

# Eat Well, Drink Wisely, Live Longer

## The science behind a healthy life with wine

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The ambience of Les Prés d'Eugénie, a Michelin three-star restaurant in southwestern France, promises a rich meal in the grand tradition of haute cuisine. But the menu delivers something entirely different: all of the pleasure for your palate, with none of the peril to your health.

Chef and owner Michel Guérard has gathered all the elements for a great dining experience. Gascony is famous for gastronomic luxuries such as foie gras and duck confit. The restaurant's dining room, set in a 40-acre park amid lush gardens, features high ceilings, Persian carpets and valuable paintings. The wine list glitters with stars from Bordeaux, Burgundy and beyond.

Yet Guérard's special menu offers three delicious courses, plus one glass of wine, for a total of only 610 calories. Balance is the guiding principle of the chef's patented "cuisine minceur active," or active, healthy cuisine. There is no butter on the table or in the food. Cream has been eliminated. Sugar is replaced by natural fructose.

The meal is built on a trilogy of healthy eating principles. First, there is the wine, which can be selected from a list backed by a cellar containing thousands of fine bottles. Then there is the Mediterranean diet, which Guérard follows to the letter. Finally, he includes a dose of alpha-linolenic acid, an important component of the traditional diet of Crete, where old farmers in remote villages enjoy the longest life expectancy in the Western world.

Guérard is 68, but he has the energy of a much younger man as he directs and inspires his kitchen crew. He is living proof of the efficacy of his cuisine, and a committed member of a broadening movement seeking to maximize the benefits of wine and a healthy diet. He keeps on top of the latest scientific studies and works hand in hand with researchers of a major multinational food company, which he credits with helping him fine-tune the use of certain ingredients.

In the small countryside village of Eugénie-les-Bains, Guérard demonstrates that healthy living and living well are not mutually exclusive, but can be blended into a pleasurable lifestyle. "I believe that the future of cooking will be linked in some part to the science of food research," says the chef, who created



*Danish researcher Morten Grønbaek has compared the health benefits of wine to those of beer and other forms of alcohol.*

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his eating regimen four years ago. "It was designed to give protection against heart and arterial disease and hypertension. It's 'active' because it also provides vitality."

## European Wine & Health

### The scientific evidence

In recent years, research teams, many based in Europe, have provided fresh insights into the health benefits and unique characteristics of wine. As their results become better-known, these scientists are influencing European culture by inspiring chefs and wine lovers to apply their discoveries to a lifestyle that integrates healthier drinking, eating and living patterns.

The data have come from different sources: large population, or epidemiological, studies; laboratory work with test tubes and other in vitro experiments; in vivo work with rats, mice, rabbits, monkeys, dogs and hamsters; and experiments with human volunteers.

The research of French epidemiologist and nutritionist Serge Renaud has been particularly influential; he's widely credited with having proven the health benefits of wine and a strict Mediterranean-style diet. Renaud has influenced other European researchers, including Serenella Rotondo, an Italian researcher with central Italy's Consorzio Mario Negri Sud, where the biological impact of wine on health is studied. Renaud's most famous disciple is Morten Grønbaek, a Danish scientist who has gone even further than Renaud in demonstrating wine's health advantages over beer, spirits and abstinence from alcohol.

Renaud is now based in Bordeaux, which has become a center of research on wine and health. Also in Bordeaux is Jean-Marc Orgogozo, a professor at University Victor Segalen and an expert on wine's ability to help fight Alzheimer's disease and dementia in the elderly. Another professor there is Joseph Vercauteren, whose cutting-edge research focuses on the potential of certain wine components, especially polyphenols, to delay, prevent and even cure cancer and other diseases.

Vercauteren works with a network of scientists around Europe. Elias Castanas of Iráklion, on the Greek island of Crete, has used the polyphenols isolated by Vercauteren to demonstrate that wine might be able to delay or prevent the spread of breast and prostate cancer. "We are encouraged," says Jean-François Rossi, who is head of the Hematology-Oncology Department at the Lapeyronnie University Hospital in Montpellier, France, where some of these polyphenols are currently being tested in experiments with certain cancer cell lines, such as leukemia.

Wine has only gradually taken a starring role in this research. Until recently, most studies didn't differentiate between wine, beer and spirits, bundling them together as "alcoholic beverages." Over the last 30 years, hundreds of studies in America, Australia, Asia and western Europe involving more than 1 million people have confirmed that moderate drinkers of alcoholic beverages have a lower incidence of disease than nondrinkers. The results varied, but the studies were broadly in agreement that consumers of moderate amounts of alcohol -- two to four drinks a day -- had a rate of heart disease from 20 percent to 60 percent lower than that of teetotalers. This suggested that the ethanol in these drinks protected against heart and arterial disease.

In recent years, however, scientists have explored whether wine confers health benefits beyond those expected from its alcohol content. Several studies found that wine drinkers are better off than those who consume only beer and spirits. Renaud and Grønbaek's findings are particularly important in this respect. In separate studies in France and Denmark, they found that wine drinkers who consumed three

to five glasses a day decreased their risk of heart disease by about one-third to two-thirds compared with beer or spirits drinkers.

The field of wine and health took another leap forward when researchers investigated links to cancer and other causes of death, not just heart disease. Wine drinkers enjoying up to three glasses a day reduced their risk of dying from cancer by about a fifth compared with nondrinkers', according to French and Danish studies. Even at five glasses a day, wine drinkers cut their cancer risk by 10 percent compared with teetotalers', Grønbaek found.

And wine drinkers have a lower risk of dying from causes other than cancer and heart disease. French and Danish studies found that wine drinkers enjoying two to five glasses a day lowered their all-cause mortality by 25 percent to 50 percent compared with nondrinkers' all-cause rates. Beer and spirits drinkers found no such significant protection.

Wine drinkers may owe their superior health partly to their general lifestyle. Epidemiological studies found that wine drinkers are better educated, eat more healthfully, smoke less and exercise more than people who prefer drinking beer and spirits. Such factors contribute to the generally longer lives of wine drinkers, some scientists say.

Another explanation for the superior protection enjoyed by wine drinkers, according to scientists, is linked to the special properties of red wine. Red wine contains antioxidant components known as polyphenols; they include flavonoids, anthocyanins and certain tannins. Research suggests that antioxidants may have anticarcinogenic properties, and may help prevent a number of diseases.

Many of these healthy components merge in what has become known as the Mediterranean diet. Traditional foods enjoyed in the region include fruit and raw vegetables, onions, garlic and olives -- all of which are important sources of polyphenols. Traditional Mediterranean patterns of wine drinking -- moderate quantities taken regularly with meals -- also seem to confer the most benefits. In one study, men who drank wine three to four days a week were 30 percent less likely to get heart disease than were those men who drank wine one day per week or less.

Public interest in the health benefits of wine exploded a decade ago, when the CBS television show *60 Minutes* broadcast a segment on the so-called French Paradox. In the television program, Renaud described how the French had an unexpectedly low rate of fatal heart attacks given the amount of animal fat they ate, and he explained that it was due to the large amounts of alcohol the French consumed in the form of wine.

Since the virtues of drinking wine in moderation were extolled in that broadcast on Nov. 17, 1991, the science of wine and health has gone mainstream. Interest in the health benefits of wine and the Mediterranean diet has intensified across Europe at universities, medical laboratories, hospitals, enology schools and pharmaceutical and food companies. And Renaud became known as the "father of the French Paradox."

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For the complete article, please see the Dec. 15, 2001, issue of *Wine Spectator* magazine, page 32. ([Subscribe today](#))

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