

Headaches and heartburn!

By Andrew Corrigan MW

Wine is often blamed for the morning after headache. Port especially can cop criticism! "I only had a little port but whilst I love it, it sure doesn't like me!" Another comment (and furphy) is "I like red wine but I suffer later! It must be the histamine/ preservative/ tannin". One hears the falsehood "of course they started putting preservative into wines a few years ago - it says so on the label. It must be the new labelling laws. I heard it is part of the requirement to get our wines into Europe."

Of course all of the above is rubbish. Lets dispel the common falsehoods. Preservative has been used in wine since ancient Egyptian and Roman times. In fact the form of preservative used, sulfur dioxide, is the same one and has been around for thousands of years. It is organic - it is a mined substance - a naturally occurring yellow powder which is dug out of the ground. The Romans burnt it and let the smoke fill rooms and barrels - it killed off insects and bacteria. To this day, the French use sulfur smoke in their cellars. In Australia the use of Sulfur Dioxide is more precise and scientific. It is added to wine normally as a powder at the stage when the grapes are crushed. In the 1950's an Australian scientist John Fornachon was a pioneer in establishing the use of appropriate and minimal amounts of Sulfur Dioxide to wine. He realised that Australian wines spoiled more easily than in Europe due to the warmer weather temperatures which help oxidation of wine. Also Australian grapes have a naturally lower acid level than in the cold rainy climates of northern Europe. Preservatives work much better at higher acid levels. Hence if the wine has higher acid naturally or because it is adjusted by the winemaker then the level of preservative needed is much lower. We see this principle often in swimming pools in Queensland - the warmer the weather, the more prone to green algae and the more critical that the acid level is maintained. Acid level is measured and is described using a scale called pH. Pool owners have watched the chlorine level but the acid level must be maintained as well. Fornachon recommended to the Australian wine industry that chilling of the fermenting wine in conjunction with maintaining acidity and modest usage of Sulfur Dioxide would protect wine from both bacterial attack and oxidation. Fornachon's principles are in use today all over the world. He recommended quite low levels of sulfur dioxide - about 50 parts per million. Sulfur preservative is also used in the food industry - especially in dried fruits, hams, pate, sausages and so on. The levels in food of preservatives are usually higher than wine.

Some years ago the law required that wine labels list the preservative used. Sulfur dioxide has a food code - it is Preservative 220. Australian labels are required to display either this code number or the full name. "Sulfur dioxide added" or "Preservative 220 added" are now on all labels. The American wording is more alarming - "Contains sulfites". Sometimes a wine has an additional anti-oxidant added - the common one used is ascorbic acid ie vitamin C. The label

will say "Anti-oxidant 330". Both these additives are quite harmless and have been used in wine (and food) for many years. The requirement to show them on the label is fairly recent and does not signify any change in winemaking.

Wine contains histamines but they are unlikely to cause a problem because their level is very low. The type is the same in reds and whites but, coming from the grape skins it is higher in a red because red wine has its skin pressed much more than white. The most likely reason for a headache from red wine is that the extra tannin combined with the alcohol dehydrates your body and you will suffer unless you drink lots of water.

Some people complain about rashes, acid stomach and other uncomfortable feelings after drinking wine. It is more likely that exotic food, not usually eaten, is being enjoyed at the same time as the wine and this is probably the culprit. Certainly wine, especially sparkling and dry young white wine, is fairly acidic and a delicate stomach with no other food present may have some effect. The difficulty in these complaints is to have a controlled experiment - where the sufferer has the same food and situation for days before trying out various wines and beverages.

Why do you feel the effects of sparkling wine quicker? Sparkling wine pressurises your digestive system making it expand and therefore offering more surface area to absorb alcohol.

We can debate the preservatives and colour of wine but most people underestimate the effect of alcohol. In modest quantities it is a relaxant and great accompaniment to food. However in larger amounts accounts for almost all the complaints of ill feeling. Consumers are not honest with themselves in terms of how much they have consumed. Often the claptrap about preservatives, histamines and so on is a cover up for the real culprit!

One mitigating factor in the effect of a genuinely small amount of alcohol is the weekly body cycle. Many people suffer from migraines on a Saturday because it is a "let go" day after the tension of the working week. Of course Friday night probably included a few drinks which then get the blame for the illness the next day.

The message is to drink wine in modest quantities and have a tumbler of fresh water next to you, sipping it frequently. I invariably find that wine drinkers who suffer the next morning treat the wine as a thirst quencher – let water perform that role and treat wine as a taste sensation and integral part of a meal.