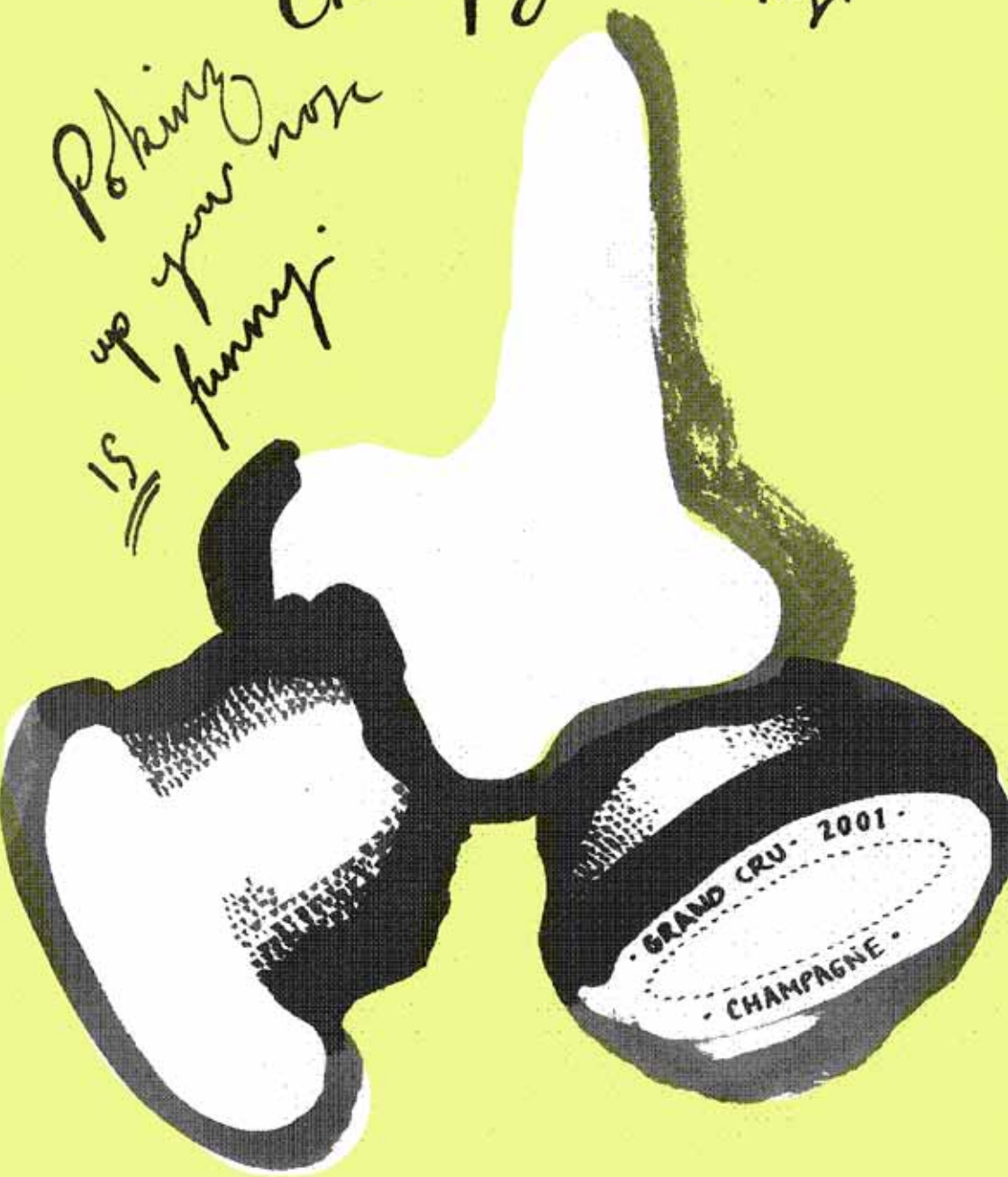


Champagne corker

Poking
up your nose
is
funny.



ELEPHANT IN THE BOTTLE

Richard Hemming celebrates one of the wine world's unspoken taboos.

What's your favourite thing about wine? Its infinite variation? Its affinity with food? The way it combines history, geography and sociology into a single glass? The sheer hedonistic, olfactory pleasure of it? Or perhaps the fact that it makes you drunk?

Nobody's ever heard yelling that last one from the rooftops, unless they already are. Inebriation is one of wine's most fundamental attractions, yet one of its least discussed. A civilised culture has built up around wine that has disconnected it from its *raison d'être*: to get one drunk.

Plenty of wine drinkers will baulk at the accusation of drunkenness. If you only ever drink one glass of wine and then stop, please baulk away. Baulk to your sober little heart's content. But if like most of us you drink more than a glass, intoxication is inevitable. Alcohol is being absorbed by your stomach and coursing through your bloodstream, partying with the nerve cells in your brain and making you think, feel and act differently. You are getting drunk.

It's remarkable how frequently this is denied. "I had a few glasses with lunch", we say "but I'm absolutely fine officer". "We'll

probably drink a bottle each tonight, but we won't be drunk", I was once told at a wine dinner by a man later seen pushing champagne corks up his nose.

Here's the thing: getting drunk is great. This is not an admission to be ashamed of. Pushing champagne corks up your nose is funny! Wine is the most sophisticated of social lubricants, an indispensable marker of life's landmarks and an unparalleled catalyst of celebration.

So why all the coyness? Why is it taboo to admit wine makes you drunk? Is it to preserve wine's precious respectability? Wine professionals will discuss every aspect in minute detail – the art, the science, the olfactory sensations and the soulful experiences – but they won't mention intoxication. Alcohol is only ever addressed in structural terms, and in this way, wine maintains its superiority over other booze groups.

There is a paradox here: if drinking wine is expressed in terms of getting drunk, then it becomes like any other drink, debased of all its complexity and intrigue; yet without alcohol, wine not only loses one of its most intrinsic attractions, it literally cannot exist.



13% A.B.V

Absolutely
Bloody
Vital

Wine needs alcohol and relies on fermentation to transform grape juice into something infinitely more engaging. If you remove alcohol from wine it is utterly eviscerated - soulless, pointless, joyless. Wine and alcohol are inextricably linked, and alcohol will always intoxicate.

Drinking wine gets you drunk, so far so good. But the problem is when drunk turns into too drunk. Being too drunk is not easy to define and differs from person to person, and situation to situation. What is pleasurable one night can be painful the next. It's also subject to interpretation. If you don't think you were too drunk, then who cares what anyone else thinks, so long as you can extract those champagne corks in the morning.

There seems to be something about drinking wine in particular that encourages excess. It's as easy to drink as beer, yet far more potent. Whilst sharing a bottle, it is easy to lose track of how much we imbibe, and the concentration of alcohol can vary significantly. Oenophiles and enthusiasts have an insatiable thirst to try more and more bottles, not simply to ingest ethanol but for the sheer, puppyish love of wine.

Hangovers are nature's rather impolite way of telling you that you drank excessively. When they are severe enough that you regret drinking – well, that's a pretty good definition of being too drunk the night before.

Sanctimonious I ain't. I have frequently felt it myself, and will doubtless feel it again. I would much rather never have to survive those mornings with vinified breath and foul guts, the deadened senses and the torpid brain – but I know well enough that for as long as I drink wine, it can and will happen.

Here is the beating heart of the matter: we love wine and it makes you drunk, and that feels good. Forget terroir and vintages, the indigenous grapes and the use of French oak, the concrete eggs, extended macerations and *bâtonnage* – this would all be for nothing were it not for wine's key psychotropic ingredient. Would we still worship wine sans alcohol, even if everything else stayed the same? Who said yes? You there, at the back? So, when given an extensive, rare, diverse but decidedly non-alcoholic wine list at a restaurant, you wouldn't be tempted to order a craft beer instead? You'd prefer an un-intoxicating champagne to a delicious, freshly shaken cocktail as an aperitif, would you? I didn't think so. No, the love of wine and the love of inebriation are as intertwined as Muscadet and oysters, or white Zinfandel and teenagers. Nobody loves wine but bemoans its wonderful mind-bending effects. The role of alcohol in wine is not something to be evaded but celebrated. Shouted from the rooftops, even.