



Does Wine Have Social Value?

By Karen MacNeil

*Karen, author of *The Wine Bible*, is one of the founders of Come Together—A Community for Wine and the Come Over October movement. In this article, she makes the case that wine has enduring social value, contending that shared wine fosters trust, community, memory, and a deeper connection to one another and to nature at a time when loneliness and disconnection are on the rise.*

One of my favorite questions to ask wine drinkers is *why* they drink wine. Most people stop for a second, unsure of how to answer.

The easy response is: *because it tastes good*. Or: *because it makes eating into an occasion*. Both are true. But I believe that beyond these, wine has positive social value. And we *need* that social value.

Consider, for example, why so many business deals are done in restaurants over a meal. I think it's because drinking and eating together open us up, predispose us to believe that something good will happen. There's a human proclivity to trust someone you eat and drink with. Over a shared bottle of wine, you get to know someone in a way that no meeting in a bare conference room will ever provide.

Wisdom from *The Godfather*

I remember the director Francis Ford Coppola once telling me that he couldn't imagine shooting *The Godfather* without dozens of eating and drinking scenes. These were, he said, physical manifestations of deeper themes like trust, confidence, loyalty, and love.

It's also fascinating that the social bonds forged when drinking together are bonds that become welded deep in memory. When you ask someone about the best, most meaningful wine they've ever had, for example, everyone always pictures the person they were with when they had that wine. Those social bonds are, of course, a critical part of what it means to be human. It's part of the reason that so many psychologists today are worried about the alarming rise in social isolation and loneliness. When we begin losing each other, we begin losing our humanity.

The Ancient Greeks and the Modern Wine Bottle

Lately I've been thinking about why I dislike the idea of wine in single-serving containers. I get that such packaging is convenient and economical. But wine in a single serving misses the point. The 750-milliliter bottle is not just happenstance. It's historically tied to how the ancient Greeks thought about social cohesion and the social order. In Greek antiquity, intoxication was frowned on, and in fact, the Greeks considered 3 modest glasses of wine—consumed with others—to be optimal. From that historic wisdom, we have today's 750-ml wine bottle, which contains about 3 glasses each for 2 people, the minimum size community for sharing.

The “Glue” in Rural Communities

Wine's social value is also derived from the way in which it acts as a glue in rural communities. And rural communities in turn are a glue in the social fabric of a country. There are more than 10,000 wineries in the US alone. Around these wineries, small rural communities form—communities that are interdependent and often tightly knit.

I know this personally. Several years ago, I moved from New York, then a city of 8 million people, to a little town in Napa Valley with 3,000 people, most of whom have one degree of separation because we're all in the wine business or connected to it. I don't think it's exaggerating to say that small communities foster empathy, humility, and generosity.

A few years ago, for example, the owner of one of Napa Valley's most famous cult wineries told me that the best way to get his seemingly unattainable Cabernet was to go to the auction fundraiser for the local nursery school. Wines that you'd never find at Sotheby's or Christie's were sure to be there because *every* winery owner donated to the nursery school.

The Silent Music of Nature

Finally and importantly, wine's social value is also derived from its ability to connect us to Nature. In a world digitized to distraction, a world where you can barely get out of bed without your cell phone, wine takes us back to something more elemental. Wine is the silent music of Nature, and in drinking it, we take Nature into our bodies. A simple but profound fact.