

Wine, health and political correctness

By ROBIN GARR
WineLoversPage.com

On New Year's Eve a year or two back, The New York Times broke surprising new ground in the national media's coverage of alcohol and health.

It's not that reporter Abigail Zuger's report, "The Case for Drinking," unveiled anything really new in this thoroughly reported story. It stayed in familiar territory in its summary of the growing body of evidence that people who consume wine and other alcoholic beverages in moderation tend to be healthier and live longer than either people who drink too much or - believe it or not - than those who don't drink alcoholic beverages at all.

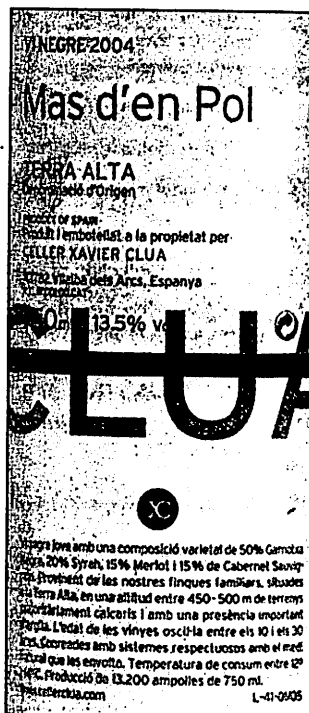
But Zuger's report may have been the first major article in mainstream, general news media that directly confronted the public-health community's enduring taboo against simply coming out and saying, "wine in moderation is good for you."

"Alcohol has become the sharpest double-edged sword in medicine," she wrote, adding that some experts consider a "drink or two a day of wine, beer or liquor ... often the single best nonprescription way to prevent heart attacks - better than a low-fat diet or weight loss, better even than vigorous exercise. Moderate drinking can help prevent strokes, amputated limbs [due to diabetes] and dementia."

But the health risks associated with heavy drinking in particular, she went on, can be so catastrophic that policy makers have been reluctant to endorse even moderate drinking. (Scientists who study alcohol-and-health issues typically define "moderate" as one or two "servings" - 5 ounces of table wine, 12 ounces of beer or 1 ounce of liquor per day.)

Quoting physicians and researchers, Zuger pointed out that "The cardiac benefits of low-dose alcohol are evident in study after study. All over the world, moderate drinkers have healthier hearts than teetotalers, with fewer heart attacks from fatty plaque clogging the heart's arteries and blocking blood flow. ... In countries like the United States where heart disease is a major cause of death, this translates into a survival advantage: Moderate drinkers live considerably longer on average than nondrinkers."

Yet the implications of this conclusion have been considered so controversial for so long that, back in 1972, the U.S. National Heart



by contributing photographer ROBIN GARR Spare and businesslike, the Clua wine label has about as much charm as a medicine bottle, and it's just about as informative. Unfortunately, most of the small-print information is in Catalan.

and Lung Institute literally covered up the results of the Framingham Study, one of the earliest reports on alcohol's heart-protective benefits.

Quoting a 1996 memoir by Dr. Carl Sentzer, one of the Framingham authors, Zuger reported that this federal-government agency declined to publish the study, objecting that "an article which openly invites the encouragement of undertaking drinking with the implication of preventing coronary heart disease would be scientifically misleading and socially undesirable in view of the major health problem of alcoholism that already exists in the country."

Attitudes have changed since 1972, but only a little. Zuger wrote that the American Heart Association, and many other policy organizations, now suggest that people who drink moderately needn't stop, but they continue to advise against "teetotalers" taking up drinking for health reasons alone.

Although Zuger's story didn't mention it, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in its "Food Pyramid" guide to diet and health, now permits alcohol, albeit rather negatively, advising: "If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation. Alcoholic beverages supply calories, but little or no nutrients. Drinking alcohol is also the cause of many health prob-

lems and accidents and can lead to addiction."

Authorities may finally be coming around to the conclusion that the best policy is simply to make information available on all sides of the issue, Zuger said, then leaving it up to doctors and their patients to make informed decisions that suit their own situations. As Boston University medical professor Curtis Ellison said, "The key is, how best do you present balanced information to the public? If you withhold balanced information, that's doing harm."

None of this should come as news to regular readers of my columns, where I've been dispensing the following standard advice for years: "If you're concerned, talk with your family doctor to get insight into how wine drinking fits into your personal health and lifestyle. This is particularly true if you have not been consuming alcoholic beverages at all before. If you do drink moderately now, remember that wine should replace other alcoholic beverages, not be taken in addition to them. Finally, it is better to develop a healthy lifestyle that includes good nutrition, exercise and a moderate amount of wine, than to consider drinking wine only as a kind of medicine; it is not a 'magic bullet' that, by itself, will keep heart disease away."

For this month's wine recommendation, here's my tasting report on a fine Spanish red wine of great value, brought in by a Louisville-based importer and available at selected local fine-wine shops in the \$10 range:

Clua 2004 "Mas d'en Pol" Terra Alta (\$10)

This inky, blackish-purple wine is a blend of Garnatxa Negra (Grenache) and other grapes from Spain's Catalan-speaking region west of Barcelona. Earthy raspberries add an appealing mineral note of red clay in the aroma; ripe red plums and tart cherries cloak a firm acidic core in the flavor.

Absolutely delicious, this is one of my top buys of the year for \$10. Imported locally by Bluegrass-Catalunya International, it's food-friendly with red meat, pork or poultry. It was a beautiful match for my home-roasted Cuban lechon asada; try it with takeout roast pork from Havana Rumba in St. Matthews.

Clua also produces a portfolio of other Spanish wines, including a white wine that's also available in the Louisville area.