

Wine nostalgia: best left in the past. Why wines are better today.

By Dave March CWM

I'm sure you've heard impressive tales of great wines from the past. People of a certain age are apt to recall, 'an incredible '82 claret we shared in Paris in '89 the night the Berlin Wall came down', or 'not a patch on the Barolo we had on our anniversary in 1972'. The truth is, though there have been some wonderful wines thrown up over the years, it is more likely that it is the occasion people remember more than the wine, most likely, the wine was fairly average. Go back further than this and probably much worse than average.

Undoubtedly, wine made today is better than ever before.

By 'better', I don't mean more distinctive or that wines today have more personality. Certainly wines of previous decades could reflect their origin more than today's. They are better because they are better made. More generic, yes, more consistent but less individual, probably, less likely to send you to the toilet, definitely.

Like many, I lament the passing of those quirky, individual, risky but characterful wines of the '70's and 80's, and I regret the way Cabernets from California are indistinguishable from those of Australia or Bulgaria, and when wines made by European winemakers in India and China become more available the problem will be even worse. Still, I enjoy the fact that I can pick any bottle from around the world in any price bracket and find a satisfying, safe and reliable wine.

We should rejoice in the advances wine has made. Okay, some of the practises of the past weren't all bad, but many are best left there.

Like banning women from the winery at harvest time as their presence would turn the wine sour, or adding tree resin, honey or salt to the wine to 'beef it up'. Chunks of honey often swam in wines, 'so thick it would stick to the teeth'. Pliny the Elder recommended adding pitch or tree resin to stop the wines turning sour. Other additives included spices and herbs, ash and seawater. One Italian wine in the first century, Falernian, was famous as 'the only one that takes light when a flame is applied to it'.

Ancient wines were definitely thicker and stickier and dark in colour. Pliny's test for one turning sour was to dip a sheet of lead in it. If it turned a different colour then the wine was souring. By the Middle-ages wine had improved, additives now were merely holly leaves, burnt salt, cinnamon, mustard and sand. Most were so unripe and green they were known as 'hedge wines'.

Maybe people were hardier then, for even in the eighteenth century consumption was high. Goethe drank three bottles a day and a famous army officer drank 'eight bottles before breakfast'.

Gone are the days of completely naked people up to their waists in juice jumping up and down to aerate it, a practice there might be no shortage of volunteers for but not one I want to think about knowing what people do in swimming pools. Or adding sacks of sugar to juice to take 8% potential alcohol to around 12% (several vintages in the last century were harvested at 9% potential then 'sugared') – even now in France it is legal to increase the wine alcohol by 2% with sugar. Or mix wines from other areas – or even countries – with your own, either to give it more body or colour or just to make it go further. For years Bordeaux was exporting more wine than it was making, and it is said that for a decade the amount of 'Bordeaux' wine in a Bordeaux bottle was around a third; the rest was from Spain, the Rhône or Algeria. Beware that American wine even today; generic non-regional US wine only has to have 75% of its content from America, the rest could be from Tunisia or the Languedoc.

Don't imagine today's wines are innocent, though. In 1985 in Austria, diethylene glycol (a component in anti-freeze) was added by some to sweeten wines and in 1986 twenty three people died because toxic alcohol was added to wines. Dimethyl Dicarbonate (DMDC), used to sterilize and to stabilize wine, is legal in Europe, the US and Australia; it is poisonous within the hour but disappears in bottle – hopefully. Even today very dubious sprays are being used in Champagne and fraud is rampant in the fine wine market.

Despite the opportunity to manipulate today's wines, with sachets of oak flavor, or packets of prescribed outcome yeasts or chemical finings, or extracting water or alcohol or adding powdered acidity or sugar, there can be little doubt of the improvement of wine. Unlike the hit-or-miss reality of wine in the last century, today's wines are of almost guaranteed quality - if only we could preserve some individuality and character in them.