

# Wine:

## Miracle cure or myth?

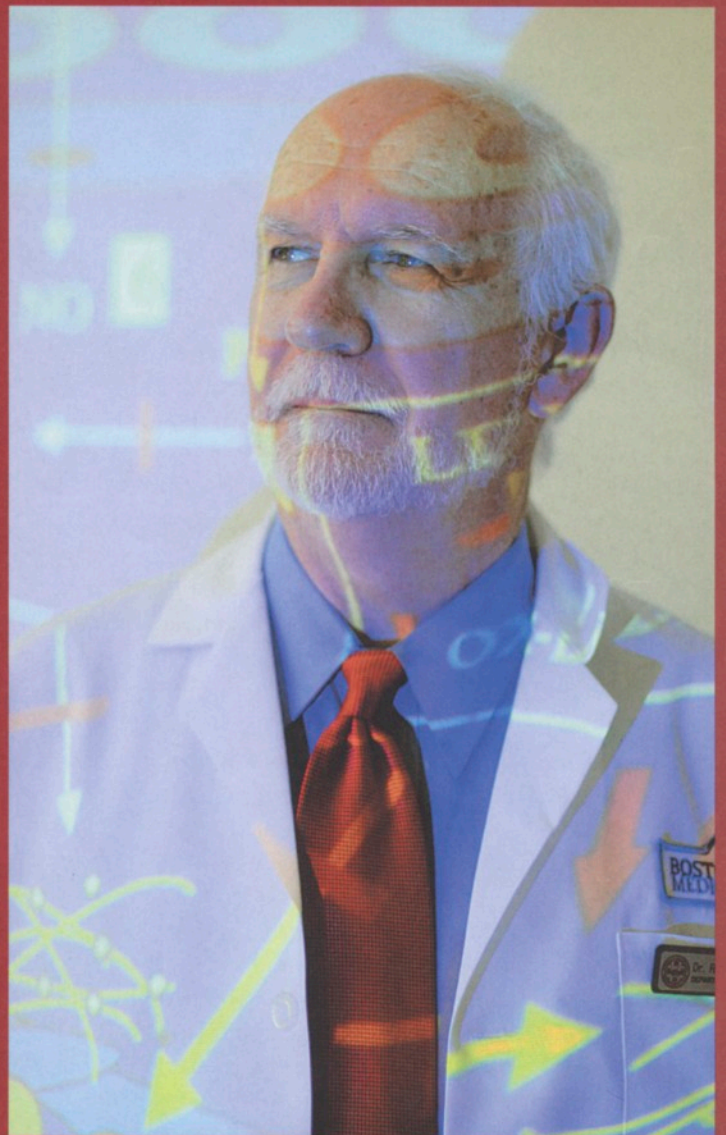
BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

**T**he French Paradox. A new, odorless fragrance for men by Jacques Pépin? Soft, unpasteurized, Provençal cheese made from lambs' milk? Or a high fat diet with low risk of coronary heart disease?

If you were tuned in to CBS' "60 Minutes" in the early '90s, you'll recall this was the phrase they coined to explain why drinking red wine enabled the French to live longer and suffer fewer cardiac problems than we do, in spite of a diet high in saturated fats.

Since then, there has been an avalanche of research on this phenomenon. Most of the studies conclude that moderate consumption of wine can help lower the incidence of a laundry list of ailments, including diabetes, hardening of the arteries, stroke, heart failure and bone deterioration. There are even studies that show that drinking wine can improve cognitive skills in mature adults and raise women's potential for getting pregnant by choice.

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Dr. Curtis Ellison, professor of medicine and public health at Boston University, is illuminated by a scientific projection on how wine and alcohol prevent heart disease.

# 'A little consumption every day is by far the healthiest pattern.'

But the medical profession remains divided on the issue. Doctors appear to be torn between the overwhelming body of epidemiological evidence demonstrating the health-giving virtues of sensible wine drinking and the fear that recommending this habit to patients could lead to overindulgence and addiction. Few physicians, says Dr. Ira Goldberg of Columbia University, would recommend a drug such as alcohol that reduces the risk of heart attack by 25 percent to 50 percent, but could result in thousands of additional deaths caused by cancer, motor vehicle accidents and liver disease.

The government is equally ambivalent about the debate.

U.S. Health and Human Services has flip-flopped in "Dietary Guidelines for Americans." In their 1990 issue, they stated, "Wine has no net benefit." By the 2000 edition, they were saying, "If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation." In the 2005 version, this became, "Consumption of alcohol can have beneficial or harmful effects. Fifty-five percent of adults are current drinkers. Forty-five percent do not drink alcohol. Abstinence is an important option."

So is wine the elixir of life for the 21st century? Or just a snake oil substitute that purports to improve your health but in reality carries more risks than benefits?

Worcester Living talked with Dr. Curtis Ellison, professor of medicine and public health at Boston University, about the role of wine in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. He took part in the original CBS "French Paradox" program with Morley Safer and subsequently became one of the most influential figures in the debate about wine and health.

**WL:** What first piqued your interest in wine and health?

**CE:** In 1988, after many years' experience as a cardiovascular epidemiologist, which means working with factors in the population that lead to heart disease, I joined the Framingham Heart Study. This is a medical survey of more than 10,000 Framingham residents, which was begun in 1948 to identify potential causes of cardiovascular disease.

I found a report compiled in 1974 which pointed out that the major risk factors for coronary heart disease are high cholesterol, high blood pressure and smoking. The report also revealed that those who abstained from alcohol had double the risk of dying from a coronary than those who drank moderately. This information was suppressed at the time by the National Institute of Health.

They said any reference to alcohol would probably increase abuse.

**WL:** What are the caveats when recommending that people drink wine for health reasons?

**CE:** You should drink wine if you enjoy it. I don't think people should necessarily drink for health reasons. However, the pattern of drinking is particularly important. Say your ideal consumption is 14 glasses of wine weekly and you consume them all on one day, you get no protection and potentially great harm. A little consumption every day is by far the healthiest pattern.

**WL:** What are the key ingredients of wine as a health aid?

**CE:** The most important single ingredient in wine is alcohol, which raises the "good" cholesterol. That is why, in terms of cholesterol, people who have a glass of wine daily — or a beer or shot of whisky — have about the same increase in their level of "good" cholesterol.

People say, well, what about the polyphenols that are only in wine? I'm convinced we're beginning to demonstrate the advantages of wine over other types of beverages, but the problem is we don't have wine drinkers and beer drinkers and spirits drinkers. We have people who drink varying amounts in different patterns. Wine drinkers tend to be healthier in terms of less smoking, more exercise and healthier diet. It's hard to know whether it's the wine that's making them healthier or if it's just that healthier people drink wine.

**WL:** What are the differences between red and white wine?

**CE:** The alcohol effect is about the same. The difference is in the protective polyphenols that come primarily from the skin of the grape. For red wine, you usually crush the grape and leave the juice in contact with the skin for some time. From the skin you absorb a lot of these polyphenols, so red wine contains much higher levels of polyphenols than white wine.

**WL:** Are there differences in the benefits of drinking wine due to gender or age?

**CE:** Most of the health benefits of drinking alcohol are for middle-aged to older men and post-menopausal women. These are the people who are getting into the diseases of aging — coronary heart disease, stroke, dementia and osteoporosis. All of the health problems older people get into seem to be ameliorated to some extent by regular, moderate drinking.

**WL:** What is the role of food when consumed with wine?

**CE:** We know that if you drink one or two glasses of wine with a meal over say, one to one and a half hours, the blood alcohol level goes up only half as much as if you drank without eating. Any type



of food — even if you're having a cocktail and are munching some peanuts — will slow down absorption and the rise in blood alcohol, so you're being protected against some of the toxic effects.

**WL:** Why is the government so ambivalent about the health effects of drinking wine?

**CE:** For millennia, wine was considered the healthiest of beverages. Wine and alcohol were part of medical therapy well into the 19th century. What changed at the beginning of the 20th century was that the focus went from the health aspects of wine and alcohol to abuse. The question became are you a drinker or not? If you're a drinker, you're a sot. If you're not, you're healthy.

**WL:** Where does wine fit in a healthy lifestyle?

**CE:** A healthy lifestyle has five essential ingredients. Stay lean, don't get obese. Take exercise regularly. This controls weight and increases "good" cholesterol. Don't smoke. Fortunately, it's no longer socially acceptable to light up in front of someone. Maintain a reasonable diet. These days the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid is, in my opinion, the way to go. Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit. Stay low on saturated fat — total fat is not important; it's the type of fat. The more whole grains the better.

But the fifth most important component of a healthy lifestyle, for those without contraindications to drinking alcohol, is the regular consumption of a small amount of an alcoholic beverage. The most recent Harvard study shows that those who followed the first four healthy lifestyle practices had their risk of having strokes reduced by 40 percent. Those who also consumed one-half to two drinks a day, reduced their risk by 69 percent. If you shouldn't drink for medical or other reasons, don't. If you enjoy a little alcohol, learn how to drink in a healthy fashion.

### Five ingredients for a healthy lifestyle

- Stay lean
- Exercise regularly
- Don't smoke
- Maintain a reasonable diet
- Have a small amount of alcohol regularly, unless you shouldn't drink for medical or other reasons

Source: Dr. Curtis Ellison, professor of medicine and public health at Boston University



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