

Casanova, master of seduction, explained his art to a German Grand Duchess circa 1770. He was comparing women to wine. “I may drink of a bottle of Rhine wine to its last drop, but I sip only one glass of a fine wine, and there be rare vintages from which I covet nothing but the bouquet.”

Was Casanova a myth? There’s a little part in all of us that wants to believe in a masterful seducer of women irresistible to all of the fairer gender. As in literature, there are wine myths as well.

One of the most common myths is that wine can be judged by its legs. The legs are the streams of wine that run down the inside of the glass after the wine has been splashed up on the edge of the glass. In Spain, they are called “tears” and the Germans call them “church windows.” This is probably due to their stained glass effect in an otherwise clear glass. Pompous wine bibbers comment on the legs as a way to determine quality. Legs have nothing to do with quality and very little to do with flavor. The truth is the legs are determined by the difference in surface tension between the water and the alcohol in the wine. Next time someone comments on the legs of a glass of wine as a determinant of quality, you might remind them that like women or men very little can be determined by the legs.

A second myth I hear all the time is “the sulfites in wine give me a headache” or “organic wines don’t contain sulfites.” All wine contains sulfites. They aren’t always being put in the wine, they were always there. The government decided that people should be warned and so they are. Mostly this is to protect asthmatics’ adverse reaction to sulfites. Some say the warnings were mostly directed at sulfites sprayed on fresh vegetables to keep them from wilting. Wine can be made without adding sulfites but when added, the government strictly controls how much. They don’t give you a headache!

All current studies and research suggest that wine headaches come from alcohol and histamines and the ability of the wine drinker to metabolize the sugars in the wine. By the way – in addition to wine – beer, cookies, pizza, olives, sugar, shrimp and fruit all contain sulfites.

A final myth I’d like to debunk this month is that you can tell whether the wine will be good by looking at the cork. Please – when you’re presented with a cork, look at it and then ignore it. Just because the sommelier puts the cork down beside you, doesn’t mean you can tell anything from it. This practice started in the 1700’s when the wineries started putting their names on the cork to prevent fraud. The idea was to compare the name on the cork with the name on the label to guarantee authenticity. A moist cork is no guarantee that the wine is good and a dry cork doesn’t guarantee a bad bottle either. So when you’re presented with the cork, you are looking for the name and vintage of the wine you ordered. That’s all.

As a wine geek, I look at the cork for length, design, depth of ullage, moisture or dryness and even quality of material. Sometimes I even smell it. However, it is not an accurate predictor of the wine’s quality.

Along those same lines, when the waiter or sommelier says they will pull the cork out to give the wine some air, it is basically a waste of time. Letting a bottle sit open for a few minutes before it is served does very little. The air in the neck of the bottle just isn’t enough in the short term to have much impact on the wine. Decanting is the only way to aerate a wine properly. Both white and red wines can be decanted.

There are a lot of wine myths and urban myths, too. These are but a few that constantly resurface. Enjoy your wine, but don’t believe everything you hear – and watch out for the giant alligators in the New York sewers!