À VOTRE SANTÉ
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Louis Pasteur was undoubtedly a wine lover as he is quoted as saying, “Wine is the most healthful and most hygienic of beverages.” If he was around a little bit earlier, he might have enjoyed a glass or two with Plato, as Plato would have remarked to him, “No thing more excellent nor more valuable than wine was ever granted mankind by God.” Were these men way ahead of their time, or does modern science need to prove they were correct? In a world where almost everything pleasurable is sure to cause harm, it’s quite a relief that wine might actually be good for you!

In the last 25 years, over 200 studies have shown there is a beneficial effect to at least several organ systems with moderate alcohol intake, and more evidence points to the effects of red wine over most other alcoholic drinks. Two compounds that are widely noted to be the most important are resveratrol and a group of compounds classified as flavinoids.

The French Paradox
Although the World Health Organization has data to show there is a high correlation between dairy fat consumption and coronary artery disease, several cities in France had extremely high fat consumption, yet an amazingly low incidence of people having heart attacks ... thus the French Paradox. When this issue was looked at more closely, it became clear that wine consumption was a major correlate to the decreased incidence of coronary artery disease. Interestingly enough, fruit consumption also correlated strongly with a healthier heart. Not only this, but moderate wine consumption (1-3 drinks per day), is associated with a lower overall mortality when compared to non-drinkers, whereas heavy drinkers (>3 drinks per day) is associated with a much higher mortality. There is an abundance of scientific data showing wine and its compounds work to help our bodies against the increasing risk of heart disease; in a sense allowing us to age as well as a fine Bordeaux can.

As a country, the French drink 1.5 times more alcohol per capita than Americans, yet the risk of heart disease is significantly lower, in spite of the foie gras and the cigarettes. They must be doing something right! Undoubtedly, a less sedentary and stressful lifestyle can help, yet it is difficult to negate the proven biochemical effects of wine on the way our bodies handle organic compounds that can cause atherosclerosis or “hardening of the arteries.”
What's in This Glass Of Claret?

Probably more important than the percentage of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc or merlot in your glass, is the presence of chemical compounds called flavanoid phenolics, especially resveretrol and flavinoids. These are actually the compounds that give wine its bitterness and astringency. They are actually antioxidants, the same compounds that pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies use to promote anti-aging. Wines that are low in these compounds should not take up your precious storage space.

An interesting study was done with a particular type of mice that were genetically prone to develop atherosclerosis. They were given normal diets to perpetuate hardening of the arteries, and then they were fed diets high in these chemicals. It could be shown that these mice actually had regression of their disease.

Blood consists of serum as well as several cell types including red blood cells, white blood cells (that fight infection) and platelets that help our blood to clot. Heart attacks almost always occur when a clot finally plugs up an already diseased artery in the heart. Resveretrol has been shown to decrease the accumulation of platelets in the blood, and flavinoids are a key player in inhibiting the aggregation of platelets.

An important step in the pathogenesis of plaque accumulation in the arteries is the oxidation of proteins that travel in our bloodstream called low-density lipoproteins or LDL. This is the so-called “bad” lipid or cholesterol as opposed to the “good” one, high-density lipoprotein or HDL. Flavinoids actually block the oxidation of LDL and thereby prevent the deposition of plaque. Studies have also shown that wine actually increases HDL (the good guys) by 12%, which is similar to increases in HDL seen with exercise programs and medicinal therapies.

Biochemical Knowledge Helps While in La Bourgogne

I remember on a visit to Burgundy, I was in Bernard Dugat’s cellar, tasting an older vintage of his tremendous 1990 Charmes Chambertin. I was using as many adjectives as I knew to describe this exquisite wine, when he blurted out to me “C’est seulement du jus de raisin” (“it’s only grape juice”). At that time I was speechless, had absolutely no witty reply and could only nod my head in a respectful gesture. Now I know what I should have said. “But Monsieur Dugat, you know that you would have to drink three times as much grape juice in order to reap the biochemical rewards of just one glass of your wine.” As always, knowledge often comes too late in life.

What Other Knowledge Can I Use To Validate My Moderate Wine Consumption?

Thousands of studies on the effects of alcohol consumption have been done to try to elucidate the effects on our bodies. There has been evidence to show that wine may reduce macular degeneration, reduce the risks of cerebral strokes, ward off degenerative brain changes that may contribute to Alzheimer’s disease, help the skin prevent sunburn, skin cancer, and reduce scar tissue, reduce the risk of chronic lung disease, reduce the risk of peptic ulcer disease by killing causational bacteria, and possibly decrease the incidence of ovarian cancer.

Santé (Health)

With all these possible beneficial effects of wine, what more do you need to know to help you enjoy a glass or two of your favorite Pinot? As one goes through life, they begin to understand that the pleasures of it depend on how you look at things. You can either pour a glass of wine and think about what grape this wine was made from, what numerical rating one or another expert gave this beverage and swallow it. Or, you can reflect of the ethereal wonders of life. You can think about the amalgamation of the forces of nature combined with the human art of the vintner that went into constructing a potion that pleases our senses as well as our being. And then, raise your glass, and say with vindication “À Votre Santé!”