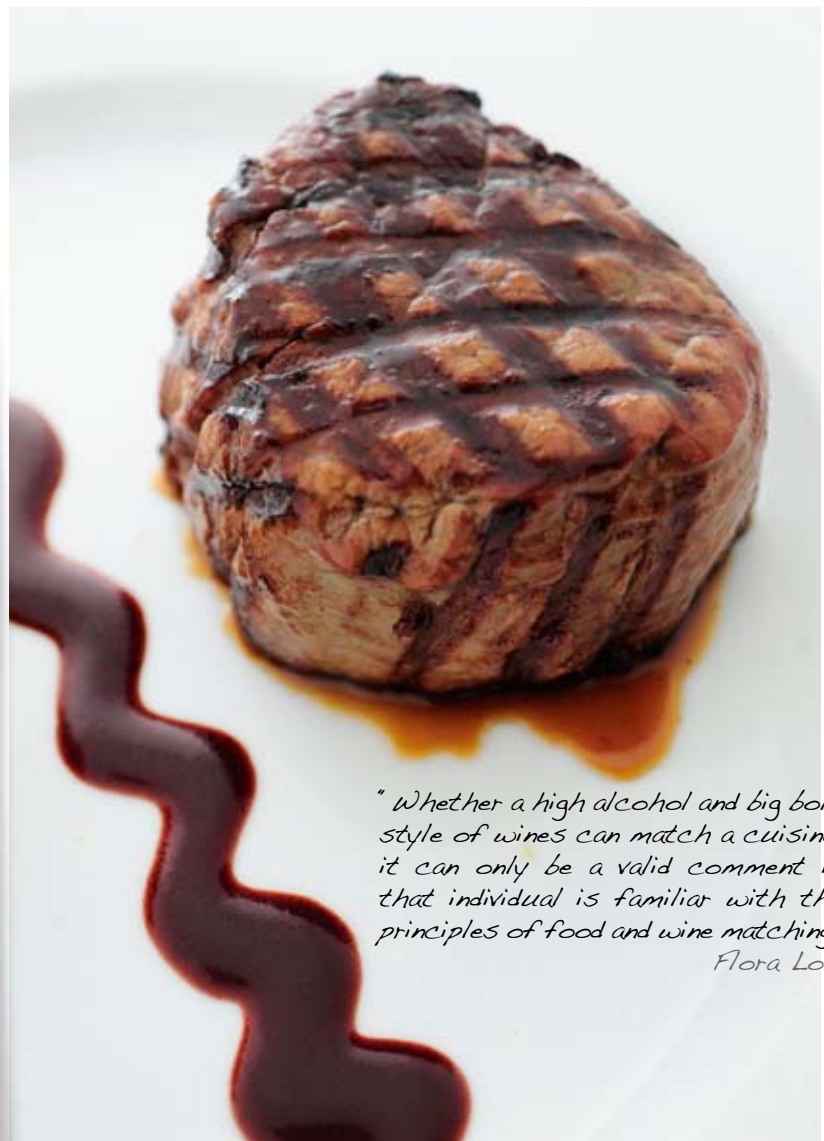


Big, Strong & Unfriendly?

ARE HIGH ALCOHOL WINES THAT DISPLAY A BOLD AND IN-YOUR-FACE STYLE BECOMING THE LATEST HATE WORD IN THE WINE WORLD, OR IS IT JUST ANOTHER UNFAIR WITCH-HUNTING? LIM HWEE PENG, CSW INVESTIGATES THIS PHENOMENON FROM AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE.

Alcohol beverages have been in existence for centuries; yet for a long time, the spotlight seems to be focusing on its 'dark-side'. It is thus unsurprising, with the increase popularity of wines, that some sectors of the wine world have been alarmed by the emergence of still table wines brimming with high alcohol concentration, a phenomenon that is notably on the rise since the late 1990s. Most attribute such outcome to the global warming effect, while other enlightened souls pointed to the market preferences for riper flavoured wine that offers immediate enjoyment. Some quarters pin the blame on the preference and influence of certain wine critics for such trend. Nevertheless, it is factual that alcohol in still table wines has been observed to notch gradually northward from 12 to 13 percent, and 14 percent or higher, a common sight in many wine labels these days. Some of the likely culprits were bottles from California's Napa Valley, Australia's Barossa Valley, Spain's Priorat and La Mancha, France's Bordeaux and Rhone region and super Tuscan wines as well as the southern regions in Italy and even some Pouilly Fuisse in Maconnais, Burgundy! Wine commentators have also noticed flavours changed in those wines as it trend towards a riper, concentrated and intense wine style, or simply put - a 'blockbuster wine'. Despite the strong presence of such phenomenon, statistics in wine consumption has continued to increase in a leap and bound trajectory, especially in the Asia Pacific region, where many in the wine world have forecast the continent to offer the next wave of high growth for wines.



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Flora Loh

Asian's Exposure to Wine

Prior to the advent of 'The French Paradox' in 1991, majority of consumers in the Asia Pacific region has never had any encounter or experience with wines, much less familiar with the style of low alcohol wine exhibiting elegance and grace that the European is comfortable and familiar with. Most of the current 'blue chip' wine markets like China, South Korea and India had their first sip and encounter of wines that already possessed high alcohol with in-your-face flavours. Naturally, with no prior experience to compare to, the highly extracted wine with high level of alcohol was not an issue with consumers of those markets. Another valid reason for Asians being able to accept wines with higher ethanol is due to the exposure to such alcoholic beverages. Some of the traditional beverages include China's baijiu (white spirit), essentially a distilled drink that would have brought a Sumo wrestler swiftly down his knees; South Korea has soju (distilled 'burned' liquor), while Japan has always had various form of sake in their traditional diet. Population in the South East Asia region has also seen their fair share of high alcohol drinks. Prior to the popularity of wines, brandy and whiskey were the beverage of the day in those markets. As a matter of fact, Thailand is still a key market for whiskey, despite the current popularity of the fermented grape juice in the Thai kingdom. With such exposure and tolerance to high alcohol brew, it is only logical that the Asia continent does not see it as a concern.

High Alcohol Wines and Food

Though some sectors may contend that food might not cope well with high alcohol with intensely-flavoured wines; interestingly, the Asian markets appear not to be bothered by such apprehension. In a continent offering a wide repertoire of cuisine accompanied by traditional beverages that are spirit-like in flavours and strength, it is not difficult to understand the non-issues with present day high alcohol still table wines gracing many Asian tables. In Singapore, similar to the other developed wine markets such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, where established and renowned eateries are aplenty, wines with high level of alcohol with a blockbuster style were also common. Edwin Seow, assistant general manager and sommelier of Morton's The Steakhouse, Singapore commented, "Most of my diners have no issue with wines that have high alcohol with a big and bold style," Seow continues, "mainly because our restaurant cuisine was able to hold up well with those wines. Good quality and tasty food and wines are what our diners seeking; their choice of food and drinks do not focus on a single aspect of their dining experience." Seow shared further. Espousing similar point of view with an interesting angle was Flora Loh, owner of Top Wines Pte Ltd, "whether a high alcohol and big bold style of wines can match a cuisine, such comments can only be valid if that individual is familiar with the principles of food and wine matching." wisely highlighted by the energetic managing director, a frequent traveller within Asia Pacific regional markets as well as Europe and United States wineries. Despite such anxiety with the compatibility of high alcohol wines and food, most experts will agree that as long as those wines were crafted with a balanced flavour – where all elements were well-integrated with none of the alcohol, acid, fruits, tannin, or even oak nuances dominated the palate, the wines should be able to find a place on most dining tables. Such sentiment was endorsed by fellow sommelier and restaurant operator, Timothy Goh, director of wines of the Les Amis Group, "as long as the wines possess balanced with crisp acidity and charisma" Goh does not think he has to manage any potential issue with high alcohol wines oozing concentrated flavours.

Role of Alcohol in Wine

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As one might expect, critics of high alcohol wines lamented strongly on the excess flavour intensity and lack of finesse in those wines. Hence, it is unsurprising for wineries that were keen to address those concerns, inevitably included processes to deliberately lower the alcohol proportion. Some of those common practices include reverse osmosis, which is used to alter the alcohol percentage of a finished wine. Those estates with increased resources may turn to a more complex process – spinning cone; while the most basic method of lowering alcohol in wine is simply adding water to the must before fermentation. Regardless of which methods were being considered and adopted, one outcome is for certain – the true flavours of the wine will never be the same once the alcohol is being tweaked intentionally. Although some will testify that by lowering alcohol to a certain degree, the wine can perceive to be fresher, trend towards a savoury style with a more vibrant taste; all the desirable attributes of a well-made wine. Yet, it is also important to highlight the flip side of such practice, where an excessive removal of alcohol can lead to wine appearing to be thin and weedy. Nevertheless, comprehending the role of alcohol in wine may not as straightforward as it seems, since wine is a complex beverage made up of many chemical components, among which, alcohol is only one of the many contributors that add to the overall character of a wine. Alcohol contributes to the overall flavours, structure and texture in a glass of wine; thus, by reducing them intentionally, the mouthfeel will surely be negatively affected. Therefore, it is naïve to assume that simply lowering the alcohol in a bottle, the various concerns can be successively removed. It seems apparent that Asian enjoys and appreciates wines, and they are likely to embrace it in a more magnanimous manner as compare to their counterparts in the other continents. Whether it is due to ignorance or acceptance, the contention on high alcohol wines will not dent their liking for such wines. In fact, the attraction of such blockbuster wines is their immediate charm, a favourable quality among wine lovers, amateurs or otherwise. The bickering on the pros and cons of high alcohol wines may continues, and evidently, it will not be a passing trend as it appears to be a permanent feature of the wine world. To rectify this issue effectively, it is wiser to resolve it with appropriate long-term measures than just trying to put down the development with a poor understanding of the issue. Evidently from my visits in 2010 to Napa Valley, McLaren Vale and Baden (Southern Germany with a warmer climate for red wine production) wine regions, I have noticed a conscientious attitude among winemakers in addressing the high alcohol matters with constructive and considerate approaches in both the vineyard and production processes. Undoubtedly, blockbuster wines will continue to offer intense flavours with unmistakable concentration; yet freshness, balanced and compatibility with food will be the key focuses in many competent vintners' mind when managing wines with alcohol strength beyond the traditionally acceptable level. LHP

