

BEER AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

Prof C W Bamforth

Dept of Food Science and Technology, University of California, Davis, CA95616, USA

ABSTRACT

Across most of the alcohol-consuming world, wine has established a perception of being the more sophisticated, technically-challenging and healthy beverage, one that you should be seen to be buying to accompany your meal. Those in the brewing industry know that this is completely wrong and that beer is substantially in advance of wine in all these aspects and more. Here is an *aide memoir* as a reminder of how the cause of beer should be defended.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent interview on the radio about *Grape versus Grain*⁵, the questioner said, “surely wine is so much more complicated than beer, so much more difficult to make”? I quickly responded that whereas there are perhaps 1 000 chemical species in wine, there are twice as many in beer. That in wine there is but one raw material afforded much attention, namely grapes, whereas in the world of beer, brewers worry about grain and hops and water and various other valid raw materials – not to mention the fact that brewers are far more fastidious about their yeast than are most winemakers. I came up with the usual semi-facetious comment that to make wine it is merely a case of crushing a few grapes and then waiting, whereas the journey from field to glass in the production of beer is vastly more complex and involves many more unit operations. In addition, in the world of brewing the aim is consistency, not hiding behind a mystique of ‘vintage’, which is surely nothing more than, at best an excuse or at worst an exercise in price hyperinflation founded on a platform of incompetence.

The huge gulf in technical proficiency between brewing and winemaking was brought home a few weeks later in a seminar, from an eminent wine academic. His talk concerned the modelling of wine fermentations and better ways to predict which fermentations would proceed without a hitch as opposed to those that would ‘stick’. In the audience was a representative from a very famous Napa winery who had surreptitiously passed on the knowledge that an indecent number of batches of fermenting must just stop, resulting in panic, extreme measures and an awful lot of blending to produce, what, ‘the latest unique vintage’? (A cynic would say that the next stage would be for some self-appointed wine guru to taste it, pronounce where he or she decreed it to stand in the pyramid of oenological excellence, before joining the rest of the folks in the racket of creaming riches from the duped consumer.) In the seminar the speaker described the variables that they were looking at – assimilable nitrogen (and in passing, mention must be made that many a winemaker uses diammonium phosphate in this context, grapes usually being deficient in amino acids), yeast count and so on. But it took my question to posit that the yeast cells were receiving inadequate levels of oxygen. The speaker looked flummoxed.

To query the charm (a.k.a. technical dubiousness) of many a winemaker tends not to make one friends in this part of the world (and no doubt, elsewhere in the earth's oenological strongholds). Which is unfortunate, for wine of course can be an entirely delightful drink, albeit one which never justifies the outrageous prices that are too often asked for it.

Frequently, the accusation is one of inverted snobbery or having a chip on the shoulder. However, it is more a feeling of frustration that the product, beer, deserves to be recognised for what it is: superior in respect of diversity, consistency, healthfulness and a rightful place on the dinner table. It is high time that brewers are appreciated for what they are: more knowledgeable, better trained, more skilled and more genuine than most winemakers. That this is an industry that runs 24 hours a day for 365 days in the year and not characterised by a mad panic known as a 'crush' for a few weeks out of the 52.

Some of these issues have been previously published³.

Also, it is undeniable that brewers might learn something from the winemaker in respect of raising the profile of beer in the minds of those who, right now, eschew beer as nothing more than a downmarket thirst quencher as they pore over the *Wine Spectator* in search of the latest bottles to lay down in their over-financed cellars.

So what might be stressed (indeed already is in several laudable initiatives such as *Here's To Beer* and the *Beer Academy*)?

Diversity

Again, with only slight exaggeration, with wine it is a case of red, white and pink, with the occasional bubble. Alcohol contents seldom fall out of the range 8-6%. But with beer it is everything from 0-26%, from colourless to black and all manner of flavours emerging from a rich diversity of legitimate raw materials.

Brewers might learn one thing from their wine cousins and that is to do more to champion individual cultivars. Imagine a world where brewers classify their beers, for example, according to hop variety. Analogously to Pinot Noirs and Cabernets and so on, there could be beers from different companies marketed as Hersbruckers or Fuggles or Cascades and the like and/or for barley varieties and yeasts.

Occasion

There are vastly more drinking occasions for beer than for wine. Overt marketing of beers for post-activity refreshment, for pre-prandial, post-prandial, for the meal itself, for bedtime, *etc.*, should be carried out. In addition, marketing could be done for stronger beers, in large bottles for sharing.

Health

It has been shown that there is the genuine perception that wine is healthier than beer⁷. In that study, it was demonstrated that beliefs about beer and health improve when the facts are presented to the consumer. Facts like beer being just as effective as wine to counter arterosclerosis because the active ingredient is alcohol, not resveratrol. That

beer is the richest source of assimilable silicon in the diet; that beer, not wine, contains folate⁶; that the beer 'belly' is a myth⁴, as are many other specifics². For good measure, note that a wine label in the US says 'contains sulphites' - this is not the case on a beer label.

Other

It might be pointed out that the pursuit of consistency is a virtue and that the seasonal variation in wine is a mark of inefficiency. That there is vastly more in the beer drinking 'theatre' than for that of wine: foam and all its facets, colour, clarity, aroma, taste and mouthfeel. The world needs to be reminded that alcohol suppresses the migration of flavour volatiles into the nose – therefore most beers with their lower alcohol content, (and broader spectrum of flavour-active species), actually deliver more bouquet than do wines. However, when talking flavour, learn something from the wine folks and convert the wheel into something that has friendlier and more pleasant terms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It would be wrong to attack wine overtly as a marketing strategy: it should be done gently and teasingly, certainly not to recreate the offensive strategies that the big brewers have used in the US to decry one another's products. But rather present the facts for, almost without exception, they speak in favour of beer as the superior beverage, from whichever dimension it is examined. Rather the focus should be on those who need to be educated and who need to regard beer for what it is: the world's favourite and truly, most sophisticated adult beverage.

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