

Drinking wine without breaking the bank (or your belt) ^[1]

Hi Alice,

What is the difference between cheap wine and expensive wine? I like red, but is there any artificial sugar in it? Will I consume more calories by drinking cheap wine?

Thank you. I hope this is not a silly question.

Answer

Dear Reader!,

Don't let expense and sugar content give you sour grapes! The truth is that delicious wines may be purchased at a wide range of prices. Many different elements, such as land price, farming practices, the fermentation and aging processes, and even the brand name could affect how much wine costs — but the price is really decided by the manufacturer. Drinking lower priced wine won't necessarily mean drinking more calories or consuming more sugar as price is determined by many different factors. Price doesn't necessarily indicate good quality, either, as wine quality is determined by a number of factors and the overall experience of wine consumption is highly subjective. In fact, studies have shown that people place a higher value on the wine inside of a bottle based on the design aspects of the bottle itself! As for the sugar content, since the alcohol in wine is made from sugars in fruit, it's that original sweetness that inspires the later proof (or alcohol content), as well as the tastes that range from sour to saccharine. However, some wines do add in sugars after the fact — but more on that later.

Before diving into the differences in sugar content, what does the winemaking and manufacturing process entail? First, grapes are harvested and crushed, then the juices produced (called the must) are placed in a container for fermentation. After being fermented, the wine is stored, filtered, and aged, then packaged or bottled for shipment and sale. So how does this relate to the price manufacturers may choose? Decisions made at each of these steps could later determine the price. For example, grapes may be harvested manually or mechanically. While mechanical harvesting saves on price, it may decrease the quality of the wine due to the potential inclusion of rotten grapes. The volume of must collected, as well as the tank material (concrete, steel, or oak) could also determine wine quality and price. Labelling and cork choices are made when bottling and both may come with a price tag. Each of these factors influences the manufacturer when

they're choosing their price point for the wine.

As for sugar, it serves several purposes in the complex process of winemaking. First, yeast metabolizes sugar into alcohol, making wine alcoholic. The riper the grapes are, the higher sugar content they have, and the more alcohol the wine will eventually contain. If grapes are less ripe, sugar may be added before fermentation so the final product will be more alcoholic. In dry wines, all the sugar is allowed to ferment into alcohol, whereas sweet wines have more residual sugar once fermentation is completed. Sugar may also be added after the fermentation process to change the sweetness level of the wine. If a serving of wine contains less than half a gram of sugar, manufacturers are allowed to claim that the wine has "zero sugar," "no sugar," or is "sugar free," according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury [2], but artificial sugars aren't included in these labeling guidelines and isn't required to be mentioned on a wine label. The price of a bottle of wine may be influenced by choices within the winemaking process that also influence sugar content, such as risking losing the grape crop by letting the fruit ripen for longer on the vine or complicating the process by using sugar for flavor or a secondary fermentation. Environment, such as temperature, time of harvest, and irrigation, may also affect the sugar content of grapes, and therefore wines. In addition to these environmental factors, climate change in general has influenced sugar concentration, increasing the alcohol content of some wines.

Just as being drunk is a subjective experience, so too is the taste experience of wine. Wine quality is typically dependent on age, style, the type of grape, where it's from, and prestige, among other attributes. While a high price is often viewed as an indicator of a good quality wine, when blinded during a taste-test, these expensive wines didn't necessarily enhance the experience. In fact, factors such as price and prestige play just as much of a role in people's concept of the quality of wine as the sensory factors such as taste or aroma. For instance, studies noted that people viewed natural corks as their preference for wine sealing, since it adds "romance and drama" to the opening of a bottle. As with many experiences in life, what people viewed as quality had to do with their overall satisfaction with the wine.

In all, what determines the calorie level of your wine isn't how much it costs, but a combination of its sugar content and the amount of alcohol in it. The calorie count in a five ounce serving of wine can vary depending on whether it's red or white, dry or sweet, and low or high proof. As alcohol contains close to twice as many carbohydrates as sugar, wines that are described as heavier or full-bodied tend to be more caloric. However, as the calorie differences between the wines aren't that different, the calorie consumption from drinking a lighter wine versus a heavier wine won't vary greatly when consumed in moderation [3].

As said in many languages when toasting, to your health!

Alice!

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