

# 10 Things You Wish You Knew About Wine

By Richard Nalley

**T**he woman cornered me near the hors d'oeuvre buffet. She had just been vacationing in Italy and brought some *issues* home with her. The gleam of revelation — or was it righteousness? — shone in her eyes. Why didn't we understand, she demanded, that the Italians keep their best wines for themselves and send us their tired and their poor? Why did America force those sensitive European artisans to adulterate their wines with sulfites before sending them here? Didn't *that* explain why the same brand of Chianti that was nectar in Sienna tasted like dog's water in Scarsdale?

With her Ivy League education, advanced purchasing power and world-travelling zest for experience, this woman is a paragon of the new breed who are creating America's first generation wine culture.

Unfortunately, everything she knows is wrong.

If I'd been able to get a word in, here's what I might have said:

**1. The best wines never leave Italy/France/Spain.** Just the opposite. Though some producers may keep small production lots or special wines for their hometown fans, most of Europe's top wineries are only too eager to sell to the world's biggest, richest import market — the U.S. And America's hypercompetitive wine importers scour the boondocks to find emerging stars. The wine that stays at home is typically the cheap, local plonk that doesn't measure up.

**2. Adding sulfites changed everything.** Sulfites — sulfur dioxide produced when sulfur is burned —

is an organic anti-browning agent and preservative that has probably been in every wine you've ever sipped. Ever. It has been used for centuries, in Europe as heavily as in the U.S. All that has changed is that the American government decided to require wines containing minute quantities (10 parts per million) of sulfur dioxide — *i.e.*, nearly every wine in the world — to carry warning labels to alert the small percentage of the population that is allergic to it. If anything, the labeling regulations have made wineries more conscious of the sulfur issue, meaning there's probably *less* sulfite in most wines since labeling began.

**3. Truly life-enhancing wines don't "travel" well.** What doesn't travel is the moonlight frolicking in the Tiber. It's not the wine's fault if you can't recreate the magic light back home in Keokuk; the wine is exactly the same. (Provided that it wasn't, say, left baking for a week on a dock at Port Everglades.) Again, the opposite of the assumption is true: Better-made wines travel perfectly well; it's the cheap homemade juice that may sour, re-ferment or otherwise turn on you like a rabid cur.

And while we're at it:

**4. Why do people sniff the cork?** This has always struck me as an absurd bit of stage business. The fact that the cork is pulled in the first place means the wine bottle is open — pour a glass and stick your snoot in that. And ignore the visuals of the stopper as well. Great older wines often emerge sound and glorious from behind some very furry-looking corks.

**5. But don't some corks make wine smell like other people's shoes?** A "corked" wine is one in which a harmless, but reek-wreaking, bacteria has attacked the cork, giving the wine a funky, musty smell. Cork makers and wineries go to great lengths to avoid this, but according to some estimates, as many as one wine in 20 may be afflicted with corkiness to some degree — and it happens to the priciest wines as well as the cheapest.

**6. So why have a cork at all?** Good question. Since wine ages ideally in an anaerobic environment (that is, without oxygen), the cork is just a device to keep air out. A hundred years ago, cork (sometimes combined with melted wax) was the only game in town; now the job can be as neatly performed by plastic stoppers and twist-off tops. It's just that the industry knows we cork-conditioned snobs wouldn't buy plastic-stoppered wine. Most champagne bottles, to cite an example, age out of sight in their French cellar sealed with soda-bottle caps. The cork and wire only go on when they're ready to sell the wine to us.

**7. What's the deal with that silver ashtray dangling from the sommelier's neck?** Dimpled silver *tastevins* were originally designed to allow merchants buying barrels in dim, candlelit cellars to gauge the colour of the wine. They are now employed by wine waiters seeking to cultivate that super-worldly, Sebastian-Cabot-as-Mr.-French aura.

**8. If one glass of wine is good for my health, won't three glasses turn me into a suave dynamo of sexual magnetism?** This is absolutely true.

**9. Is it cheaper to order wine directly from the winery?** While some super-hot labels *do* sell their entire year's production through mailing lists, it's not

a way to bargain shop. You may come across special sales and promotions — just like at your local package store — but wineries generally are reluctant to alienate their wholesalers and retailers by undercutting them (and, of course, all too happy to capture those extra two tiers of profit markup for themselves). What's more, if you live in the U.S, you may be breaking the law. The 21st Amendment, that ended prohibition back in 1933, set up a crazy quilt of legislation in which each state has the power to regulate "intoxicating liquors" for itself, and the vast majority prohibit cross-border shipments to private individuals. Though these regulations are enforced spottily at best, seizure or a stiff fine can really inflate the old wine bill.

**10. Isn't dry wine always better?** It is if you like it — and fewer people do than think they do. It's commonplace in the wine business that cola-suckled Americans "talk dry and drink sweet," explaining the popularity of those inexpensive California Chardonnays, many of which contain perceptible residual sugar. Of course, it's another truism in the trade that "sweetness hides a wealth of sins," meaning that wines without much character of their own can be made at least palatable if you keep 'em sweet.

That accounts for the treacly tongue buildup from most of the world's "white" Zinfandels, gloppy jug wines and \$5 "champagne." In finer wines, dryness means less than balance. Some wonderful wines, including many German whites, true champagnes, and Vouvrays, balance sweetness and acidity without a cloy in the bottleful. And "dry" wines can range in taste from very austere — think Soave — to very fruity and exotic — think Alsatian Reisling. Your move. CPM

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