

The new Prohibition

Why some of the Bay Area's top restaurants just say no to California's high-alcohol wines.

BY MICKEY BUTTS

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT PETERSON

The menu at Aziza, the popular Moroccan restaurant in the outer Richmond, includes a statement assuring diners that the bulk of the ingredients used in the kitchen comes from local farms and ranches. But customers looking for a Sonoma Pinot Noir to go with the squab raised in that wine-producing region will find just one option on the restaurant's list. And if they'd like a Napa Cabernet to pair with their Niman Ranch lamb shank, they're out of luck. Aziza's commitment to local ingredients stops at its wine list, where lovers of California wines will have a hard time finding more than a



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few bottles produced within 3,000 miles of Geary Boulevard.

Aziza is hardly alone in its antiprovincial tastes. At Zuni Café, a landmark of California cuisine, California wines make up no more than a third of the list. Next door to Zuni, at the new wine bar Cav, only 15 percent of the more than 300 wines come from the Golden State. Owner Pamela Busch says that she doesn't actively avoid California wines, but that she also doesn't find many with the balance of acid and fruit that she looks for in a wine. Mark Ellenbogen, who created the list at the Slanted Door, as well as the one at Aziza, is of the same mind.

“Balance is a basic issue,” says Ellenbogen, “and these wines with high alcohol levels simply aren't balanced.

“In the beginning, we tried all kinds of things,” he says. “We had a California Viognier on the list at the Slanted Door, but found it tasted terrible with the food.”

Seventy-two years after the repeal of Prohibition, a new temperance movement is taking shape. This time around, no one's busting barrels with an ax or advocating teetotaling. Instead, a small but growing number of Bay Area wine directors are leaving California wines off their lists, complaining that the high alcohol content of these wines leaves them head-spinningly drunk after just a glass or two and that the wines are simply too overwhelming to be enjoyed with food.

It's not that people are getting softer; rather, alcohol levels have reached an all-time high. During the 1970s, Napa wineries routinely made wines that were 12.5 percent alcohol. Today, the average alcohol level is 14.8 percent, according to consultant George Vierra. (Alcohol levels throughout the world have been rising as well, although not nearly to the same heights as in California on average.) Cult winemaker Helen Turley makes Zinfandels that often register a bruising 16.5 percent, and other Zinfandels exceed that amount, approaching the alcohol levels of fortified wines such as port. A difference of 4 percent may not sound like a big deal, but it means nearly a third more alcohol in the blood, and often makes the difference between feeling relaxed after a glass or two and being unable to walk a straight line.

Still, these wines have many fans, not the least of whom is Robert Parker, publisher of the *Wine Advocate*, whose influential 100-point scoring system holds winemakers around the world in its sway. Many people credit Parker's preference for high-alcohol wines with the industry's move toward this bigger, more powerful style.

And so, many California winemakers in their quest for the nod from Parker let their grapes

stay on the vine as long as they can, a practice that's known as extended hang time. As the grapes continue to ripen, the proportion of sugar increases, and it's the sugar that's transformed into alcohol during fermentation. The higher the level of sugar in the grapes, the higher the alcohol level in the wine.

To be fair, climate also plays an important role, and California's hot summers (which, thanks to global warming, keep getting hotter) mean sweeter grapes and more alcoholic wines. And these wines are popular with consumers.

But Steve Kopp, wine director at Zuni, and others like him say the high-alcohol wines don't belong at the table. “Big, high-alcohol wines may impress people who don't drink wine on a regular basis,” says Kopp. “But at a restaurant, you look for wines that integrate themselves into the course of a meal, rather than conquer it.” And many ethnic cuisines—like the Moroccan fare at Aziza and Vietnamese dishes like the Slanted Door's—don't mesh well with big wines. “When the food has many sweet elements, as it often does at the restaurants where I work,” says Ellenbogen, “it tastes awful with the high-alcohol wines coming out of California.”

There remain plenty of local restaurants, places like Bacar and Rubicon, both noted for their encyclopedic collections, that feature high-alcohol California wines. Larry Stone, Rubicon's master sommelier, says the high-alcohol debate is misguided. “Wines aren't easily defined by a single component,” he insists. “A German Auslese at 8 percent can be exciting to drink; so can a Turley Zinfandel at 16 plus.” Still, he notes that diners at his restaurant often prefer high-alcohol wines because that's what tastes good to them. “It's industry people who are complaining,” says Stone, “not ordinary drinkers.”

That may be changing. “I'm seeing steadily rising objections to alcohol levels from my most vocal readers,” says Alder Yarrow, publisher of the San Francisco-based *Vinography*, one of the most widely read wine blogs, “sometimes to the point where they're questioning my reviews and scores.” And in one of several letters to the wine section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Susan Burns of San Mateo writes, “Like so many others, I, too, am sensitive to the increase in alcohol levels in California wines over the past decade or so. A 14.5 percent Pinot Noir or a 14 percent Sauvignon Blanc is too much to drink and drive home. I hope winemakers will listen to what many of us are saying. You might be surprised at how many people are noticing.” ■

MICKEY BUTTS IS A WRITER AND EDITOR WHO LIVES IN BERKELEY.