WHY IS WINE NOT BOOZE?

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"And he kept pouring the booze down his throat and I kept thinking 'Yuk'."¹

This is an unexceptional remark. In a test of women’s reactions to it, most visualised the “booze” as beer. Spirits, such as whisky, were a secondary possibility, and, if the drinker was imagined as a street alcoholic, cheap sherry, cheap wine or even meths might also be “booze.”² What is exceptional about the sentence is that it is part of a description of a dinner party. The same speaker continues:

"But I cooked what I thought was a superb meal. We had vichyssoise first. He wanted more of that. And then I had some chicken breasts that I’d done. It was a very French meal, very simple, in a tarragon sauce and two really nice vegetables and a really interesting salad to come after that and then some raspberry tarts."

The guest-of-honour had been away from New Zealand for fifteen years. Usually returning expatriates bring back tastes which are regarded as sophisticated. On this occasion it was just the opposite:

"When he came in the door he said, ‘Oh, sorry I’m late, I’ve been having drinks with so and so.’ You know, the flushed look on his face and the smell on his breath. He’d obviously been having a lot of drinks then he had quite a lot of beer before we even sat down for dinner. You know, then he just kept chucking the wine back . . . I’d gone to quite a lot of trouble for this fat thing, and he ate everything he’d piled on. And I’d put this there and that here and thought, ‘Oh this looks quite nice on a white plate, bit like out of a magazine!’ I thought. [She smiled.] But he had a bit more of this and a bit more of that, piled it all onto his big mountain of food [laughter], and all this booze".

The speaker was a middle-class, urban woman in her thirties who had come from a wine-growing background. She and her husband were very hospitable folk who spent an above average amount on alcohol.

The wines they bought were chosen with care and she had put as much thought into selecting the wines as she had in planning the courses. What particularly revolted her about the behaviour of their guest was his excessive eating and drinking combined with his disregard for the aesthetics of the food and wine which comprised the meal. He converted separate dishes and even courses into “this big mountain of food” and the carefully chosen bottles of table wine into “all this booze”. As a result of all this consumption he became “this fat thing”, “grossly overweight”, “revolting” and “repulsive”.

This story is the most graphic of a set of short texts which in conjunction with other information allow an exploration of the relationship between wine and the colloquial category, “booze”. The exploration is based on material from the New Zealand Women and Alcohol Project and is therefore primarily concerned with women’s perspectives on the relationship.

It is clear that in some contexts wine is simply a sub-set of booze. For example, a middle class woman describing a thirtieth birthday party that she was planning for more than fifty guests said, “There’s going to be a lot of booze: three dozen beer and five casks of wine!”. The consumption of these quantities of alcohol by over fifty people at a lengthy party would not be regarded as at all excessive by the majority of women yet the size of the order was large from the perspective of the speaker. Similarly, “booze” was used by another woman describing the duty-free gifts of wine and spirits which she brought back for friends and relatives when returning from a trip. She said exaggerating somewhat, “My whole bag is full of booze!”. Again, the term “booze” is used to refer to a relatively large amount of alcohol for one person, but not an excessive amount because it was being distributed to several people. That seems to be the general rule: when wine is a sub-set of booze relatively large amounts are indicated but these amounts are not usually excessive because the booze is intended for a party, or is to last a long time, or is to be given away, and so on.

However, when booze (or its derivatives) is used to indicate excessive quantities of alcohol, wine is sometimes specifically excluded, or, more frequently, it is simply not included. An example of the former is: “I wouldn’t call her a boozer. She’d only ever drink a couple of wines”. Examples of the latter are those where beer or spirits only are included in descriptions of booze, boozing or boozers. The reaction to the quote which begins this paper is a good case in point: no one guessed as a first choice that the booze was wine. Once the women had given their choices the situation to which it applied was described. The women identified with the speaker’s amused horror at the transformation of good wine into booze. The purpose of this paper is to explore when and why wine is not booze.

WINE: TRADITIONAL USE

The history of wine is possibly relevant. The link between wine and religious and community rituals is strong in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Wine is an ingredient of the central Christian sacrament and is often drunk when “communias” is being celebrated in the secular world. It is the beverage of toasts and figures in what Fallding and Miles (1974) call ornamental drinking. As sacrament and ornament, perhaps its place in ritual and ceremony where its style of consumption is fixed by tradition precludes it from being a type of booze. There are at least two lines of argument here: in such contexts or in talking about such contexts one does not use informal speech, and ceremonial wine drinking uses only small quantities; a couple of sips rather than a couple of bottles.

In New Zealand, wine drinking was a very minor form of alcohol consumption until the 1960s. Widespread wine drinking is therefore a recent phenomenon and may not owe very much to traditional values relating to wine. In addition, there are other ancient models: bacchanalia were, of course, feasts in honour of the god of wine and were characterised by the drinking of quantities of the new vintage and by riotous behaviour. Arguments based on traditional uses of wine are therefore somewhat inconclusive, but on balance, there is support for wine as a drink of moderation and civility.

QUANTITIES OF DRINK

It may be that wine is not generally drunk in sufficient quantities to ever be booze. Certainly, in New Zealand, much more beer is drunk than wine. But much more beer is drunk than spirits and there is little problem in classifying spirits as booze. In contrast with the overall consumption figures for New Zealand, the majority of women who recorded drinking alcohol in their beverage diaries for the “New Zealand women and alcohol project” drank more wine than any other drink, and the women drinkers who drank the most were just as likely to drink wine as they were to drink beer or spirits. However, compared with lighter drinkers whose first choice was almost always wine, more of the heavier drinkers would choose beer or spirits. It does not seem that quantity alone is a good explanation of why wine is or is not “booze” but it is clear that quantity is part of the explanation.
KNOWLEDGE

It may be that the relatively esoteric knowledge that surrounds wine prevents it from becoming booze. Wine knowledge is a whole system of meanings and like other systems such as table manners, or knowledge of a foreign language, it serves to separate those who are "in" from those who are "out". For those who are "in", the greater control they have of fine distinctions, the greater prestige, a factor which in itself would promote complexity in the system and remove wine still further from booze. One of the features of boozing is the focus on quantity at the expense of qualitative distinctions. Indeed this was one of the aspects of her guest's behaviour which made the hostess most indignant. Compared with wine, booze is relatively undifferentiated.

Women participants in the project were very aware of how much there was to learn about wine. They thought that traditionally men had better access to this body of knowledge, but that nowadays, women were starting to acquire it and to pass it on to their daughters (Park 1987:127, Banwell 1988:293).

However there is the problem of "chateau cardboard": wine sold in 2 to 4 litre cardboard boxes lined with plastic and/or foil liners. Indeed some of the binges recorded in the beverage diaries did show that cask wine featured in heavy-drinking episodes. Compared with wine sold in 750ml bottles, wine in cardboard boxes is relatively undifferentiated and may even be sold under almost generic labeling, such as "Odo's Dry Red", with no information about variety of grapes, the year of production, production methods or the place where the grapes were grown. This may be the weak spot in the categories, the place where wine leaks into booze. But for one important factor: marketing.

MARKETING

Wine of all sorts is generally advertised as one of the finer things in life, and this is almost as true of cask wine as it is of expensive bottled wine. For example, in a long-running print advertisement for a white wine sold in casks and bottles, the people picnicking with it were depicted as socially attractive and full of joie de vivre. In another advertisement for the same casked wine an elegant party is implied: the box of wine in the refrigerator is surrounded by tasty morsels of party food.

Liquor wholesalers with their supermarket-style advertising run somewhat counter to this trend, as the thrust of these advertisements is value for money or bargains and if wine is involved it is usually casks which are featured most prominently, along with the different brands of spirits and beer. It is interesting to contrast these liquor wholesalers' advertisements with advertisements from the more upmarket wine shops which tend to advertise the product and contain a good deal of information on each wine, rather than just advertising the price. The latter advertisements stress wine as a system of knowledge. Advertisements for bottled table wine which do stress its reasonable price often compare it favourably to well known expensive imported varieties, reassuring the buyer that although the wine's price might be low its status is not.

The net effect of marketing is probably to cork the leak of cask wine into the booze category, but liquor wholesalers who depend on selling large quantities at lower prices may prise the cork loose.

FOOD

In advertising, wine is very often served in the presence of food. In our research with women we found that those who favoured drinking wine usually drank it immediately before or as part of a meal, especially dinner, and that usually women drank wine (and other drinks) at home or at the homes of friends. These women tended to be in their middle years, better educated, pakeha and were more likely to be urban than women who favoured beers or spirits over wine. The link between wine and food was stronger than between other types of alcohol and food, but in general the women who contributed to the study did tend to drink alcohol and eat rather than to drink alcohol by itself. The link with food is probably an important factor in dividing wine from booze, as through this link the image of wine becomes a domestic one, disassociated from ideas of excess and riotous behaviour. The gluttonous imbibers of the opening extracts transformed wine into booze despite the domestic setting and the communitas of the occasion by introducing both excess and ignorance or disregard of the systems of knowledge and meaning associated with both the food and the wine.

WOMEN

It seems no accident that advertising associates wine with women in a mirror image of the association of beer with men. In "real life", as revealed through our research, we find that women tend to drink several varieties of alcohol, and that some women: young women, enlisted women, older women, non-pakeha women, favour spirits or beer over wine. However, it is true that for the women involved who were between about 25 and 60, who were pakeha and who drank alcohol, wine was the most frequent choice of drink and also accounted for the largest amount of pure alcohol consumed. It seems that the association with women also helps to prevent wine from being a sub-class of booze. There is evidence for this from various texts. The following example indicates a train of thought which contrasts booze with women: The hotel "was a real old
boozy place. In those days [1950s] ladies did not go to hotels”. The speaker then goes on to talk about current drinking practices in which women are involved which she does not describe as boozy but as “social drinking”.

WINE IS TO BOOZE AS GOOD ALCOHOL IS TO BAD ALCOHOL

Wine is associated with women and with food in real life and in advertising. Wine makers and firms involved in marketing wine argue that their product is not linked with social and health problems in the same way as are other forms of alcohol (Cooper 1977:47). One spokesperson for wine makers has even taxed our credulity by asking us to believe that wine is really more a food than it is an alcoholic beverage (Sunday Star 3/1/88:B1-12). From this assertion and because wine may be consumed with a meal, arguments are made that wine should be on sale in food stores, and should generally be more readily available than other forms of alcohol. That wine has achieved a high level of respectability is clear too from the comments of research participants about the buying of alcohol. We found that generally women disliked buying alcohol from bottle stores attached to hotels, they were happier buying it from liquor wholesalers, but were happiest buying it at wine shops (which in NZ are permitted to sell only wine). The contrast between wine and some other drinks was made very clear. For example, in some circles women “cannot” drink beer. In describing a social occasion a senior high school student from a rural area said: “There was only a keg of beer so there was nothing for the girls to drink”. Conversely, in some public bars, generally the preserve of males, it is impossible to buy a glass of wine, although beer and a full range of spirits are available.

Wine, the drink of moderation, is perceived as good alcohol. It exists in contrast with beer, especially undifferentiated beer in kegs or tankers, which is bad alcohol: the drink of excess. Wine may have had a privileged position based on its history of sacramental and ornamental use, but in contemporary New Zealand its good image is also contributed to by its position in a system of knowledge, its association with food, with women and with the home. These associations are all reinforced by the ways in which wine is marketed.

Hodges (1985:17) makes a case for drinking styles as models for particular sets of social relations: that modelled by the drinking of table wine suggests civility, cooperation and control; that modelled by the consumption of large quantities of beer, such as in competitive drinking games, suggests struggles for and about power, among other things. One of the features of alcohol is its versatility and ambiguity as a symbol and many drinking styles carry hints of their own antithesis. The dinner party, for example, may be a model for cooperative civility on any one occasion, but the system of dinner-partying may be highly competitive as many an upwardly mobile person has discovered.

Perhaps because of this ambiguity, occasions involving alcohol seem particularly susceptible to redefinition: aspects of the sorts of occasions which they are not creep in willy nilly. When a person introduces into one style of drinking the mores of another, as did the prodigal guest, the rather flimsy line between “good” alcohol and booze, between civility and grossness is erased, the definition of the situation becomes questionable and the participants are discomforted.

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Wine is not booze, when the latter carries connotations of excess, because wine is thought of as good alcohol drunk at home with food by good women – and some good men.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on “The Place of Alcohol in the Lives of New Zealand Women Project” which was supported by grants from the Alcoholic Liquor Advisory Council, the Social Sciences Research Fund Committee, and the Health Research and Development Committee. It was carried out from the Anthropology Department, University of Auckland, and received the support and advice of a Project Support Committee of which Ralph Bulmer was a valued member.

The project consisted of six studies based in different localities throughout New Zealand and a dozen smaller studies with specific groups of women. The methods used included participant observation, group discussions, interviews including life story interviews, and the keeping of beverage diaries. In each study a wide range of women was invited to participate.

2. These and the other extracts are from the study carried out in Mount Eden suburb, Auckland (Park 1987). A small survey (n=15) using the opening quote as a projective device was also carried out with women similar in socio-economic background to the speaker especially for this paper. Women were shown or read the opening sentence then asked what were the most likely types of drink the term “booze” referred to. These responses were noted in order. Finally, the “real life” situation was described and the women’s reaction noted. The responses were highly uniform. The only two women who visualised the booze as anything other than beer were immigrants (from North America - spirits; from Japan - wine).
3. In the 1950s wine accounted for 3.1 - 4.3 million litres of alcohol consumed in New Zealand, compared with over 210 for beer and between 4.9 and 8.8 for spirits. By 1970, wine accounted for 15.9 million litres, compared with 329.2 for beer and 7.3 for spirits (ALAC [1988] NZ alcohol consumption statistics).

4. The estimated consumption of alcoholic beverages for 1985 expressed as litres of absolute alcohol per head of mean population aged 15 and over was: beer: 6.10, table wine: 1.71, fortified wine: 0.64, spirits: 2.27. The total volumes in million litres of the different types of alcohol were beer: 375, table wine: 38, fortified wine: 8.8 and spirits: 13.3 (ibid).

5. Beverage diaries were filled in on a daily basis over a period of two weeks. The women who successfully completed this task tended to be better educated than women in general, and most of them were pakeha. They were not randomly selected and the results cannot be generalised outside the categories or groups to which they belong. Around 600 diaries were completed. A special study of the heavier drinkers is reported in Park (n.d.).

6. This information was derived from group discussions and interviews as well as from beverage diaries. A broader cross-section of women participated in discussions and interviews than completed beverage diaries.


9. There is little evidence which suggests that drinking one type of alcohol has better or worse outcomes than drinking other types. Obviously, absorption rates which are partially dependent on the presence or absence of food are important in determining the effects, but the quantity of pure alcohol consumed over the given time (other things being equal) is vital.

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