

On Valentine's Day, someone sent a poem I thought I'd share from Ben Jonson in "To Celia". "Drink to me with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine; or leave a kiss but in the cup, and I'll not look for wine." It's a beautiful thought but as for me, "I'll look for the wine." And I am not the only one – wine consumption in the U.S. continues to rise. We're now #3 in the world. Most experts predict we'll be #1 very soon. We now drink more wine than beer.

So here are some facts about wine consumption. It's the answer to a series of questions that were asked at a Super Bowl party. "How many grapes does it take to make a glass of wine?"

One grape cluster equals one glass of wine. That's right – every bunch of wine grapes turns into a glass of wine. The average cluster in a vineyard, fully mature, has 75 grapes on it. I've never counted them, but others have. These are not like the bunches of table grapes you buy at the grocery store.

Four clusters, or approximately 300 grapes, equal one bottle of wine (white or red). Each vine in the vineyard has approximately 40 clusters. These are thinned with finer wine, a process known as green harvest. In a green harvest, the grapes are cut off the vine and thrown on the ground to allow those remaining to ripen more fully. In inexpensive wine, all 40 are allowed to ripen if possible.

The math is easy but that means the average vine produces 10 bottles of wine or almost a case (that's 12 bottles everywhere). So how much wine is in a barrel? The answer is 1,200 clusters or 60 gallons of wine. One barrel (1,200 clusters) turns into 25 cases of wine. Another way to look at it is that 30 vines equals one barrel and one barrel equals 25 cases of wine.

On mass-produced wine vineyards, there are 400 vines per acre and these vineyards can produce five tons of grapes. Five tons of grapes will turn into 332 cases or about 4,000 bottles of wine.

This mathematical lesson reminds us that wine, after all, is a crop. Mass-produced wine like this can be had rather cheaply – hence, Two Buck Chuck. The really fine wines of the world will produce one or two tons per acre and so by controlling production, they intensify the flavors. In addition, realize there are over three thousand vine types. Most are growing wild. There are only three species of interest to wine lovers. The most prominent is vinifera. From this species comes the varieties we love most and the grape variety determines the production. (Two and one half tons per acre is a lot for Pinot Noir.) However, by necessity, the smaller the production the more they must charge.

Of course, if you're trying to stretch your wine, you can add water. The Greeks and Romans mixed wine and water. Not for taste but to purify the water's taste. You'd add wine to your water, too, if your water was stagnant!

How diluted was it? In the Odyssey they describe 20 parts water to one part wine, but tradition says it's closer to three or four parts water to one part wine. There were other blends reported as well. Spices, resin, lemons, oranges, limes, and even seawater were added. The important part is we don't have to do that anymore. Our water and our wine is much better now.

It is interesting to note though that some of my French friends were given diluted wine when they were children. And we all have friends who put ice cubes in their wine. (Yuk!)

So next time someone asks how many grapes does it take to make a glass of wine, you'll know. Tell them that it's one bunch per glass unless you're adding water.

And here's a thought for this month ... "What pleasures we gain from the anticipation of opening a bottle of fine wine, approaching that first aroma, and savoring its unique character." – Clive Michelsen