

Decanter

Katherine Cole: ‘Yes, we are all doomed to die. But wine won’t do us in’

Since last January, when the World Health Organization (WHO) dogmatically declared that ‘no level of alcohol is safe for our health’, a spate of alarmist news reports and protectionist governmental initiatives have thrown the wine world into an existential crisis.

Katherine Cole | March 14, 2024



But lost in all the hand-wringing is an important fact: a glass a night may, in fact, lengthen our lifespans. Yes, we are all doomed to die. But wine won’t do us in.

Hundreds of studies show that moderate tipplers enjoy health benefits – a 10-30% reduced risk of heart attack, stroke and peripheral vascular disease – over abstainers and heavy drinkers.

‘These studies are solid, and data overwhelmingly shows that there is a potential cardiovascular benefit from drinking alcohol in moderation,’ says Laura Catena MD. A graduate of Harvard, and Stanford Medical School, Catena was an emergency room physician in San Francisco for 25 years before taking the helm at her family’s wine business, Bodega Catena Zapata, in Argentina. She has been campaigning tirelessly in defence of wine and poking holes in the WHO’s claims.

In a guide issued to journalists last spring, the WHO aimed to discount decades of perfectly good research by alleging sponsorship bias. News coverage dutifully regurgitated this assertion, but Catena disputes it, adding that just 5.4% of 386 widely cited observational studies on alcohol and health were funded by the alcohol industry.

In addition, the WHO’s scare campaign fails to mention the top two global causes of death, heart disease and stroke, focusing instead on cancer.

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But just 4% of cancers are attributed to alcohol. By contrast, as Catena points out, there's a far greater likelihood that diet (30-35%), tobacco (25-30%), an infection (15-20%), or obesity (10-20%) was the culprit. So if you want to quit something, why not start with charcuterie and cigarettes?

'Of the big international studies, I'm not aware of any that don't identify the healthiest populations as the alcohol drinkers,' observes Miles Hassell MD, a physician specialising in comprehensive risk reduction. Hassell's popular book *Good Food, Great Medicine: A Mediterranean Diet and Lifestyle Guide* has been in print for nearly two decades.

'Half the patients I see are over 75,' says Hassell. 'The eldest are active, not too heavy, don't smoke, regularly drink a small amount of alcohol, and cook at home.' The way he reads the data, older adults who drink modestly – even after heart attacks or cancer – live longer than lifetime abstainers.

And the 'French paradox' – the observation that red wine drinkers, in particular, outlive those who live and eat similarly but drink differently – continues to hold true, he adds. Red wine, taken in moderation, is good for our hearts and guts.

Meanwhile, the WHO's warning siren has silenced other doctors. A well-known hepatologist I contacted for this article declined to speak to me, then immediately posted a report from JAMA (the Journal of the American Medical Association) on his social media feed. The JAMA article suggests that alcohol-related cancers disproportionately affect the poor, while those of higher socio-economic status enjoy the protective benefits of moderate consumption. Put another way, too much cheap booze is killing the less fortunate.

'To say it that alcohol is purely a toxin is an incomplete story,' says my friend and colleague Martín Reyes MW. A wine importer, Reyes is part of an anti-abolitionist movement within the wine industry. 'It is either a toxin or a tonic, and it depends entirely on the dose and the pace.'

When ordered to cut out alcohol, people seek pleasure elsewhere. Marijuana use is up. The 'sober' are replacing alcohol with unregulated psychoactive substances. Bourgeois women are microdosing on magic mushrooms. Contrary to all reason, these substances are assumed to be safe because very little is known about them.

As the world faces an epidemic of loneliness, why not, instead, enjoy a beverage that for some 10,000 years has created camaraderie, and eased everything from stress to arthritis? Wine heals – as long as we enjoy it in moderation, drink it with food, and focus on quality and enjoyment rather than quantity and oblivion.