

The Province

Food

Anthony Gismondi: If it's non-alcoholic, please don't call it wine

A declining market for alcohol among younger generations and a shrinking market of baby boomers has wineries nervous

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PHOTO BY LIUDMILA CHERNETSKA /Getty Images/iStockphoto

Several interrelated thoughts this week are undoubtedly contributing to the chaos that has beset the global wine business. Climate change has been at the root of many of wine's recent challenges. Still, an even more troubling issue might be the World Health Organization's proclamation that no level of alcohol consumption is safe when it comes to human health.

No matter what your position on the studies or the science, the WHO statement has fuelled the well-funded anti-wine lobby to turn up the volume, and the results are a declining market for alcohol among younger generations. Coupling that with a naturally shrinking market of baby boomers drinking less and eventually aging out, you can see why wineries are nervous.

The real wine market, which has been around for 8,000 years, is hardly in danger, but it is only a part of the current milieu of industry players, many of whom have been on a 50-year rampage of planting vines and selling wines from places it should never have. The lure of owning a winery may be greater than the lure of opening a restaurant, even if only a tiny percentage of the public has the chops to operate either challenging enterprise. Only a few people drank or talked about wines in the 1970s or '80s, and it could be that wine will retreat to that level again.

The above has opened the door for a burgeoning non-alcoholic beverage market. I have often wondered why the powerful wine, beer and spirits sector has put up with the non-alcoholic sector appropriating the use of their monikers for products that contain no alcohol. It's not wine, folks.

As if on cue, last week, Italian agricultural minister Francesco Lollobrigida, the brother-in-law of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, asked that the word wine be removed from alcohol-free wine products. Speaking to Drinks Business online, Lollobrigida says: "Let's make non-alcoholic drinks, but not call them wine." I couldn't agree more for one simple reason: It's not wine. It's some sort of beverage that undergoes a series of highly technical machinations in which the original alcohol is stripped from the wine along with much of its flavour and texture.

As I have stated before, wine critics — those who taste and review wine for a living, should refrain from rating non-alcoholic products. For the same reason, abstainers should not review and score real wine because, once again, there is no comparison between the products.

To illustrate the non-alcoholic issue, the makers of Bloom, one of the hottest-selling French non-alcoholic sparkling beverages that sells for \$60 a bottle in England, describe their partly oak-aged base wine as being “acidified with tartaric acid to create a wine that is overly acidic and overly oaky; it is almost undrinkable, and then we de-alcoholize in three steps, from 12 per cent alcohol by volume to 2 per cent, then 2 per cent to 0.5 per cent, then 0.5 per cent to 0.0 per cent.” They also worked with a fine sparkling-water producer to find a way to inject the tiniest of bubbles into the bottle so they persist in the glass like real sparkling wine. It’s impressive work, and the product sounds interesting, but don’t call it sparkling wine. By the way, the 1,200-word Drinks Business article referred to Bloom as a wine or sparkling wine 42 times.

As mentioned above, all of those will have a dramatic effect on the historical restaurant model, which is built around the large markups on alcohol and tips that accompany sales. Suppose there is an appreciable drop in people ordering alcoholic drinks. In that case, there may not be enough revenue to sustain the current restaurant model as we know it unless the abstainers are willing to pay the same prices wine drinkers face.

If you need more evidence, look at the large number of B.C. wineries, B.C.ale and the increasing number of restaurants struggling to pay the rent. Everyone is contending with ever-rising prices for almost everything they touch, while much of the customer base is dealing with similar issues at home, and no one has any answers.



J. de Villebois Sauvignon Blanc 2022, France

\$26.99 I 89/100

UPC: 3760189780519

We saw this wine last vintage and thought it was impressive, and it was just fine in 2022. The Vin de France cuvée gives J. de Villebois the leeway to work outside Sancerre with grapes grown on the cool Atlantic Coast and in the Loire Valley. Don't be fooled. The result is more Sancerre than Vin de France, which means you get a Sauvignon that overdelivers for its price. Fresh, dry and linear, there is a line of citrus and gooseberry with a slight tug of dryness. Still, it's a treat for the price and should be an easy order with fresh oysters.

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