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What the debate about wine and health gets wrong

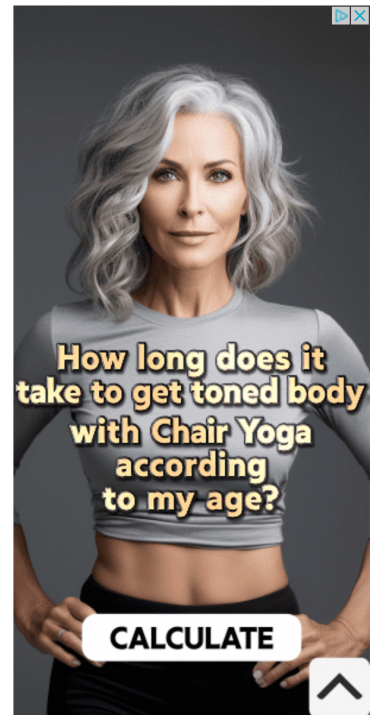
By **Esther Mobley**, Senior Wine Critic

Aug 15, 2024



Dr. Laura Catena at home in San Francisco. A vintner and a physician, Catena is the rare voice who says that alcohol in moderation for people over 40 should be considered health neutral.

Lea Suzuki/The Chronicle



Before I joined the Chronicle, I worked as an editorial assistant at Wine Spectator magazine. Hungry for any writing assignment I could get, I constantly volunteered for the beat that no other staffer appeared eager to cover: wine and health.

It was a strange exercise, because seemingly every week a study was published that contradicted the study I'd covered the week before. Alcohol was bad for sleep quality. But red wine might help you fight the common cold! But it causes dementia. But it may reduce vision loss!

After a couple years, I learned to roll my eyes at every new report that came across my desk. Any information that one of these studies purported to convey had just come to seem rather useless to me. It felt like an endlessly circular debate that would never arrive



at any definitive conclusion.

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So I don't think I was paying close enough attention to the public discourse around wine and health when, gradually over the past decade, a major cohort of the scientific community and the public turned sharply and decisively against alcohol.

This shift in sentiment is the subject of a [big article I published on Tuesday](#), a project that has been in the works for months.

It's probably obvious to anyone who's lived in the U.S. or Europe in the last few years that alcohol is now widely viewed as much more dangerous than it once was. Public abstinence events like Dry January and Sober October keep growing in popularity. Youngsters are calling wine the "[2024 cigarette](#)." Bottles sold in Ireland [will soon have](#) a cancer warning label, similar to what's seen on tobacco packaging.

My story mainly looks at what could become a bombshell moment in the U.S. The federal government is revising its dietary guidelines, and looks likely to recommend a major reduction in alcohol use. That revision would effectively reframe an idea that our government has endorsed since introducing those guidelines in 1980: that moderate alcohol consumption is perfectly safe for adults.

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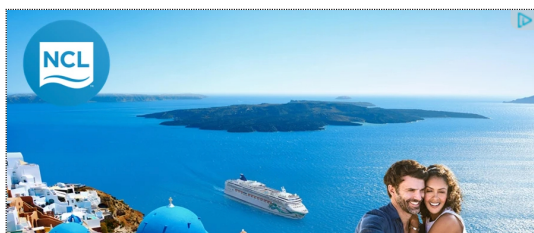


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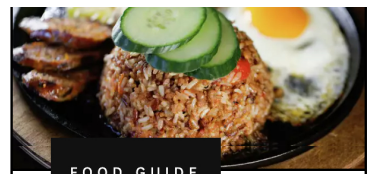
It's not that the dietary guidelines on their own will rewire a nation's opinion on alcohol. But they could hammer the nail into the proverbial coffin that was constructed by temperance groups, negative headlines and scientific journal articles over the last several years.

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Frankly, the wine industry was slow to respond to what could amount to an existential threat. Though the dietary guidelines' revision process has been in the works since 2022, it wasn't until this spring and summer that industry groups started sending letters and organizing campaigns around it. Maybe many industry players, as I did, initially mistook this growing movement as part of the usual airwave of anti-alcohol chatter that's always been circulating.

Now that industry proponents are speaking up, however, they're rushing to mount a full-blown defense of moderate drinking. They're effectively trying to pre-debunk the new dietary guidelines before they're even published, claiming that this revision has been placed in the hands of neo-Prohibitionist activists who have infiltrated government subcommittees.

Some wine industry insiders, meanwhile, are leaning into other arguments — like how wine can ease our society's "friendship deficit," as wine publicist Gino Colangelo put it.

"We do not want to be part of the medical discussion, because we're not doctors," said Napa wine writer Karen MacNeil. "But the current surgeon general's report talks about social isolation being at epidemic proportions in the U.S. Without addressing that medically, I think we can say that enjoying a communal beverage brings people together." MacNeil, Colangelo and wine publicist Kimberly Charles have launched a campaign called "Come Over October," a retort to Sober October.



Focusing on wine's convivial aspect is a nice idea, though I wonder whether sounding the alarm of loneliness can really compete with the anti-alcohol movement's much more dire-sounding warnings. (Cancer!)

Ten years after leaving behind the wine-and-health beat, I still don't quite know how to think about, or write about, alcohol's health effects. I've always felt uncomfortable with the idea that people would drink wine *because* they believe it's healthy for them, which is what happened after many people learned about the [French Paradox](#) and the Mediterranean Diet. Even if moderate wine consumption could be said to reduce the risk of certain problems, like heart disease, we also know that in certain doses it is certainly harmful.

Sometimes, when I hear wine professionals and enthusiasts effusively promoting the alleged benefits of moderate drinking — the ever-popular J-curve — I fear that the discussion is willfully ignoring the obvious other side of alcohol. Even if they're correct, many of these folks seem reluctant to admit that they have a financial interest in the notion that moderate drinking can be healthy — or at the very least, a personal interest (because they like to drink!).

If it wants its arguments to be credible, the wine industry needs to do a much better job of preaching moderation, of calling out problem drinking and of acknowledging the dangers of heavy consumption. I appreciated that Laura Catena, a vintner and physician, sounded this more moderate tune when I interviewed her for this week's story.

I've come to think about it like this: I know that sugar, in high doses, is awful for me. But that doesn't stop me from enjoying dessert after dinner a couple of times a week. There's



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no question in my mind that the deliciousness of a piece of cake is worth whatever health trade-off I've made.

I don't drink wine because I believe it's reducing my mortality risk. It brings me joy, and that's enough.



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Aug 15, 2024



Esther Mobley
SENIOR WINE CRITIC



Esther Mobley joined the San Francisco Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. She reports on the business of the state's \$55 billion wine industry; reviews Bay Area wineries, wines and bars; and writes about the effects of climate change on vineyards.

Previously Esther was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York. She has worked harvest seasons at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina. She was the 2019 Feature Writer of the Year in the Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards, and her work has been recognized by organizations including the California News Publishers Association, the Society for Features Journalism and the Association of Food Journalists.

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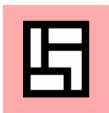

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