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SPIRITS Science trumps wine dogma, and money can't buy me love

**BYLINE:** PHILIP MARTIN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

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I have been drinking wine a long time. And I drink it fairly often, three or four times a week. I know what I like, and I know what to stay away from, and I'm not terribly intimidated when confronted by a list-bearing sommelier.

Yet I am no connoisseur of wine. I have just a dangerous amount of knowledge and every time this column touches on the subject of wine I am reminded that I'm an idiot by people who know far more than I do about the subject.

Remember when I wrote about Pinot Grigio a few months back? Some people claim to have been shocked by my impudence. At least one correspondent told me that because I said nice things about a \$12 Australian version of the wine, she could never trust my judgment in anything ever again.

"There is no drinkable Pinot Grigio produced outside of Italy!" she thundered.

Well, all right, I get it: People have strong opinions. But it did seem a little ironic that the column should provoke those kinds of reactions given that I prefaced it with a discussion of how snobbery mitigates happiness. My attitude is to drink what you want. And if you like cheap stuff, good for you - you can buy more of it.

Just about every wine drinker I know has a few inexpensive favorites they return to again and again. An Arizona liquor store owner introduced me to Bonny Doon's popularly priced Big House Red - it's produced from grapes grown near California's Soledad prison - by telling me it was the infamous financier Charles Keating's everyday table wine. I remember exactly where I first had a glass of Carlo Rossi's Paisano, but I can't tell you because the oenophile in question made me swear I wouldn't.

On the other hand, not everyone who likes top shelf booze is pretentious or bullied by advertising - you can educate your palate, and dividends accrue to connoisseurship.

I've had plenty of bottles of \$60 wine (and thank you all for sharing) that were absolutely worth the price. I know there's a difference between what's good enough and what's sublime. And I know some people can sip a wine and tell you everything about

it, but I can't do that. And in a way, I count myself lucky - I don't have to spend a lot of money to find wine I like.

And I've always suspected most of us don't.

My theory was validated by science - or at least by a group of economists - a couple of years ago. In April 2008, six members of the American Association of Wine Economists published a paper titled "Do More Expensive Wines Taste Better?" in the *Journal of Wine Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1.

They concluded exactly what I've believed all along. While a few people have trained themselves to discern between cheap wine and expensive wine, most of us can't, even if we believe we can. And while most of us "appreciate" wine more when we believe it's more expensive, "individuals who are unaware of the price do not derive more enjoyment from more expensive wine." Working with a sample of more than 6,000 blind tastings, the economists found that most people actually enjoy more expensive wines slightly less than they do cheaper ones. (This isn't terribly surprising; most people would prefer cherry Kool-Aid to single malt Scotch if they hadn't cultivated a specific taste for Scotch.) On the other hand, the study showed that people "with wine training" generally did like the more expensive wine better in blind tastings. So they weren't faking it - it's not simple snobbery or pretension that pushes them toward higher price points.

The bottom line? The economists wrote: "Our results indicate that both the prices of wines and wine recommendations by experts may be poor guides for nonexpert wine consumers." Again, I'm not saying you aren't one of the "trained" wine experts who can discern the difference between plonk and ambrosia. I'm only pointing out that most of us - even most of us who drink a lot of wine - can't.

Now that doesn't mean there aren't really bad wines that (almost) everyone would immediately recognize as hazardous. But we're not talking about fortified street varietals or sugary potions from the Great Lakes region.

Everyone who drinks a lot of wine occasionally comes across a problematic bottle - I've had a few Chilean reds that could be charitably described as "chompy" and detected some notes of detergent in the nose of (the beloved by some) Trader Joe's "Two Buck Chuck" (actually Charles F. Shaw, and actually selling for around \$4 a bottle the last time I checked). But I have to admit that it's hard for me to find a wine I will not drink. I'm lucky that way.

E-mail: [pmartin@arkansasonline.com](mailto:pmartin@arkansasonline.com) This article was published 10/17/2010