



Grape-A-Hol: How Big Business Is Subverting Artisan Winemaking and the Future of Fine Wine

Michael F. Spratt, Mark L. Feldman

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The world is awash with wine - nearly 30 billion liters are produced every year. But how much is truly fine wine? Vastly less than what is claimed to be. By coining the term "Grape-a-hol" and defining it as "an alcoholic beverage made from fermented grape juice and passed off as a substitute for fine wine," this book exposes the questionable practices of big business and the regulatory myopia of governments that are subverting artisan wine making, altering consumer tastes, and sabotaging the future of fine wine. Industry insiders themselves, the authors draw on their intimate knowledge of both the U.S. and New Zealand wine industries to reveal how the line between fine wine and bulk wine has become dangerously blurred. But it is not too late. Grape-a-hol is a rallying cry to everyone who believes it is only art - not economics - that can create truly fine wine.

Survival of the fittest, as Charles Darwin pointed out, does not mean survival of the best - just those who are most able to adapt to a changing environment. In the wine industry, corporate producers of Grape-a-hol are the best equipped with capital resources to quickly adapt to changing market conditions and indeed can actually alter the business environment themselves through their influence on policy-makers. Big business is altering wine industry economics and, in the process, is undermining a 6,000-year-old craft.

The authors argue that authenticity, integrity, and responsibility are the pillars of true artisan winegrowing and the last line of defense against the rising tide of Grape-a-hol. The fate of artisan winemaking rests with a larger group than the thousands of small producers who practice this ancient craft, however. A large network of influential interests wields considerable power over the industry, comprised of:

- * The corporate producers who consider wine to be nothing more than a vehicle for profit making.
- * The taxing authorities who are motivated to increase government revenue while simultaneously preaching economic growth and drinking in moderation.
- * The critics, wine writers, and promoters who devote time to rating mass-market wines better scored by a system similar to that used for grading meat.
- * The large chain retailers who treat wine as a loss leading inducement for filling grocery carts.
- * The distributors, arbitrageurs, brokers, and agents who, without remorse, willingly cannibalize a region, variety, or brand simply to make quick cash.

If the Grape-a-hol trend continues unabated, in the not-too-distant future the only people who will be able to produce or acquire fine artisan wines will be the very wealthy. The rest of us will have nothing more than the illusion of choice as we are engulfed in an ever-rising ocean of pseudo-fine wine.

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Ken Martin:

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