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Here Is One Way Commercial Wine Labels Are Lying To You

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In 2017 *Wine Spectator* released its top-100 list of wines and if you examined the top ten wines on that list one quality that jumped out from the page was their alcohol content, which ranged from 13% to 15%, with an average alcohol level of 14.3%. One simple truth is that over the past twenty years commercial wines, for various

reasons, have been getting boozier in all countries by almost nine percent, going from an average of 12.7% to 13.8% alcohol by volume. Another simple truth is that contemporary wine experts, who annually announce to consumers what are “the best wines” in the world, seem to prefer these boozier wines (see the July 2015 issue of *The Vintner's Press*, which focused on wine critic Robert Parker’s influence on winemaking worldwide).



One factor that has influenced commercial wines showing an increase in their alcohol content over the past couple of decades is the effects of global warming and the higher



Global warming has played a factor in the increasing alcohol content of commercial wine, but that’s only one factor driving this increase.

sugar levels in grapes throughout the world. Another factor driving this increase in alcohol content is the observation by many wine experts that American wine consumers—who significantly drive wine trends worldwide—tend to like bigger bodied wines with fuller flavors. As a result, winemakers have adjusted their growing practices, leaving grapes on the vine a bit longer to obtain a wine that is a little bolder and has a higher alcohol content.

The dilemma faced by commercial winemakers in trying to match the palate preferences of American consumers is that most wine drinkers tend to favor wines that are less alcoholic. To solve this dilemma commercial winemakers began “fudging their data” when it came to what they reported on the wine bottle label. As the alcohol content increased in commercial wines around the world, winemakers intentionally began understating the alcohol percentage by volume on their labels by 0.15 percentage points. Wines from Chile (0.27 percentage points), Argentina (0.24 percentage points), the United States (0.23 percentage points), and Spain (0.21 percentage points) have the least accurate labels, while Old World Wines (largely those from Europe) tend to understate their alcohol content by just over 0.1 percentage points.

One reason this under-reporting of alcohol content occurs is because in some countries—like the United States—wines with more than 14 percent alcohol by volume are taxed at a higher rate (the US federal excise tax increases by \$0.50 per gallon for those above that threshold). Dr. Kate Fuller, Professor of Agricultural Economics at Montana State University, succinctly sums up this current wine reality in the following way: “Consumers want wines with bigger or fuller flavors, but they do not want—or at least, do not want to know about—the higher alcohol content that typically comes with those attributes. So, winemakers have made do by giving people what they want—wines with bigger bodies—and hiding from them what they don't—the extra alcohol that comes with it. And it's hard to see why that would stop, so long as it's legal, and effective, and preferences don't change.”



The alcohol content of commercial wine will continue to be *hazy* until wineries are forced by law to accurately report what's in their bottles. Until that day, alcohol haziness will be the norm, so consumer beware!