainly drinkable at present, but will certainly add additional rewarding character for those able to hold bottles for 3-5 years.

#### **Monticello Vineyards:**

Jay Corley purchased land in the Oak Knoll district in the southern end of the Napa Valley in 1970. The vineyard was planted to several varietals including Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. A decade later, Corley began producing wine from his vineyards under the Monticello Brand. The family name was referenced with "Corley Reserve" along with the vintage date. The winery remains very much a family affair. Chris Corley, heads the wine-making team. Charged with the vineyard's management is Kevin Corley, who farms five vineyards within the Napa Valley appellation. The "Home Ranch and Knollwood Vineyards are located in the "Oak Knoll" appellation and are planted to five varietals- Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah. The Corley

Cabernet Sauvignon is sourced from three vineyards: State Lane in Yountville, Tietjen in Rutherford and the Ehlers Lane Vineyard in St. Helena.

Stephen Corley is the Director of Sales and admirably performs this formidable task in the current environment of competition with mega corporate entities.

Chris Corely, shown below, is the family winemaker, and is about as enthusiastic about his craft as any winemaker I know. He is shown displaying a monumental grin as he greets participants at the ASH trade tasting.

The 2015 Corely Cabernet Sauvignon “Corely Reserve” is a striking example of the Corley wines. Dark red, with a deep purple edge; the bouquet is a classic cabernet cherry with hint of blackberry, light spice and earth within a toasty framework. The finish is long, lush with plenty of backbone to age well.



**Revana Winery:** This is one of my favorite Cabernet Sauvignon producers of the Napa Valley. A very thoughtful pairing was offered at the tasting. A 2009 Revana Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, which was the last vintage that was completely vinified by Heidi Peterson Barrett, the winemaker preceding Thomas Rivers Browne, the current Revana Winemaker. Compared with the current release of the 2016 Revana Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, the flavors of the 2009 were remarkably similar, namely rich cherry and blueberry fruit, along with light earth. The vinification approach of the younger wine seemed to reflect a “more refined” or “less assertive” dimension, making it the more accessible of the two wines. The attraction of the wine would reflect this taster’s preference along the dimension of refined/assertive character, whereas those who prefer the term “grip”, would likely be favoring the Barrett wine which retains a degree of astringency.

**Robert Biale Vineyards:**

Dave Pramuk is a co-founder of Biale Vineyards and has had a remarkable career in the wine industry dating back to the early days at Sterling Vineyards. He also worked at Carneros Creek Winery along with Napa Valley legends such as, Francis Mahoney and Bill Bishop.

Biale is distinguished in Napa Valley as the premiere Zinfandel and Petite Sirah producer. Dave was showing three of Biale's 2017 Zinfandel's at the 2019 ASH trade tasting. The first from the Varozza Vineyard and a second from the Old Kraft Vineyard. The third was their special one-time wine crafted for Napa Premiere which was a blend from the Varozza and Old Kraft vineyards.



2017 Zinfandel 'Varozza Vineyard'. Dark red, with a deep purple edge. The bouquets leaps from the glass with rich and ripe red fruit aromas within a wandering toasty cloud. In the mouth there is a delightful texture and a lasting finish. This wine is presently ready for grilled foods and summer barbecued ribs.

#### **Spottswoode Estate Vineyards & Winery:**

Undoubtedly one of the most consistent "High Quality" Cabernet Sauvignon producers in the Napa Valley through the last 37 years. The 2014 Spottswoode Estate Cabernet continues in remarkable fashion to extend that view. Its color is dark red with a purple edge. The bouquet of ripe dark fruits—blueberry, blackberry, dark cherry, is couched carefully within a supportive toasty aura. Medium in body, with superb fruit, balance and an ultra-fine finish of soft tannins and succulent flavors. The mouth feel is stunning. Fortunately, over four thousand cases were produced and the wine should be readily found in high end Bay Area shops.

**In Memorium**

John Shafer, the founder of **Shafer Vineyards** and a wonderful

sensibility

person, has passed away. John had a special manner in which he made you feel like the most important person in the room. His vibrance and charm produced an abundance of warmth that was both overwhelming and utterly wonderful. It was impossible to spend a few minutes with him and sustain a grim feeling about anything.



The very first wine he produced at Shafer, 1978 Cabernet Sauvignon, captured the praises of so many critics of the time. It remains as one of the best wines produced in the Napa Valley. He followed this spectacular beginning by producing, year after year, wonderful wines and by establishing a team of his son, Doug Shafer and Elias Fernandez, formed in the early 1980s, that persists today in producing wine as good as it gets.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

We would like to remind you of two exciting upcoming events that your Society has planned.

On **Sunday, May 19<sup>th</sup>** we will gather at Alfred's Steak House, 659 Merchant Street, San Francisco for a classic steak dinner accompanied by select California wines with hors d'oeuvres and the first and the main courses. A surprise and special dessert wine will make its appearance with the chocolate bread pudding dessert in what we hope you will find to be a match made in dessert heaven.

This will be a joint event with the Chaine des Rotisseurs, a sister organization with like goals populated by members in the food and restaurant industry. Our president, Dr Jack McElroy D.V.M. is a member of the Chaine and has been working closely with his counterpart Elliot Katz of the Chaine to assure us of a great evening of excellent food, memorable wine, and great camaraderie as well as a chance to meet new people who share our interests. We hope to see you there.

Our annual wine country tour will take place on **Saturday, June 22**. Jack McElroy has planned a wonderful day in the Russian River wine country, home to some of California's most celebrated Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, followed by dinner at John Ash Restaurant in Santa Rosa. You all have received a save the date notification, so please look for full details and sign up to arrive shortly.

## SOME MUSINGS FROM THE EDITOR AND CELLAR MASTER

First of all, a big thank you to Dan Bikle, M.D., PhD and Jim Gallagher, PhD, for contributing articles to this newsletter.

In our March letter I mentioned that I am always trying to think of topics for this newsletter that might entertain or stimulate discussion. Last month I introduced some thoughts and concerns about wine inflation—not in price although that is also a reason of concern—but in wine scoring. I promised (or threatened) you with further thoughts this month about whether or not critics' scores remain a valid way of judging wine and guiding purchases.

There is no doubt in my mind that the 100-point scoring system popularized by Robert Parker was a stroke of marketing genius. Prior to this, U.C. Davis did have a 20-point scoring system that was heavily technically influenced. It arose from an era when wines were more likely to have technical flaws, and the presence of cloudiness, off aromas, volatile acidity, and the like would detract from the score. There was little place for flavor or complexity in the system, and a technically sound wine of little varietal character or taste interest could still generate a respectable score. It was a system for budding wine makers but not for consumers.

When Hurst Hannum and I wrote the first edition of our book, *The Fine Wines of California*, in 1971, we came up with a rating system reminiscent of the grades we received in school, although we used ratings from Excellent to Below Average rather than A through F. This was the era just before the birth and growth of wine critics, and the concept of rating wines was quite novel. Our book did well, but the rating system certainly did not prove memorable. Other guides followed and used symbols. One of the best of that era, *Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wines*, used puffs to rank the wines. Again, fairly successful, but not of the magnitude of Mr. Parker and his 100-point system.

A 100-point system is easy to remember and to quote. It also helps to further comparison within a category. The implication is that a 96-point wine is better than a 95-point wine, even though both might overall be in an excellent range. From a sales point of view, a little hang tag with a score is very easy to put around the neck of a bottle.

Wineries loved the system as long as they got good scores. It became very easy to quote a number in their ads and gain attention. Wine merchants loved it, again for the ease of marketing, but also because they could widely quote critics who gave favorable scores to wines they have to sell. If a customer comes back and says "I didn't like that wine", the ready answer is, "Oh, but it got a 95 from Parker." The implication being maybe it's you and not the wine (or your wine merchant) who should be questioned. The old days when a friendly wine merchant tasted everything, got to know his customers' likes and dislikes, and could be relied on as a source of knowledge quickly became the old days. Even merchants whom I know well, have educated palates, and taste a lot of wines still cannot resist quoting critics and their scores in virtually all their marketing. I suspect that they fear that doing otherwise could be economic suicide.

So, what is wrong with this? Is an honest critic with an experienced palate and talent for writing a bad thing? Isn't this a system to help many people who might otherwise be too intimidated to navigate through the world of wine? Haven't wine sales increased dramatically to the benefit of producers, merchants, restaurants, consumers, and our economy in general?



This is a fascinating subject worthy of a lengthy discussion, and it is not my intent to argue for or against the system. Rather, I would like to look at how it has evolved, and ask the question, is it still useful?

Early on the system did seem to work quite successfully, and quite well I might add. Any wine above 90 points was considered a wine worthy of consideration for purchase. A wine in the mid to high 80's might fill the bill quite nicely for an everyday drinking beverage or for use at a large event where few attendees would be discerning tasters. A wine with 98, 99, or 100 points was rare and likely to be worthy of very special attention.

Today we seem to have one of two possible situations. Either virtually everyone making wine is producing excellent wines, or there has been a serious inflation in wine scores. One can find publications touting thousands of wines ranked higher than 90. 100-point wines are no longer rare. There are more wine critics than ever before, and it seems that virtually every wine has gotten a high score from at least one critic. And of course, when selling wine, the highest score is quoted, even if it seems out of line with others. I conclude, and you may or may not agree, that wine scoring has become virtually meaningless as a true guide. If you follow one critic that you agree with and like, then doing so will still work for you. But to just follow scores that appear in ads is meaningless.

I am just waiting for someone to publish a consensus guide to wine scores, where every wine has the average and standard deviation score from all published critics. After all, in the securities business this is the case—many stocks followed by analysts receive disparate ratings, and you can easily find a “consensus” score of analysts. Whether or not that is a good way to research and buy stocks is a good question. I'm not sure it would really help in choosing wines.

I have not touched on the subject of rating wines by number from an intellectual or emotional viewpoint. My feelings are exemplified by the following true vignette.

I was once at a dinner where an acquaintance mentioned she was going to an upcoming tasting of California current release Cabernets from the Napa Valley. She by all appearance was an experienced taster, and I knew frequently attended such events. I was interested in the Beaulieu Private Reserve Cabernet, which used to be one of my favorite wines, but had been in a funk for a number of years. Reportedly it was starting to return to old form, and I wondered if that were true. I asked her to pay special attention to how the current release of this wine tasted and faired in her upcoming event.

When I next saw her, I asked of her experience, and specifically asked what she thought of the Beaulieu Private Reserve. If I recall, she answered, “well I suppose it would be a 91 or 92”. When I asked what she meant, her reply was, “well it was certainly better than an 88 but not as good as a 95-point wine would be”. When I asked about its aroma, balance, flavors, and ageability, she was at a loss for words. But she knew she would give it a 91 or 92.

How sad when the appreciation of a fine wine is reduced to a numbers game. There, at least now you know how I feel about numbers, inflated or otherwise.

Like many of you, I receive daily emails from a number of excellent wine merchants enticing me to buy their latest offerings. Many are extraordinarily well written and catch my attention (even if they include numeric scores), but I am often puzzled at how a newly released wine is often touted as every

bit as good, if not better, than the one released last year that was praised to the skies and touted as the best ever from the property.

Why is it that the best wine is usually the wine available for sale? Join me next edition as we ponder this question and I offer my own thoughts on how to read between the lines to navigate the world of wine offerings.

Robert Blumberg, M.D.  
SMFW Editor and Cellar Master