

# DEBATE: *alcohol* IN WINE AT A HIGH

Thanks to Wine Communicators of Australia ([www.winecommunicators.com.au](http://www.winecommunicators.com.au)) I was delighted to be on the guest list to listen to a Panel discussion on the levels of alcohol in wine and the 'trend' by winemakers to aim to for lower levels of alcohol in their wines. The distinguished panel included wine notables such as the charismatic Chester Osborn (d'Arenberg), the impressive Mike Symons (Stonier) and of course the notable Gary Baldwin (Wine Consultant).

From the outset it was clear that the panel was leaning toward 'less' alcohol in wine due to, it seems, pending economic pressure (taxes), media preferences (or rather bias) and technical and environmental factors allowing for better management of alcohol in wine. There is no question that the influence of Robert Parker, USA wine guru, has resulted in the 'parkerisation' of wines with higher levels of alcohol in wine in response to Parker's preference for wines with high alcohol levels. Generally speaking, the level of alcohol in wine is grouped as follows:

- Very Low (under 12.5%)
- Moderately Low (12.5 to 13.5%)
- High (13.5 to 14.5%)
- Very High (more than 14.5%)

We know that alcohol in wine is produced during the wine making process when the sugars in the grape ferment to alcohol. Therefore, less sugar to convert means less alcohol in the resultant wine. However, we need to remember that alcohol is the main carrier of aroma and bouquet and hence flavours of wine. Alcohol provides balance to a wine. Remove the alcohol from a wine and notice the difference.

The panel made some interesting comments noting that factors such as increased use of fertilisers has impacted on the alcohol in wine according to Chester whilst Mike noted that the 'natural capacity' of the vine and terroir was an important factor as vines tended to find their own balance. Gary gave an excellent overview of the trend by some winemakers to adopt alcohol reduction techniques. There are several ways of making lower alcohol wines in the winery, from simple dilution through to de-alcoholising using spinning cone technology. Reverse osmosis removes alcohol and water and then the osmotic perstraction separates the alcohol and water and you just take the water stream and add it back. There is now talk of genetically modified yeasts (heaven forbid) that facilitate lower alcohol levels.

That said, too much dogmatism and vituperation has crept into the debate on alcohol in wine and no-one to date has given any real facts, surveys, research to indicate that consumers demand less alcohol in wine - I have only heard opinion to date. I can only hope that winemakers who wish to go back to the days of the watery, thin and light-bodied wines do it for the right reason and not for their own self-interest at the expense of the wine consumer.

## Wine of the Month - 2009 d'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz

At 14.5% alcohol, this is a stunner. Deep, inky purple-crimson it is the typical Dead Arm style wine, powerful and rich, with bitter chocolate and savoury/spicy notes on the palate. This is a style to my liking - it is consistent and a classic McLaren Vale.



*Greg Bondar*  
Food and Wine Editor