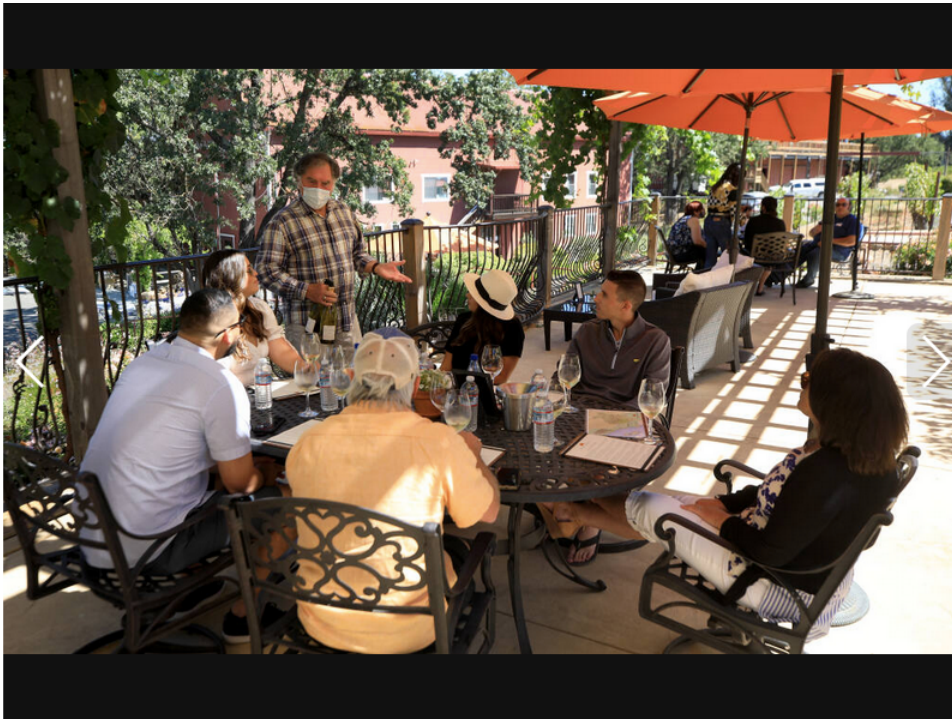


## North Coast wineries grapple with proposed US health guidelines to curb alcohol use for men



SLIDE 2 OF 2

Michael O'Looney of Martinelli Winery, left, talks with a group of Gallo employees as they wine taste at Martinelli Winery near Forestville, Friday, July 31, 2020. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2020

[BILL SWINDELL](#)

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In the midst of an already challenging year between the coronavirus and flattening sales, the U.S. wine sector was hit with a surprising blow last month that threatens to erect another obstacle to its growth into the future.

An expert panel revamping the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans called for a major change in alcohol consumption in the United States. Its July 15 report said men should limit themselves to one drink of alcohol per day, cutting in half the two-per-day standard for men that has been in place since 1990. Its recommendation for women, also one drink a day, remained unchanged.

The committee's [report](#) referred to alcohol beverages as an overall “unhealthy substance” and warned the United States was “far from” consumption levels that would make a dent in the health-related problems caused by wine, beer or spirits.

“Alcohol can be consumed at low levels with relatively low risk, and is consumed by U.S. adults for a variety of reasons. However, in terms of health, among those who consume alcohol, drinking less is better for health than drinking more,” the panel wrote in recommending the change.

Caught on the defensive, trade groups representing the wine, beer and spirits sectors are launching a counteroffensive questioning the science behind the recent change. The Wine Institute, the wine industry's main lobbying group, based in San Francisco, said in a statement that “to change the long-established guidance on moderate consumption is not supported by science.”

If the change is finalized in the new recommendations, it will likely translate to lower sales for wineries, said Rob McMillan, executive vice president of Silicon Valley Bank's wine division. The message on the new level for men — whether from health professionals or amplified in media reports — would likely result in a reduction of consumption.

“It's one more piece of ammunition to those who are anti-alcohol,” McMillan said.

The change would likely be another challenge for Sonoma County wineries, which are adapting to increased consolidation and a massive drop in the consumption of wine in restaurants and bars closed under COVID-19. Many, including Martinelli Winery & Vineyards northwest of Santa Rosa, are also grappling with the effects of recent natural disasters.

“We have had fires and our vineyards on Martinelli Road were flooded (in 2019). We are family winery and we have seen it all the last couple of years,” said Tessa Gorsuch, a fifth-generation member of the Martinelli wine family who serves as marketing director.

The battle over how much alcohol is enough for Americans to consume on a daily basis goes back decades. The debate has publicly played out during wrangling on the guidelines, which are published every five years as part of an effort by the federal departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services. The definition of one serving is a 12-ounce beer at 5% alcohol by volume (ABV), 5 ounces of wine at 12% ABV, or 1.5 ounces of a spirit at 40% of ABV.

Decades ago, the wine industry found an opening to promote the health benefits of its product in the aftermath of news reports on the French Paradox, research in the late 1980s that showed a Mediterranean diet accompanied by moderate drinking of red wine helped to curb heart disease. That was aided by research conducted by Dr. Arthur Klatsky, who was then a senior consultant in cardiology for Kaiser-Permanente Medical Center in Oakland, which found moderate drinkers had less risk of heart disease.

The wine sector prevailed in 1995 when the wording from 1990 recommendations that alcohol had “no net health benefit” was dropped from the guidelines. There was also inclusion in 1995

that moderate consumption could reduce the risk of coronary heart disease. In 2000, opponents of the industry, which included then-Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-South Carolina, sought to roll back such claims on the supposed health benefits of moderate drinking after the sector's victory five years earlier.

The language in the 2000 version was more nuanced. "Drinking in moderation may lower the risk for coronary heart disease, mainly among men over age 45 and women over age 55," it stated. But it added that moderate consumption provides "little, if any" benefit for younger people and that drinks should be taken with meals to slow absorption.

The recommendations had not changed that drastically for 20 years — until a few weeks ago.

Some like McMillan said they believe wine industry leaders rested too much on their laurels from years ago and didn't remain vigilant against those who kept questioning the health benefits of alcohol.

The guidelines on alcohol apply to all sectors of the beverage industry, but some in the wine industry contend that wine should be considered separately, based on the way it is consumed, and say their product has research from Klatsky to back up claims that moderate consumption can have beneficial effects.

David Ramey of Ramey Wine Cellars in Healdsburg noted that wine consumption is typically part of dining. He remembers his late UC Davis viticulture and enology professor Vernon Singleton saying that "wine is the beverage of moderation" and noted that wine is often sipped with meals rather than guzzled on its own.

"My problem with these anti-alcohol people is that what they are, they are anti-alcohol. They conflate beer, spirits and wine as just 'all alcohol' whereas I really think wine is special and different. It is a gift from God," Ramey said.

Opponents disagree and contend the sector has not kept up with evolving research that has showed more troubling signs. The committee noted observational studies found beneficial effects "of low average levels of consumption" in regards to heart disease. But at higher levels of drinking there was an increased risk of heart disease, especially among binge drinkers. The definition for binge drinking for men is five drinks a day or 15 or more per week, according to the panel report.

The preliminary report stated that alcohol is recognized as a carcinogen by the World Health Organization and the U.S. government and it "is likely causally associated" with seven types of cancer and is responsible for up to 5.5% of all cancer deaths in the country. "Alcohol also is a risk factor for a range of gastrointestinal health outcomes, including chronic liver disease, pancreatitis, gastritis, gastro-esophageal reflux disease, and peptic ulcer disease," the report said.

For example, opponents note that about 40% of alcohol-related deaths occur among those below the age of 50. Studies looking at the linkage between alcohol and heart disease in people from ages 50 to 70 would not consider those who have already died, said Carson Benowitz-Frederick,

research manager for Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael-based advocacy group that calls for higher taxes and regulation of alcohol.

“A big chunk of people who in fact may have been killed from alcohol died before they even had the chance to make it into that cohort (group),” Benowitz-Frederick said.

In contrast, he contends that there have been more links reported between development of certain cancers — such as those in the breast and colon — and drinking, which would increase with more consumption.

“This been compounded by what has really emerged in the last 10 years and what is being taken into account here,” Benowitz-Frederick said of the panel’s report.

The wrangling over the science will continue. R. Curtis Ellison, a semi-retired professor of medicine and public health at Boston University’s School of Medicine who studied the effects of alcohol for years, labeled the panel report as “fake news” that didn’t properly consider prior research such as Klatsky’s work. In some of his past work, Ellison received donations from the alcohol-beverage industry but he said it had no control over the results of his research. He stopped such industry funding in 2013.

Ellison noted that he did not read the panel’s report but said “in my opinion there is no evidence that suggests we should change the guidelines.”

The lobbying is intensifying. On Wednesday, the Beer Institute sent an email blast to its members asking them to urge their representatives to sign onto a letter drafted by Rep. Andy Harris, R-Maryland. The Harris letter will ask top leaders at the Agriculture and HHS departments to review the process and evidence behind the committee's recommendations to ensure the guidelines are backed by a preponderance of the scientific evidence. The Wine Institute will send its comments on the panel report by the Aug. 13 deadline for such submissions, a spokeswoman for the group said.

Ramey said he had been worried about such a rollback and raised the issue during a board retreat with the Sonoma County Vintners last summer. The nonprofit group has been looking into the issue, but the pandemic has delayed any public discussion, said Michael Haney, executive director of the Sonoma County Vintners.

“There is a rising tide of anti-alcohol out there,” Ramey said. “We got to take this seriously.”

*You can reach Staff Writer Bill Swindell at 707-521-5223 or [bill.swindell@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:bill.swindell@pressdemocrat.com). On Twitter @BillSwindell.*