

Prohibitionists at the gate

For years, the American wine trade, which represents the world's biggest wine market, largely ignored the dual threats of the neo-Prohibitionists and a generation of consumers whose "healthier" lifestyles minimized wine drinking. Now, as Roger Morris reports, a flurry of activity is aimed at wooing back reluctant consumers while heading off potentially onerous new, official dietary guidelines on alcohol consumption

In the late 1980s, Robert Mondavi, the pied piper of the social benefits of drinking wine, began sticking back labels on his bottles that read, "[Wine] is the temperate, civilized, sacred, romantic mealtime beverage recommended in the Bible. Wine has been praised for centuries by statesmen, philosophers, poets, and scholars. Wine in moderation is an integral part of our culture, heritage, and gracious way of life."

In November 1990, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (today Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) ordered Mondavi to cease and desist. The Mondavi label, the bureau said, implied that "the consumption of wine is beneficial to society and is recommended by religious authorities without mentioning any of the possible harmful societal effects arising from the consumption of wine, or the fact that religious authorities may disagree on whether consumption of wine is permitted by the Bible [...] such statements constitute irrelevant

material that tends to create a very misleading impression."

Besides, the bureau had its own wine labels, introduced in 1988, warning against alcohol consumption for those operating automobiles or heavy equipment or who were pregnant. That the bureau's own labels were equally one-sided, it said, was irrelevant.

In the more than 30 years since, the American wine industry has largely remained silent as suspect scientific studies have reduced the amount of alcoholic beverage consumption considered "safe"—or if any consumption was safe—and as neo-Prohibitionists appealed to youngish adults to adopt ever "healthier" lifestyles.

Today, US wine sales are slipping after years of gains, while no- and low-alcohol wine sales are surging. Campaigns for Dry January, Sober October, and Curious Sober have convinced many casual drinkers

to drink less or stop entirely. Surveys report younger, health-conscious drinkers are listening to negative claims about alcohol. The message from the World Health Organization is that no level of drinking is safe, and Canada's new health guidelines say the only relatively safe consumption is two drinks per week.

The New Prohibitionists are already at the gate.

Fighting back

Now, the American wine industry, by far the world's largest wine market, and its advocates have begun to fight back, led by the first stage of a high-profile campaign called Come Over October. Its strategy is to provide one solution to health officials' concerns that too many Americans feel lonely, socially isolated, and depressed. If you have these feelings, why not invite someone to "come over" to share a bottle of wine, or go visit friends? (See also *WFW* 84, p.91.)



Photography courtesy of (left) Kimberly Noelle Charles; (middle) Colangelo & Partners; (right) Karen MacNeil



"The Surgeon General has reported that post-pandemic social isolation and loneliness have reached epidemic proportions," says wine writer and author Karen MacNeil, who this summer launched the consumer campaign on a pro bono basis along with wine communications veterans Gino Colangelo and Kimberly Noelle Charles.

Indeed, in May 2023, US Surgeon General Dr Vivek Murthy warned, "In recent years, about one in two adults in America reported feeling loneliness." Further, he wrote, "Loneliness and isolation represent profound threats to our health and wellbeing. But we have the power to respond. By taking small steps every day to strengthen our relationships, and by supporting community efforts to rebuild social connection, we can rise to meet this moment together."

Another piece of consumer research also rang an alarm. "In talking with Karen, I went over our latest consumer surveys, and one finding in particular

Above: Come Over October publicity image. Opposite: Advocates of the Come Over October campaign: Karen MacNeil (right), Gino Colangelo, Kimberly Noelle Charles (left).

"The Surgeon General has reported that post-pandemic social isolation and loneliness have reached epidemic proportions," says wine writer and author Karen MacNeil, who this summer launched the consumer campaign

struck both of us," says Colangelo, president of New York-based Colangelo & Partners. One in four occasional wine drinkers polled in the 21–29 age group had health concerns in drinking even one glass of wine daily.

Other organizations and writers have also become engaged. Napa Valley Vintners has launched its own subtle but potentially far-reaching campaign, called Why Wine? It invited wine drinkers to answer that open-ended question and share on social media their thoughts about, and experiences with, wine.

While stressing his independence from the wine trade, *New York Times* wine columnist Eric Asimov wrote a strong defense saying that in the debate, the pleasures of wine should not be forgotten. "I take very seriously the actions of those advocating zero or near-zero drinking," Asimov said in a recent interview. "For one thing, why single out alcoholic beverages if the issue is simply health? Why not similar stances about bacon, or ice cream? Or skydiving or mountain climbing? I also object to the blanket condemnation of alcoholic beverages without regard to the context of the drinking or the intent of the individuals drinking. I would add to this that I personally have never consumed alcoholic beverages because I imagined they were healthy."

The looming political threat

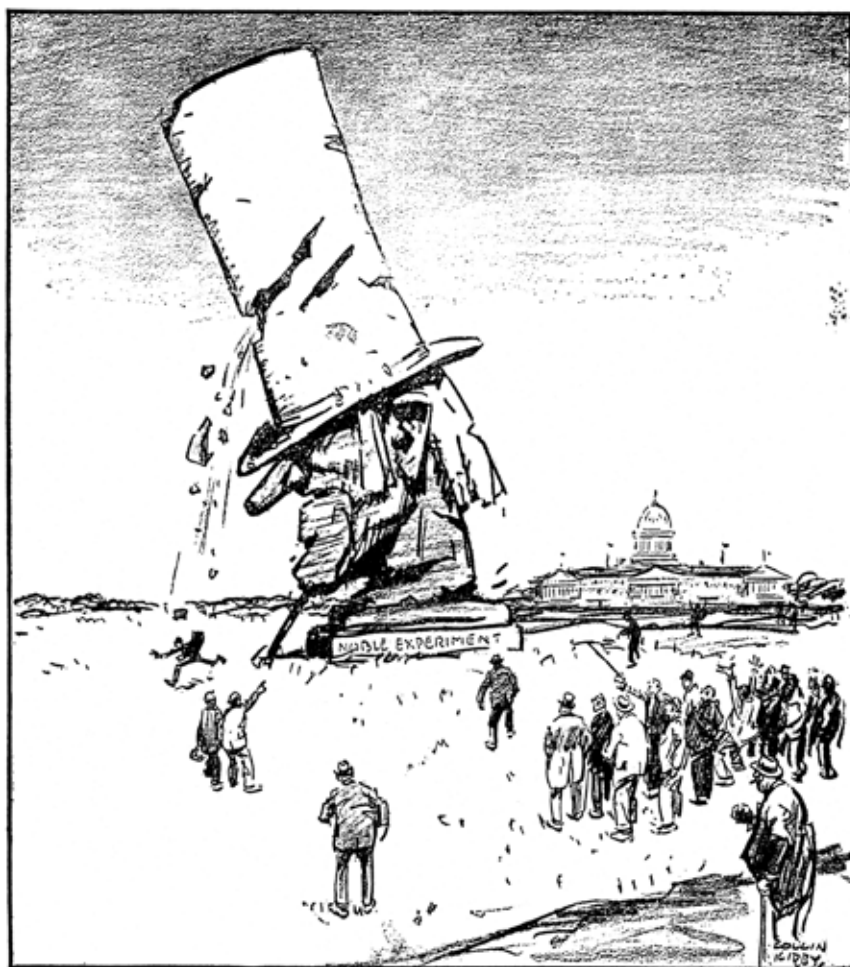
But the looming—some say Doomsday—development is that the US will in 2025 update its official dietary guidelines, which presently recommend no more than two drinks daily for healthy men and one for healthy women. And critics warn that the jury isn't impartial.



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. A subscription includes access to the complete digital archive, stretching back 20 years.

For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.worldoffinewine.com or call +44 020 7406 6790.



“The fear had been that the US Dietary Guidelines might tend toward last year’s declaration in Canada that no more than two drinks per week were acceptable alcohol consumption,” Tom Wark, executive director of the National Association of Wine Retailers, wrote in May 2024. “This concern was due to Dr George Koob, the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, responding to a question about alcohol recommendations in the guidelines this way: ‘I mean, [consumption recommendations] are not going to go up, I’m pretty sure. So, if they go in any direction, it would be toward Canada.’” What scared Wark even more were rumors that working documents declared that “no amount of alcohol is acceptable for a healthy lifestyle.”

“The federal government releasing such a statement,” Wark warns, “has

Above: “The Leaning Tower Shows Signs of Collapse”; cartoon by Rollin Kirby from the *New York World*, 1930, on the growing strength of the forces of repeal after ten years of Prohibition.

“The Administration appears to be driving toward approving Dietary Guidelines that by default recommend that Americans consume no alcohol whatsoever,” read the letter of the oversight committee

the potential to kill off numerous small wineries, distillers, and brewers over [...] a few years, as younger Americans take this kind of statement to heart.”

While the wine trade can legally discuss the social benefits of wine as long as they don’t do it on wine labels or in marketing their wines, there has been an understandable hesitancy to launch aggressive, industry-sponsored defenses that could question credibility and sour its audiences. MacNeil says she is content in just promoting the social

benefits and pleasures of wine drinking. “Arguing the scientific issues can soon become pretty much a tit-for-tat argument about your study versus my study,” she says.

There is one influential entity, however, that doesn’t hesitate to attack other branches of government or researchers and their studies: the US Congress. So, when the House of Representatives’ oversight committee caught rumors of potentially harsher dietary recommendations on alcoholic beverages, it demanded—and is receiving—private briefings from agencies that are responsible for guidelines revisions.

“The Administration appears to be driving toward approving Dietary Guidelines that by default recommend that Americans consume no alcohol whatsoever,” read the committee’s letter to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “despite a continually evolving scientific debate about the risks and benefits of moderate alcohol consumption on individual health outcomes.” It may not be coincidental that the chair of the committee, Republican James Comer, represents a Kentucky district with several Bourbon producers.

And while the Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America is not itself challenging the validity of anti-drinking studies, it has been referring questions to interested medical experts. One of them is well-known Argentinian wine producer Dr Laura Catena, herself a pediatric physician who for years practiced at a San Francisco hospital.

“In considering these conflicting studies,” Catena says, “we should also look at the reputation of the researchers and in which journals they publish their studies.” She notes that even some studies cited as proof in negative articles are actually more nuanced in their conclusions. “I would like to get all the people who have published major studies together in one room to discuss their findings,” Catena says, adding, “Maybe that’s something that Harvard [University] could do.”

Meanwhile, as the clock continues to tick, the American wine trade will be urging wine lovers to spend more time enjoying the social benefits of getting together for a glass or two and, of course, sharing those experiences on social media. ■