

It would seem a safe assumption that readers of a weekly wine column don't need to be reminded of the virtues of moderate consumption. Nevertheless, the virulent attacks by the crypto-prohibitionists in our midst (many of them doctors who should know better) sometimes make it necessary to repeat why it is healthier to drink than to abstain.

The issue of alcohol is politically fraught in South Africa. It is easy to understand that for many people, and for whole communities, it is powerfully emotive. Anyone who has read Charles van Onselen's pamphlet "Randlords and Rotgut" will know alcohol was used as an instrument of repression, and as a (particularly evil) inducement to press-gang rural males into the labour market.

This, however, should not be allowed to blind us to the facts, as they relate to the health-giving properties of moderate wine consumption, nor should historical injustice be allowed to justify poor statistical analysis of the contemporary situation. A recent piece in Daily Maverick claimed (as if this were a universally acknowledged fact) that South Africa is the 19th heaviest drinking nation in the world. In fact, the WHO puts us in 30th position.

Alcohol abuse is a very real problem: there is ample legislation to deal with managing excessive consumption and its consequences. What is lacking is the political will to police the regulations. The inevitable result of this failure to apply existing laws will be more repressive legislation, which in turn will increase illegal and (by its very nature) irresponsible consumption. Already 70% of retail liquor sales take place in an unlicensed environment.

For those who care to hear the other side, here are some pointers. Firstly, it is better to drink than to abstain. For all the evils of excessive consumption, the universe of imbibers (from moderate to manic) has a longer life expectancy than the universe of teetotallers. Those who drink wine, regularly and in moderation, are likely to live longest.

While this observation is supported by considerable empirical statistical evidence, it's important to try to identify why this is so - in other words, how the consumption of wine helps to extend life expectancy. Firstly, moderate and regular wine consumption reduces the risk of heart disease by improving blood vessel cell health, thus reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. It also reduces the risk of strokes: wine (and in this case alcohol in general) acts as a blood thinner. The resveratrol which occurs naturally in the skins of red grapes, together with procyanids (which are also present in red wines) and which serve to reduce cholesterol, suggest greater benefits to red wine consumption.

Resveratrol is a potent anti-oxidant and offers a degree of protection against free radicals implicated in the development of some cancers (notably colon and prostate). A Harvard study showed that four to seven glasses of red wine per week halved the risk of prostate cancer. In addition, Resveratrol activates a protein which works as an anti-ageing agent. There are also studies which show that the silicon in wine helps in the battle against declining bone density. It has also been identified as an immune-system booster.

There are conflicting studies around wine consumption and long term brain health. The UC San Diego study, which followed more than 1,300 older adults for 29 years between 1984 and 2013, found that men and women 85 years old and older, who consumed 'moderate to heavy' amounts of alcohol, were twice as likely to be cognitively healthy than non-drinkers - a conclusion which differed from an Oxford University study published a few months before.

However, the most interesting recent research shows that wine tasting (which, sadly, is different from actual consumption) can play a vital role in enhanced cognitive function in later middle age. Apparently the use of the different sensory centres of the brain associated with tasting and judgement do for brain health what daily sudoku is supposed to achieve - but with vastly more enjoyment for the participant.