



Thomas Cottrell is Bellevue Club's contributing wine columnist and the owner of La Cantina Wine Merchants.

THE TRUTH ABOUT LEGS

It was not an uncommon situation for me: in front of a group of people, pouring wine and answering questions. I've done it thousands of times. But this was an especially busy evening, at least it was at that particular moment, so I didn't have a chance to comment. Not that I would have, now that I think about it. The gentleman was obviously trying to impress the lady with his knowledge of wine. It would have been impolite to correct him in such circumstances. Another time, perhaps.

Such as now, assuming he's reading this article, and I'll extend the

information to anyone else who still believes the old, oft-repeated myth. The one about "legs" in a glass of wine.

This little bit of conventional wisdom has been around for a long time. When my elders were teaching me about wine, way back when, I was instructed that a fine way to determine the quality of a given wine was to observe the thickness—or thinness—of the legs formed on the inside of the glass when the wine was swirled. You know the ones; you've seen them and wondered what they were. I believed the stories, and passed the belief on to others.

We were all wrong.

Just research Mr. Willard Gibbs and Mr. Carlo Marangoni. They are the fellows responsible for describing the Gibbs-Marangoni Effect in the 19th century, the one about surface tension and the fact that alcohol evaporates faster than water. That's what you see happening in your goblet of wine. Or in your martini glass.

The legs in a martini are really thick—does that make it a better wine?

Nope. Makes it more alcoholic.

It works like this. As the alcohol in the glass of wine evaporates, it rises and pushes up on the sheet of fluid that coats the inside. The water—and other elements in the wine—are slowly forced up ... until gravity takes over, and the weight of the fluid overwhelms the upward pressure, falling in rivulets back to the surface. In the presence of more alcohol, the process takes longer and the legs are the thick sort. (By the way, the French call them "tears"—more romantic, I guess.)

So a Port, with nice, thick legs, is not better than a Beaujolais with thin ones—it's just got more alcohol in it (20 percent versus 12 percent). Likewise, a glass of 151-proof rum is not (necessarily) better than the Port; it most certainly has nearly four times more alcohol in it, though.

To a slight degree the increase in alcohol does lead to a fuller body, a richer mouthfeel. But it's a small difference, due as much to other elements in the wine as the ethanol content.

Complexity, intensity, bouquet; balance, length of finish, polish, ageability—none of these are revealed by the legs—or the tears—of any wine. They won't even help you pick a good Scotch.

But there is something you can do to help yourself evaluate a glass of wine, and it's related to the forming of legs. Coat the inside of the glass by slowly rotating it at a 75-degree angle. Caution: 90 degrees works, but it's messy.

You will find that this is more effective than swirling the wine when it comes to revealing the bouquet. The scents will be bolder and your consequent enjoyment of the flavors greater.

Go ahead and swirl—it looks good and is traditional. I've been doing it so long that it's now a habit—I find myself swirling cups of tea and glasses of water without thinking about it. But the slow coating of the glass actually works better at showing off the wine. You'll see.

Future wine myths to be bashed: Old Wine Is Best; and Let the Wine Breathe by Pulling the Cork Early.