

Max allen writes about wine:

“PAYING FOR IT”

Is it true that cheap grog gives you a worse hangover than the expensive stuff? Max Allen lays his liver on the line to find out.

(First published in AUSTRALIAN GOURMET TRAVELLER, June 2006)

IF you want to make a success of your next party, whatever you do, don't skimp on the booze bill. Give your guests the poshest plonk you can afford: not only will they love you for it at the height of the revelry, they'll also thank you for a softer landing the next day.

You see, the urban myth is true: cheap wine does absolutely give you a worse hangover than expensive wine. How can I be so sure? Because I've put the theory to the test.

One evening recently, over dinner, I got hammered on some serious booze. I started with Dom Perignon Champagne (\$270) and then guzzled an array of fine draughts, including a \$120 Petaluma Tiers chardonnay, a 1998 Penfolds Bin 707 Cabernet (\$150), a Bullers Rare Muscat (\$75 - a half bottle), and some 1978 Islay Malt Whisky (\$250).

I measured how much alcohol I consumed using the 'standard drinks' declaration on the labels. A 'standard drink' is 10g (or 10 ml) of alcohol; Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council recommends that men should consume no more than four 'standard drinks' per day - women no more than two - and warns that more than six 'standard drinks' at one sitting is a 'binge'. I am slightly hesitant to tell you, then, that I was so determined to give myself a meaningful hangover that I put away 19 'standard drinks'.

Most of the symptoms of a hangover - nausea, dehydration, depression - are caused by immoderate consumption of alcohol. Stands to reason, then, that the more alcohol we drink the worse these after-effects will be.

The thing is, a typical Australian red wine - regardless of price - contains roughly 14 per cent alcohol, about 85 per cent water, and much less than one per cent 'other stuff' such as flavour and colour compounds. The water and the alcohol are the same, chemically, whether they come out of a two-litre cask of Queen Adelaide Regency

Red or a \$400 bottle of Penfolds Grange. Can the less-than-one per cent of 'other stuff' really make that much difference?

Only one way to find out. A week later, I repeated the exercise - ate the same food and drank another 19 'standard drinks' over the same time period, at the same rate - but this time I got stuck into some Orlando Carrington Brut (\$5.50), a two litre cask of Renmano Chardonnay (\$8.95), a bottle of 2004 Butterfly Ridge Shiraz Cabernet (\$4.10) a two-litre flagon of Royal Reserve Muscat (\$10.95) and a bottle of Woodstock Bourbon (\$20).

During my expensive night I'd guzzled close to \$400 worth of booze. Consuming exactly the same number of 'standard drinks' on my cheap night cost me - wait for it - twelve bucks.

So. Which hangover was worse?

The \$400 morning-after was surprisingly manageable. After seven hours sleep I was relatively eager to get up, felt only mildly nauseous, had a distant headache and a gummy mouth.

The \$12 hangover was unequivocally more brutal. When I woke up I felt like a vengeful gremlin had spent the night jamming beer-sodden drink coasters into the gap between my eyeballs and their sockets. I didn't want to get out of bed, and when I did my head throbbed, my mouth was sandpaper, my heartbeat raced and I felt as though I was exhaling petrol fumes.

I couldn't blame the quantity of alcohol: I'd drunk exactly the same amount on both evenings, under the same conditions. I could only conclude that cheap booze really is worse for you than the posh stuff.

The question, then, is: why? Nobody's really sure, but the most likely culprit does indeed appear to be the 'other stuff' present (or, importantly, not present) in what I drank on both nights.

The other stuff even has an almost-proper name - 'congeners' - loosely applied to the grape or oak-derived polyphenols (the tannin, pigment, flavour compounds) that give red wine its deep colour and dry taste, or the caramel added to many spirits and fortified wines to darken their hue. At least one study has shown that drinks such as bourbon, which are high in these dark congeners, are more likely to give you a bad hangover than clear, low-congener, drinks such as vodka.

Doctor Eric Wilkes, group chemist for Fosters Wine Estates, has a theory. He explains that many of the 'congeners' - such as tannin - present in a young red are 'short-chain' polyphenols. As the wine matures in barrel or bottle, the tannin polymerises and forms longer chains - which is why older wine feels more mellow in the mouth, and why you often find gritty sediment in older bottles: the gunk is (among other things) the polymerised polyphenols and tannins that have literally dropped out of solution.

The theory is that while short-chain polyphenols are readily absorbed by the body and may exacerbate a hangover, longer-chain polyphenols are less readily absorbed - or aren't even present, if (as I did with my 1998 Bin 707) you decant the clear wine off the sediment. And as I drank more red wine on both nights than anything else - and drank much, much older fortifieds and spirits - this could go some way to explaining the vastly different morning-after experience.

So, posh grog may well give you a less severe hangover not because it's more expensive but because it's likely to be older than the cheap stuff.

It's a subtle, but important distinction; as Dr Wilkes points out, downing a couple of bottles of immature, 2004 Grange - stacked with masses of short-chain polyphenols - would probably be just as painful the next day as polishing off a two-litre cask of Queen Adelaide Regency Red. Not that he's tested his theory, of course.

Hey, I know! Let's find out ...

© Max Allen, 2006

www.Maxallen.com.au