

## Drinking for Health

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By now most people interested in cabernet sauvignon or merlot know that a little wine a day may help keep the doctor away. This is good news, and it should encourage our benevolent authorities to lower taxes on wine. It does not mean, however, that wine should be treated as a medicine.

One of the most recent studies into the health benefits of wine comes from the Netherlands, a nation that could hardly be described as a wine producing country. It is a very serious study that lasted 40 years and was recently presented to the members of the American Heart Association at their 47th annual conference in Orlando, Florida.

The study was done on no less than 1,373 men age 40 to 60. They were followed from 1960 until either their death or June 2000, whichever came first. It shows that men who drank a moderate amount of alcohol, especially wine, tended to live longer by an average of four years.

Here are the figures: 33 percent of the men who drank alcohol daily in moderate quantities were less likely to die of any cause and 28 percent less likely to die from a heart attack during the time span of the study. The figures go up for men who drank mostly wine: 38 and 46 percent, respectively.

But the authors of the study also warned against too much drinking and stopped short of encouraging non-drinkers to start drinking. For those who like a good conspiracy theory, here is an interesting item.

At the centre of the controversy is the US National Institute of Health (NIH). A famous study known as the Framingham Study of 1974 found that four major factors were responsible for heart attacks: High (bad) cholesterol, high blood pressure, smoking and abstinence from alcohol. They came to be known as the "big four" risk factors.

But the NIH promptly intervened. According to the Napa Valley Register (1 March 07), it told the authors of the study: "Refer to only three major risk factors and remove all reference to alcohol. With all the abuse in this country, we must not say alcohol prevents Coronary Heart Disease (CHD). If you must comment on alcohol, say it has no effect."

Already in the early 1970s, a doctor in Oakland, California, had reported on the favourable connection between moderate alcohol consumption and heart condition.

After the broadcast of the famous 1991 CBS 60 Minutes segments on the "Wine Paradox", an American professor Curtis Ellison met a French colleague, Dr Serge Renaud and convinced him to start a cross-cultural study on alcohol consumption and its health consequences in France, the USA and a third country. They applied to the NIH for a grant but were told that the NIH would not support any research showing that alcohol was good for health. The grant was rejected.

Things are changing though. Today NIH, in cooperation with the Harvard Medical School, is conducting research on the effect among others of resveratrol on overweight mice. Resveratrol is the compound in red wine that could benefit the heart. According to Dr Ellison, hundreds of epidemiological studies 'have shown uniformly that moderate drinkers of any type of alcohol have much lower risk of CHD and that some studies, especially in Europe, show additional advantages from wine."

"The whole package of red wine is good for you. Even if you take the world's worst wines, they still prevent heart disease."

According to Dr Francois Booyse of the University of Alabama: "There is no such thing as the healthiest wine. They all have the same compound and you get the proper amount of compound in all of them."

A couple of things to remember: binge drinking is not good for you; it is the regularity that matters, not the amount. And to be fully beneficial, wine drinking must be part of whole regimen that includes plenty of fruits and vegetables, regular exercise and no smoking!

As for red wine, even if they are all good for us (if drunk in moderation) we tend to agree with Chairman Mao when he told intellectuals in 1948 that "Good wine is better than bad wine." Of course the chairman was talking about revolution, and about giving the people the best, not the worst. But he was right about wine too.