

Martin Luther said, “Beer is made by Man. Wine by God.”

Well, this has been a great month for wine. I hope you have been enjoying all the great wine out there and available now. I just have to mention two: 1989 Haut Brion (one of the greatest wines I’ve tasted) and a 1947 Petrus that I drank with my wine mentor, Stan Burton. Stan bought this wine on release over 55 years ago. It was perfect in every way.

During dinner with Stan at the Regency Club in Los Angeles, we had a discussion about bottle size. Some discussion of size always seems to come up when men get together and drink wine. Anyway, I thought it would be helpful to understand that wine doesn’t just come in one size (just like men).

The smallest bottle of wine available is a Split. It’s a quarter-bottle. This size is available only in champagne. It’s basically one glass.

Next up the bottle pyramid is a Half Bottle. This is perfect for one person. Most prominent wineries offer half bottles (also called a Demi), but you have to search these out. Ask your favorite retailer. They can help.

There are a few 500ml bottles. These usually hold some type of dessert wine. Perfect for two, these are a tad smaller than the standard bottle and come in all shapes. The key is the volume, not the shape.

Next comes the 750ml bottle we’re all familiar with. This is a fifth of a gallon, so it’s also known as a Fifth.

Two bottles in one is called a Magnum (1.5 liters). These are great for larger groups or for two people over a long evening. Don Napier and I polished off a magnum of 1961 La Mission Haut Brion one very long evening.

Next in size is the Double Magnum. This is four bottles of wine or three liters. This is party size and quite fun. Plan on 12-20 people if you’re using this bottle size.

The bigger we go the better. Next is a Jeroboam. There are two sizes of jeroboams. When referring to a sparkling wine, a jeroboam holds three liters. When referring to a still wine, a jeroboam equals five liters or six and two-thirds bottles.

The Jeroboam was named after Jeroboam II, who was King of Israel during the traditional year of Rome’s founding (753 B.C.) and as the Greeks were emerging from the Dark Age that separated Homer from the Parthenon.

The Imperial is next in the pecking order. This holds six liters of wine or eight 750ml bottles. This is the most regal bottle size and so is well named. Frank Komorowski once owned 1,000 of this size bottle. Now that’s a collection!

Yes, there are larger bottles. The Methuselah comes next. It’s the same size as an Imperial, but is a different shape and usually used for sparkling wine. Methuselah was an antediluvian patriarch described in the Old Testament as having lived 969 years and whose name is synonymous with great age. He may well have evolved from a character of earlier Sumerian legend who lived for 65,000 years. To the Old Testament scribes this was perhaps too tall a tale, so they may have cut him back to a more conservative lifespan.

If you put one case of 750ml bottles of wine in one bottle, it’s called a Salmanazar. We had a 1985 Beringer Private Reserve at our last Chaine function for 64 people. One note about bottle size. The bigger the bottle, the slower the wine ages. It’s because there is less oxygen per volume of wine acting to age the wine. Also, sometimes the wine-maker puts his best blends in bigger bottles.

Salmanazar (also spelled Shalmaneser I) was an Assyrian monarch who reigned around 1250 B.C., just about the time the science of iron smelting was first imported into his kingdom from Anatolia.

Sixteen regular size bottles equals a Balthazar (12 liters) and twenty regular size bottles equals a Nabuchadnezzar (15 liters). These bottles are rarer than hen’s teeth, but a few collectors own them. Finally, there are 18 liter bottles of wine called Melchior. They hold two cases of wine and you need a wagon or wheelbarrow to move them around.

Balthazar (“King of Treasures”) is the traditional name of one of the Three Wise Men, the other two being Melchior (“King of Light”), and Gaspar (“The White One”). Many scholars nowadays tend to characterize the trio not as kings but rather as Zoroastrian priests, while others speculate that at least one of them was a king—namely Azes II of Bactria who reigned from 35 B.C. to 10 A.D.. Whatever their occupations, legend and German tourist brochures have it that the Three Wise Men—or at the very least their skulls—lie buried in a golden shrine at Cologne Cathedral.

Nebuchadnezzar, originally nabu-kudurri-usur meaning “Nabu protect the boundary”, became King of the Chaldean Empire in 604 B.C. He was actually the second Nebuchadnezzar; a less celebrated Nebuchadnezzar I preceded him by 500 years.

Extrapolating the trend toward ever longer names for increasingly larger sizes, maybe the next logical step would be the “Mahershalalhashbaz” (Isaiah 8:1). In any case, a 1.5 meter tall sherry bottle was blown in Staffordshire, England, in 1958. It holds about 26 gallons or a little over 6 ½ Nebuchadnezzars. They decided to call it an Adelaide. Twenty six gallons of wine would weigh around 220 pounds, not including the glass.

These large bottles are impossible to pour wine from, so you decant them using a siphon hose just like you would gas. Don’t worry about germs from the siphon, wine carries no pathogens.

Two years ago, Beringer made the largest bottle in the world for charity. It was called “Maximus”. It was over 4 feet tall and over 4 feet around and held 130 liters of wine. This is equal to 172 bottles or over 14 cases of wine. It sold for over \$40,000. Just for the record, a barrel of wine holds 20-25 cases of regular size bottles.

Never judge a man by the size of the bottle he brings to a party, but larger bottles are impressive, fun and many times have better wine. If you get a chance, open or own one or both. But, in any case, remember what William Butler Yeats said, “Wine comes in at the mouth and love comes in at the eye. That’s all we shall know for truth before we grow old and die.”