

Prepare to feel the burn from higher alcohol content

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Tuesday, March 9, 2010 at 11:39 a.m.

I tasted a pinot noir the other day from a bottle whose label stated that the alcohol was 14.5 percent.

It tasted like about 16.5 percent. The throat burn was so strong I literally sought antacids.

Wine must have alcohol, by definition. Without it, we have grape juice, which fails to deliver the sublime elements we seek to pair with foods.

Some wines are typically low in alcohol, but the lower you go, the more likely the wine is to retain a bit of sugar.

Some German rieslings have alcohol levels in the 10 percent range.

And for more than a century, 12 percent was about the level of most fine wines.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that a few wines, mainly reds, reached as high as 13.5 percent alcohol.

The only exceptions were a few zinfandels that were in the vinous stratosphere at 14.1 percent or so.

A handful of such wines came out that were called "late harvest." Today later picking has resulted in more grape sugar.

Since fermentation converts sugar into alcohol (and carbon dioxide), alcohols now are regularly above 14 percent, and many are closer to 15 percent.

Since any wine over 14 percent alcohol can legally be a full point higher, I'm not surprised when I try wines that taste a lot more alcoholic than their labels state.

Many wines are still made with less than 14 percent alcohol because over that level a higher tax is imposed.

Do those who make such wines simply do it by picking earlier? No, in fact there are many different ways to make a lower-alcohol wine.

One such method is simply to add water. And it's easier to add water today than it once was. A 2002 ruling by the state of California eases controls on water additions.

Another idea is to use a machine to remove alcohol.

A number of different processes have been developed to do this, including reverse osmosis as well as a machine called a spinning cone.

Alcohol removal seems like it's tinkering with nature, but alcohol has an aroma that covers wine flavors, something you can sense for yourself.

Pour two glasses of tap water and pour into one a jigger of vodka. Then smell the two glasses. The vodka-added glass will have a strong aroma of alcohol.