

The New York Times

## The Hard Stuff Now Includes Wine

By ERIC ASIMOV

**N**OT so many years ago, back when Americans sought out compact cars and calculated their gas mileage, most California wines clocked in at an economical 12 to 13 percent alcohol. It was perhaps a shade higher than what their European colleagues achieved, but California was blessed with generous sunshine that made ripening grapes an easier proposition than in the cooler climates of Bordeaux and Burgundy.

Twenty-five years later, the 12 percent California wine seems as quaint as the gas-saving hatchback. Today, it's the rare bottle from California, red or white, that doesn't reach

With the new numbers, 12 percent is so 80's.

14 percent alcohol. Many now hit 15, even 16 percent, a difference that may seem insignificant until you realize that a 15 percent bottle contains 25 percent more alcohol than one labeled 12 percent.

Casual consumers seem to pay little attention to the small print on the label that indicates the approximate alcohol content. And while these extreme wines do not hide their alcohol levels, few winemakers trumpet them, either.

In fact, many of these wines come from some of California's most critically acclaimed producers, who charge from \$25 to \$100 or more a bottle. Clearly, consumers intent on intoxication can find far cheaper pathways, like a bottle of bourbon with 40 percent alcohol.



Alcohol in a few California wines reaches 17 percent.

But among California producers and those who follow wine closely, the wines have provoked sharp debate.

Opponents have called them wines on steroids, and insist that the qualities of elegance and subtlety, and the ability to evolve gracefully with age, so prized in traditional wines, are completely lost. Wine's place on the dinner table, they say, is in danger, too. These wines, they argue, overwhelm food instead of enhancing it. High alcohol can create the impression of sweetness, which can clash with food. And then there's the headache factor, not to mention the issue of driving.

"You raise the alcohol just a couple percent in wine, and you change people's experience," said Andrew Murray, a winemaker in Santa Barbara County, who says he has tried tripling the alcohol in his wines. "The old concept, my wife and I can split a bottle of wine with dinner, is no longer true."

Proponents say the alcohol level is irrelevant, as long as the wines are balanced and taste good. They complain that opponents are judging them by Old World benchmarks. These producers assert that they are carving out an identity for California in the most traditional fashion, by allowing the wines to reflect the characteristics of the soil and climate in which the grapes are grown. They contend that higher alcohol levels are not a flaw as long as other factors, like acidity, which gives a wine zing, and tannins, which give it structure, do their part.

"We're not trying to be Bur-

Continued on Page 8

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13, 2005

## The Hard Stuff Now Includes Wine

Continued From First Dining Page

gundy, we're not trying to be California pinot," said Greg Brewer, who, with his partner, Steve Clifton, makes pinot noir and chardonnay in the Santa Rita Hills of western Santa Barbara County. "We're only interested in the two grapes that grow best in the area in which we live." The Brewer-Clifton wines are often above 15 percent alcohol. They are intense, but unlike many of the high-alcohol wines they can be balanced and graceful as well.

"It's a number," Mr. Brewer said, dismissing the focus on alcohol. "Are people checking the B.T.U.'s on a chef's burner?"

At the Adegia Restaurant and Wine Bar in Denver, where the higher-alcohol wines are popular, the issue of percentages almost never comes up, said Aaron Foster, the wine director. "Their popularity is due to the name recognition," he said. "To a certain degree, most people assume that wines are all the same, and they're looking at taste."

High alcohol levels are not completely new in California. Zinfandels have a long history of surpassing 15 and 16 percent. What's different are the wines from grapes not known for producing blockbuster alcohol levels. The Heavyweight 2003, a blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and two other grapes from Behrens & Hitchcock in the Napa Valley, weighs in at 15.6 percent. A 2001 roussanne from Sine Qua Non is at 15.5 percent. The 2002 Hard Core, a blended red wine from Core in eastern Santa Barbara County, hit 15.7 percent. Syrahs from Pax Wine Cellars in northern California regularly approach 16 percent, while the Bulladóir, a 2002 syrah from the Garretson Wine Company in Paso Robles, reached nearly 17 percent. Each of these wines has received scores of 90 points or higher from Robert M. Parker Jr., the influential wine critic.

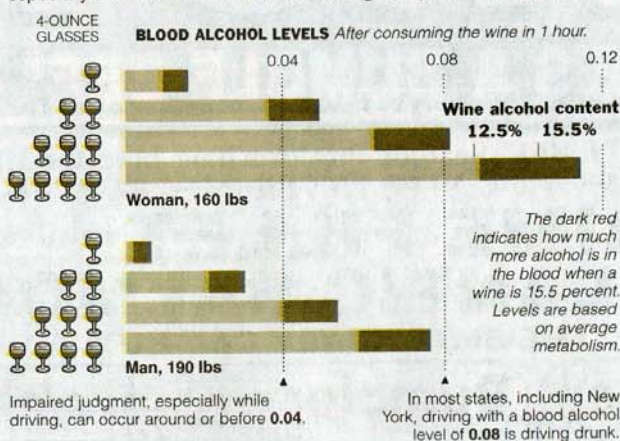
"It used to be anything above 14 percent was really up there," said Bob Lindquist of Qupé Wine Cellars, who has been making wine in Santa Barbara County since the 1970's. "Now, 15 is the new 14."

Around the world, a few wines, like Amarone in northeast Italy, are typically above 15 percent. Australia has had many high-alcohol wines, and in hot years, like 2003 in France, some producers may achieve elevated alcohol levels. But nowhere else can match California's concentration of extreme wines.

In the state, the alcohol watershed came roughly around 1990. Previous-

### More Gusto in a Glass

A standard French wine is 12.5 percent alcohol, but now some wines, especially those from California, are reaching 15.5 percent or more.



Sources: David Craig, Hobart and William Smith Colleges; New York State Dept. of Motor Vehicles

ly, grape growers judged the ripeness of their grapes simply by gauging the sugar content. When the grapes hit a certain point on the Brix scale, which measures sugar content, they were picked. In the last 15 years, though, the buzz phrase has been physiological ripeness. This takes into account the ripeness of other parts of the grape, like the seeds and the skins. A physiologically ripe grape, in which the seeds have turned from green to brown, yields softer, more supple tannins with less astringency, making traditionally long-lived wines easier to drink at an earlier age.

In most California vineyards, the seeds and skins lag behind sugar in reaching their ideal level of ripeness. As the seeds and skins ripen, the grapes get sweeter and sweeter. Growers using the standard of physiological ripeness are picking grapes at a much higher sugar level than they had previously.

That's only part of it. Many winemakers say that scientific advances in viticulture have turned grapevines from plow horses into thoroughbreds, able to photosynthesize sunshine into sugar far more efficiently than a couple of decades ago. Scientists have sharply reduced the viruses that used to afflict leaves and turn them a brilliant red late in the growing season. Now those leaves are green and absorbing far more light

than before. In the modern nursery, growers are able to select their rootstocks, graft them to any number of grapevine clones, and in a sense custom-design their own grape-producing factories.

"Because we've done such a great job in the selection of budwood and eliminated the viruses, photosynthesis is working far more efficiently,"

### Sweeter grapes and more voracious yeasts.

said R. Michael Mondavi, the former chief executive of the Robert Mondavi Corporation who is now a consultant. "It's forcing people to have much higher sugar levels before the skin and seeds become mature."

In order to deal with ultra-sweet grape juice, scientists have developed voracious strains of yeast that are far more efficient in transforming sugar into alcohol than wimpier yeasts of old.

"These are Schwarzenegger kinds of yeasts," said Bruno D'Alfonso, the winemaker at Sanford Winery in the Santa Rita Hills. "They would ferment a building if given a chance."

Mr. Mondavi does not favor the

higher-alcohol wines.

"To me a wine is a beverage to be enjoyed with a meal," he said. "These wines remind me of what my grandfather used to do with a big, heavy wine. He would add water, then drink it with his meal."

In fact, Mr. Mondavi's grandfather used a technique not that different from what some winemakers do to avoid having wines too high in alcohol. They add water to their grape juice before fermenting it into wine, resulting in less alcohol by volume.

"I pick ripe and water back," said Mr. D'Alfonso, saying out loud what many winemakers would prefer not to admit. "I shoot for between 14.2 and 14.5. But I've had wines that were above 14.8 and they were balanced."

Other winemakers employ more advanced methods, like reverse osmosis or spinning cone columns, which can remove alcohol from wines after they are made. "Pick at 16 percent, spin a third of it down to 12, then blend it together under 15 percent," said Jim Clendenen, owner of Au Bon Climat Winery in Santa Barbara County.

Mr. Clendenen continues to make wines under 14 percent, and occasionally under 13 percent. So does Randy Dunn, owner of Dunn Vineyards in the Napa Valley, who makes powerful cabernet sauvignons that are always long lived. His 2001 weighed in under 13.8 percent, and he tries to keep his wines in that range, even if he has to resort to techniques like reverse osmosis. Figures like 13.8 percent, by the way, are not as accurate as they seem. A wine below 14 percent, according to federal regulations, has a margin of error of plus or minus 1.5 percent. Above 14 percent, the margin of error is reduced to 1 percent. And for reasons that are more arcane than scientific, the federal government taxes wines above 14 percent at a higher rate (\$1.57 a gallon) than those 14 percent or lower (\$1.07). Winemakers seem not to care.

"I go with, the numbers be damned if you're picking the fruit when it's really ripe," said Mat Garretson of the Garretson Wine Company, whose wines typically run from 15 to 17 percent alcohol. He acknowledges that his wines may be a little much at a dinner party.

"To do more than two or three of those at a meal is kind of scary," Mr. Garretson said. "I know that does present a problem for some people, but I'm just trying to make the best wines I can from the area. There's a lot more pain to be had from people who pick too early or pick too late."