Adding water to wine

23 Nov 2004 by JR

I wrote the following article for the dozen or so publications I syndicate a column to every two months. It has just appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle *and stirred up quite a response. I'll be publishing all that I'm allowed to in* ***purple pages*** *over the next week or so.*

How would you feel about vintners who added water to their wines? Pretty negatively, I would guess. All manner of inexpensive wines taste as though they've had the flavour and character diluted out of them by stretching with water, possibly the oldest form of wine fraud in the book - and one which many wine laws around the world are designed to counter.

But how would you feel if a winemaker told you he was only adding water to make the wine taste better? That's a more difficult one, isn't it?

The phenomenon of 'humidification', as it is sometimes euphemistically known, is increasingly common as growers are encouraged to leave grapes longer and longer on the vine in search of the holy grail of 'physiological ripeness'. Time was when grapes were simply required to notch up a certain sugar level but nowadays towards harvest time vineyards are invaded by winemakers trooping up and down the rows waiting for grapes to go way past this stage.

They chew pips to check whether they still taste 'green' (bad). They squash sample grapes between their fingers to see whether they really, really stain their hands (good). They want to see grape skins start to shrivel and stalks turn from green and pliable to brown and woody. Prolonged 'hang time' has become all-important as winemakers insist that not only is the fruit ripe but the tannins and other phenolics are ripe too. What they're searching for is wines that have massive impact but feel comfortably smooth in the mouth.

While all this is happening, in warmer wine regions anyway, sugar levels continue to rise. Put that together with the fact that for reasons unclear yeasts are getting more and more powerful and it's hardly surprising that many a grape must nowadays has a potential alcohol of 16 or 17 per cent.

But how many of us want to drink table wines that are almost as strong as port? I know I don't.

And there is the further complication that in some cases wines above 15 per cent alcohol are either charged higher duty or simply forbidden. It is illegal, for example, for American and Australian wines over 15 per cent alcohol to be imported into Europe (although the South Africans have somehow negotiated 16.5 per cent as their limit).

This means that for years the addition of water to top Barossa Shiraz for example has been routine, even though illegal. A precise quantity of water, calculated according to a formula involving sugar ripeness, is added at crusher stage. This may be partly on the principle that, as with all additions, the sooner you make it, the better the additive will be integrated into the whole. But I suspect it is also because the Australian Wine and Brandy Corporation insists on pretty tight record-keeping in terms of volumes held in wineries - which matters even when dilution is done with quality rather than quantity in mind.

In California, as one would expect, things are rather freer and easier, even if this particular aspect of modern winemaking is rarely discussed with consumers. Here winemakers are allowed to add a tiny proportion of water for pumping grapes and flushing equipment but there is almost maniacal devotion to hang time. In some cases people are practically picking raisins rather than grapes.

Because of this development, only a year ago the head of the California Wine Institute sought official approval from the authorities for adding sufficient water 'to replace that which was lost from grapes through field dehydration' - and got it. Quite how the amount is calculated remains a mystery.

The Wine Institute's major argument for being allowed to add water was that these high-sugar musts can be difficult to ferment and the incidence of stuck fermentations has been rising with the popularity of ultra-ripe musts. And the lower acid levels in late-picked musts have dramatically increased the risk of brettanomyces infection, resulting in distinctly animal smells in the final wine.

One response to California's love affair with extended hang time has been the emergence of operations offering specific

alcohol reduction services to wineries. A Chardonnay that arrived naturally at 16.3 per cent alcohol, having been made from super-ripe grapes, may be sent off to someone with a spinning cone or other bit of de-alcoholising gadgetry to be 'broken back' (another euphemism) to a more palatable 14.5 per cent.

This may be done because the legal limits for water addition would be exceeded otherwise, or to avoid the wine tasting watery. Another response is to use a particularly dilute form of diatomaceous earth filtration where the water is every bit as useful to the winemaker as the filter. (The EU rules state in their prim and proper way that 'authorised oenological practices and processes shall exclude the addition of water, except where required by specific technical necessity'. They specifically and quite rightly forbid adding water with the sugar that is routinely added to musts in so many cooler European wine regions.)

The increasing trend towards picking grapes that are either super-ripe or overripe depending on your point of view is contentious. I must say that I find an increasing proportion of red wines that I taste show unappetisingly pruney, raisined flavours and wholly concur with high profile Australian wine figure Brian Croser's condemnation of 'dead fruit' wines. Wine's first obligation is to refresh.

Fellow Australian, viticultural consultant Richard Smart takes an even more extreme view. In a recent article in the Californian journal *Practical Winery & Viticulture* he maintained 'the need for hang time is being overstated and uncritically accepted. I believe that if grapes need hang time, they are not being grown properly in the first place'.

'My research and commercial experience tell me that, all other factors such as climate being equal, the first vineyards to be harvested make the best wine. This is a sign that the vine is in good balance and able to ripen fruit easily. Problems with the vine translate into delayed harvest'. He has even accused those offering dealcoholising treatments of promulgating the gospel of overripeness for commercial gain.

I don't go along with this conspiracy theory, and each vintage can deliver such awful weather that man has to intervene. But it is certainly true that many vine growers find that by improving vine health and balance they are able to pick ripe grapes earlier than before, so maybe all this deliberate late harvesting (often impossible in areas with wet autumns) is by no means the only answer to wine quality. As a consumer advocate, I'd much rather see healthy vines and naturally balanced wines than continue to live with the nasty little secret of dilution - sorry, breaking back.