

I feel sorry for someone that does not drink wine because when they wake up in the morning that is as good as they are going to feel all day. Seriously, besides the pleasure of the flavor and the calming effect of wine, the record of its health benefits is legion. Life slows down with a glass of wine.

Recently, while drinking some older California wines (from the 50's and 60's) the topic of fining and filtration came up. Most people throw the terms around without understanding them and so I thought an explanation might be in order for our readers.

By definition fining is the removal of unstable molecules through their absorption into some other material. This process also clarifies the wine to prevent it from being hazy or cloudy. Over history lots of fining agents have been used including dried blood powder and various gums. Today fining agents are either organic or inorganic. The two most common are egg whites or the albumin from egg whites and bentonite (a type of clay). Typically, the finer the wine the later in the maturation process the fining takes place. There are other fining agents as well. They are used at the wine makers' discretion. For example, gelatin reacts with tannins to reduce astringency in wine. Tannin as a fining agent reacts with proteins in the wine and helps clarify the wine. Casein reacts with acids and tannins and both clarify and reduce undesirable color.

So now you know more about fining than some wine makers. So does it affect the taste? That's all we really care about, right? Yes, in general fining softens red wines by reducing bitter and astringent tannins. In white wines it helps clarify them which adds to our enjoyment. Most blind tasting by amateurs cannot tell the difference. Most great wine makers can. That's why they do it. Wine makers that choose not to fine do so because they believe fining takes complexity and flavor from the wine.

Now as to filtering. Filtering is the process by which solid particles are strained out of the wine with various sorts of filters. Know this, that natural settling will do most of what filtration does but it's slower and not as totally effective. Two common types of filtration are sheet filtration and membrane filtration.

Sheet filtration involves a thick finely divided element like cellulose powder or perlite passing wine through this traps small particles and clear wine comes out the other side. Membrane filtration uses a thin film of plastic with uniform holes which remove particles larger than the holes – duh. This filtration can be so fine that it actually sterilizes the wine. This removes bacteria and yeasts which may destabilize the wine once its in the bottle. Most fine wine these days is not put through “sterile filtration.”

Many wine makers believe that sterile filtration, or for that matter any filtration, removes complexity, the ability of the wine to age and even color. Unfiltered wines throw a much heavier sediment than those that are filtered as they age.

So again, what does all this mean to you? First, don't believe a wine is bad because it's filtered or fined. By the same token unfiltered and unfined wine can be bad too. These are just wine making techniques like any other. Also, know that a cloudy white wine is not necessarily bad or good. And a red wine with lots of sediment can be just as good as one without.

As to our discussion about old California Cabernets and whether they were fined and filtered, we postulated that they were less complex because of fining and filtering. I personally doubt it. There is light fining and light filtration and we weren't there to see them do it. There are lots of other factors that are important. Once again as in all wine drinking, the individual taster is the final judge and jury.

Next time you hear someone say this wine is or isn't fined or filtered, you'll know what they're talking about. More importantly, I hope that knowledge enhances your enjoyment of what you're drinking. It's like old John Milton (1608-1674) said, “Wine...one sip of this will bathe the drooping spirits in delight beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise and taste.” Like I said, “that's the best a non-wine drinker will feel all day.”