



Inside the

BUBBLE

WHAT CAN THE HARD SELTZER CRAZE TEACH THE WINE INDUSTRY?

Last weekend I set up a tasting but did not invite my usual group to join. This was not to be a double-blind or even blind event, and my goal was not to focus on the subtleties found in the fine wines that my companions and I are lucky enough to enjoy. Rather, it was to get my first taste—and perhaps some understanding—of a beverage that has been beeping away on my radar for some time now: hard seltzer.

We winemakers first felt the squeeze as craft beer moved into the market, taking up precious space on the date-night dinner table. Now brewers are also looking over their shoulders as the popularity of alcohol-spiked spritzers continues to explode: The category tripled in size in 2019, growing more than 202% from the previous year to top \$1.3 billion in sales, according to CNBC journalist Tom Huddleston Jr. I felt my first shudder of real fear this summer, when a sophisticated wine-drinking friend told me that his 21-year-old daughter has taken to hard seltzer. Here is a young woman I'd like to see embarking on the great life adventure called wine.



PHOTO: DEVIN BERKO

If she's not starting down that path despite all her previous exposure, then who else can be expected to?

Though White Claw dominates the category, with an estimated 60% of market share, there are countless other brands. Every company from Corona to Smirnoff has something on the shelves, and we are also seeing interesting labels from small startups. What they all have in common—and what distinguishes them from 1980s-era predecessors such as Shandy Bass—is marketing: They are being pitched (not for nothing without reference to gender) as lower-calorie, lower-alcohol, and lower-sugar alternatives to traditional categories. We often say in this business that consumers talk dry but drink sweet—and these brands are responding with their fizzy, fruity, and fun products, offering a much easier segue from soda pop to the grown-up world of alcohol than beer or wine ever could.

“Know thy enemy,” I told myself as I pulled various cans from the fridge. I was also genuinely curious to see what these drinks had to offer. Here is my quick summation: White Claw's variety pack showed intense if mostly artificial notes of candy and fruit on the nose, but surprisingly, there was next to zero follow-up on the palate. Barefoot Moscato Spritzer carried its pungent peach aroma onto the palate, where it was too sweet and monotonous to make me want more. High Noon's Sun Sips, however, were a definite step up. Thanks to fortification with vodka rather than high-proof ethanol, they avoided the bitterness of many of their competitors. The grapefruit expression in particular was refreshing and true to its natural fruit flavoring. I was starting to lose my skepticism.

The most interesting of the cans I tried comes, not surprisingly, from a producer based in Los Angeles, always ahead of the curve when it comes to wellness trends: Pulp Culture. Despite its disconcerting name, Hustle, it hit smack in the center of the Venn diagram for modern wellness trends, promising only six ingredients—apple, passion fruit, strawberry, ginger, turmeric, and lion's mane—along with live probiotic cultures, “botanical adaptogens” in a 99-calorie, zero-sugar



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servicing. I felt almost virtuous as I cracked it open.

Hustle reaches 4.9% alcohol through what it bills as “wild” fermentation as opposed to the addition of hard liquor, and you can tell: It's got a yeasty finish that reminded me of the ginger beer I used to ferment as a child. In fact, I'd classify it more as a kombucha that really means business. I found myself finishing the can.

In the end, I could easily see that there's a time and a place for many of these drinks—namely summer afternoons by the pool. It also became quickly obvious that comparing hard seltzers and their ilk to fine wine is like comparing apples to carburetors. In that sense, we winemakers have nothing to fear. Sure, wine is less predictable and frankly more demanding than any of these drinks, not to mention higher in calories per ounce and more expensive (albeit a much-better value from a cost-of-goods perspective). But as any wine lover knows, the rewards that it offers are beyond compare.