



The Shifting Societal Role of Wine

Editorial Comment

Why do people drink wine? A simple question without a simple (or single) answer.

Over the years, the many and varied reasons that nearly 100 million Americans drink wine (at least occasionally) have been proposed and debated by winemakers, marketers, distributors, sommeliers, and countless others - often over a glass or two of wine.

In my experience and observation, most of these fit into one of five broad categories:

Why People Drink Wine

- Ethnic or cultural "inheritance"
- Modest, pleasant alcohol effect
- Wine is a "badge of sophistication"
- Like the taste of wine or wine/food together
- Wine is a kind of "social glue"

It could be argued that the COVID crisis has nudged the "modest, pleasant alcohol effect" as a motivator for some. And for those who just love the taste of wine or are also "foodies," the widespread closure or restrictions placed on restaurants has prompted many to indulge their culinary and vinous passions at home, putting wine on their tables more often.

On the other hand, we have seen wine consumption as a "badge of sophistication" waning, as the proliferation of good wine in cans and Tetra Paks (not to mention 3L boxes) has perhaps finally driven a stake into the heart of wine as a symbol of snobbery.

But wine as a kind of "social glue" is a stimulus that seems not only to be more common these days but also to be taking on a new kind of significance. The term "social glue" suggests wine as a facilitator of conversation, an encouragement to socializing with family, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. The proliferation of wine-enabled FaceTime calls and Zoom chats these days is a testament to wine's increasing social presence and role.

What I have observed, in recent months, is not only wine as "social glue" becoming a more frequent consumption motivation, but that wine is taking on the larger context of not just social but *societal* glue. Like so many other things that have become totems of a political divide in America that has blossomed into a culture war, wine has become emblematic of one side.

Consider, for example, the message on the sweatshirt pictured below, which is now a fairly common sight in many urban areas around the country. The implication is unmistakable:



If you watch more than a few minutes of news or campaign coverage on MSNBC, you find "wine as an island of sanity" or "wine gets me through this waking nightmare" references to be common, especially during the highly rated hours hosted by Nicolle Wallace and Rachel Maddow.

Guests sometimes join this chorus, as evidenced on the evening of the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Rebecca Traister, writer at large for *New York Magazine* and political pundit, was in the midst of a Zoom interview from her home with MSNBC host Chris Hayes. Early in the interview she was fighting back tears as she talked about Ginsburg's legacy and accomplishments. After the camera cut back to Hayes and then to Traister once more, she was in the midst of a healthy sip of red wine.



Daily Beast columnist Matt Wilstein captured the moment and posted it to his Twitter feed with the invocation "We are all @traister chugging wine on MSNBC with @chrishayes tonight." Within an hour, the clip was viewed more than half a million times.

Wine producers and marketers alike are rightly averse to mixing politics with promotions or branding. And wine drinkers taken as a whole certainly cover the left/right spectrum from one end to the other. But the demographics of high frequency wine drinkers mainly correlate with that of left-leaning voters (skewing toward higher levels of education, higher average household income, and concentrations in urban and suburban areas). That these partisan wine drinkers have kindled the sudden leap of wine from "social" to "societal" glue is culturally significant, and likely a positive factor in the steady growth of retail wine sales through this year.

That's how I see it, as we enter the "O-N-D" period in a year like no other, with wineries imperiled by wildfires in California, the COVID blaze still raging, and the culture war's turning point still off in the distance. I'd be happy to discuss these observations with industry colleagues most any time - via a wine-enabled Zoom chat, of course.

John Gillespie
Founder and CEO, Wine Opinions

2020 Wine Shipments Enter the Home Stretch

The 2020 wine sales year has made its final turn on the track and is now in the "O-N-D" stretch.

Data from bw166 through August shows an increase in domestic still wines shipped to market, with 181.5 million cases shipped, compared to 176.4 million in the same period in 2019. Domestic sparkling wines were at 7.8 million cases, compared to 7.2 million in 2019. Imported packaged still wines, on the other hand, are not faring as well, with 55.7 million cases shipped through August, compared to 57.1 million cases in 2019. Imported sparkling wines are holding steady, with 10.2 million cases shipped through August in both 2019 and 2020.

Jon Moramarco of bw166 finds 2020, to date, to be challenging to summarize. "We've had impacts from actually imposed tariffs, threatened tariffs, and COVID-19," he says. "The results have been a truly unpredictable market."

Moramarco also points out that large brands that rely on major retailers are doing relatively well, while smaller domestic wineries have been hard hit by the drastic reduction of on-premise business and limited tasting room sales. Smaller imported brands, he adds, have also been negatively impacted by the downturn in the on-premise market.

Looking to the end of 2020, Jon offers a bit of advice: "Given the numerous factors impacting the market, I believe that simple extrapolation of the trends through August will likely not be a good predictor of year-end results."

Enter the "O-N-D" Predictions Contest

We're running a short quiz, asking our readers to guess where domestic and imported still and sparkling wine shipments will end the calendar year. The person whose projections are closest to the actual year-end figures will be interviewed for the February edition of this newsletter. The quiz asks entrants to simply provide the four 2020 shipment totals (shown as question marks below). You can take the "O-N-D" quiz at [this link](#).

Wine Shipments to Market (Millions of cases 2018 vs. 2019)

	2018	2019	2020
Domestic Still Wines	255.3	256.7	?
Domestic Sparkling Wines	12.7	12.9	?
Imported Packaged Still Wines	83.0	83.7	?
Imported Packaged Sparkling Wines	14.9	16.6	?

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