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Journal

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Bad Reaction to Wine? Give Organic Products a Try

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: Doubtless many of you have said "To your health" as a toast to friends and family.

The health benefits of wine have been amply demonstrated, but are there any detriments to drinking wine?

Many people do have bad reactions to wine, from headaches to digestive or respiratory distress, which cause them to moderate or eliminate wine from their diets.

Let's look at which attributes of wine cause those problems. There may be a solution other than abstinence.

As a food, wine grapes are often subjected to more insecticides, herbicides and fungicides than any other food product. The amount of chemicals used can make wine difficult to tolerate for some people. Because mass-produced and inexpensive wines typically rely more on nonorganic methods, it confirms my dislike of cheap wine is more than taste-related. And here I thought I was being an elitist.

Au naturel

In investigating organic wines, and yes, that does mean a lot of tasting (one of the reasons I love my job), I've discovered a number of wine makers dedicated to making good-tasting wines that are also more healthful products. They range from hand-tended vineyards that rely minimally on chemical agents to preserve, protect or nurture the grapes to fully organic vineyards that adhere to the federal guidelines for organic wines.

Certified-organic wines are produced using organically grown grapes, no pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, chemical fertilizers or synthetic chemicals of any kind are allowed on the vines or in the soil. In addition, there can be no added sulfites. Strict rules govern the winemaking process and storage conditions of all imported and domestic wines that desire organic certification.

An important point to consider is that many wines are made with little or no harmful chemicals, but the winemakers don't want an organic label, either because of the added expense of certification or the cost of training organic growing requires. That condition is changing, however, and organic products

of all types are showing up in the marketplace.

I recently tasted several organic wines from Sedona, Ariz., and can attest to the high quality and wonderful taste components they possess. Many wines from Mendocino County, Calif., are organic; in fact more organic wines are made there than in Napa and Sonoma counties combined. I haven't turned up any certified-organic New Mexico wines, but most, if not all, wineries are family-owned, exercise quality control and minimize the use of chemicals.

The Organic Wine Journal (organicwinejournal.com) recently noted that most New Mexico grapes were still grown conventionally, but it didn't stop the writers from lavishing praise on select wines from the Land of Enchantment.

What's inside?

"Made with organic grapes" on a label doesn't mean the wine is free of sulfites, which is the most common additive to wine. The words "contains sulfites" appear on most wine labels, so what is that about? Seldom will you find a wine free of sulfites, but wines low in sulfites or free of added sulfites do exist.

Sulfites are a natural byproduct of the fermentation process. Fermenting yeasts present on all grape skins generates naturally occurring sulfites in amounts ranging from 6 to 40 parts per million (ppm.)

Sulfites have been added to wines for more than 200 years, a practice begun in Europe, but no more than 350 ppm can be added to domestic wines. Most serious winemakers would agree that to make a consistently stable wine, some sulfites must be added to those naturally present.

That is primarily because freshly pressed grape juice has a tendency to spoil due to contamination from bacteria and wild yeasts present on the grape skins. Not only does sulfur dioxide (SO₂) inhibit the growth of molds and bacteria, but it also stops oxidation and preserves the wine's natural flavor.

If you visit the Web site (wineserver.ucdavis.edu) at the University of California at Davis, the premier university for enology (the science and study of winemaking), you'll find a good discussion on sulfites. Little agreement exists as to whether sulfites cause headaches, but evidence suggests that sulfite-sensitive people predisposed to asthma can trigger an episode after consuming products containing too many sulfites. Most dried fruit contains even higher levels of sulfite as a preservative than wine, however.

If you do suffer from headaches from wine, and I'm assuming we aren't talking about what happens with massive ingesting of the product, it could be a reaction to the chemicals with which many wines are treated. If you are one of the unlucky few who suffer bad reactions to wine, try a few organic wines before you give up. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com

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