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## DAN BERGER: 17 PERCENT ALCOHOL A TROUBLING WINE TREND

By Dan Berger

Americans like sweet wines. And wineries around the world who market wine here are giving it to us — some of it simply in the form of high alcohol levels.

I first noticed a trend toward high-alcohol wines about 15 years ago, but in the last few years the issue has become widely discussed, to the point where wine columnists and bloggers are finally calling it out.

I spoke with two brilliant winemakers for whom this is a troubling trend.

One recalled a tasting he staged at his winery in 2008 of about eight high-end (expensive) red wines including wines from the Napa Valley and Paso Robles as well as carefully chosen bottles from Spain and Australia.

“When we did chemical analysis on the wines, all but one of them tested out at 17.1 percent alcohol,” he said. “And the other wine came in at 16.9 percent alcohol.”

In addition to tasting a bit sweet, he said, “I don’t think these wines have any chance of aging well at all. And my suspicion is that they were fortifying them with high-proof.”

He said high-proof, which comes from distillation, can add fusel oils and aldehydes to wines, which he said “are pretty noticeable when the wines are young, but those elements integrate into the wine if it’s in a barrel for a year or two.”

Adding alcohol to wine is perfectly legal, he said, since the government has a code of regulations that sets down the rules. “You have to declare it,” he said, “but that never goes out to the public.”

At his tasting of alcoholic wines, said the winemaker, all tasters said “they understand why these kinds of wines score so high — they tasted sweet, big, and bold.”

He said many winemakers try to make their wines even more concentrated by bleeding off some of the juice in the fermentation tank to create a higher skin-to-juice ratio (the French call this process saignée).

Other wine makers add grape concentrates.

“If you tested wines selling for about \$10 a bottle or less, I’d guess that 70 percent of the wines have actual residual sugar,” he said. “Concentrates are pretty commonplace.”

“But remember, it’s all legal. At the end of the day, the job of the wine maker is to make the most popular style of wine. That’s why we are seeing all these massive, muscular wines.”

The second winemaker, who has a lot of experience with high-proof additions to dry wines, said adding raw alcohol to wine is a recent trick many wineries now use.

“The term we use is WSA — wine spirits addition,” he said, and by federal law you can’t fortify with any spirit under 140 proof (70 percent alcohol).

Most people add grape neutral spirits (defined as 170 to 190 proof).

The technique, he said, is to harvest grapes a lot later than was common a few years ago, and ferment the wine as dry as it will go, leaving the wine with, say, 16 percent alcohol.

The wine then needs aging to allow it to develop a bit. Such aging is trickier when the alcohol is high (since alcohol inhibits aging), so to permit the aging under better conditions, some of the alcohol is removed to, say, 13 percent.

After aging, some wineries then push the alcohol back up because it “sweetens” the wine.

All this manipulation is greater than it was 15 years ago.

I asked both men if such tactics altered the wines.

“They are certainly different from the more balanced wines we had in the 1980s,” said the first winemaker.

The second said, “We once relied more on grapes for flavor, but the competition is so fierce right now, and many people are so new to wine that they can’t measure quality except by impact. And wine makers are giving it to them.”

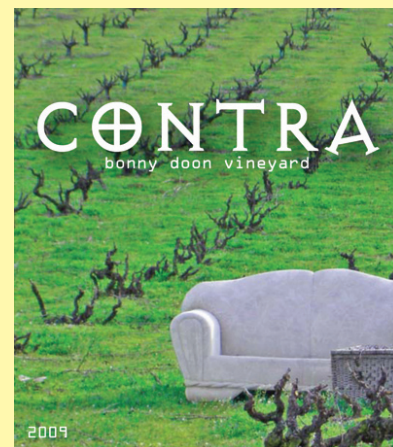
Are wines sweeter than they were a decade ago?

“I was at a wine competition a few weeks ago and I had to taste 300 chardonnays,” said the second winemaker. “I couldn’t believe it, but well over 75 percent of the wines had actual residual sugar. And a lot of that may have come from high alcohol.”

### WINE OF THE WEEK:

2009 Bonny Doon  
Contra, Central Coast (\$14)  
This red wine is a blend of 55 percent Carignane, 15 percent each of Grenache and Mourvedre and three other grapes, and offers the earthy workhorse-ness of the primary grape, the aromatics of the Grenache and the deep fruit of the Mourvedre.

It’s hearty and richly fruity, and moderate in alcohol (13.5 percent).



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