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## Can low-alcohol wine sparkle?

**New techniques can cut the hangover risk, but what about the fun? We put them to the test on a girls' night in**



(Chris Floyd)

Raise a glass to hangover-free drinking

Gemma Soames

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What if you could sink that standard bottle of wine of a Friday night and not feel the effects? Wouldn't that be the ultimate drinking scenario? Well, it could now be an attainable one. The average alcohol by volume (ABV) level of wine has been creeping up for years. (What percentage alcohol do you think wine is: 11%? 12%? No, these days 13% is the norm, and some new-world reds can even be 15%.) But new processes for removing the alcohol from wine — without stopping the fermentation process — claim to safeguard the taste, which has resulted in the slow but steady increase in availability of (primarily white) wines that, supposedly, taste something similar to their more boozy brothers, but come in at up to 2% lower in the alcohol stakes. That may not sound like much, but it can actually have a profound effect on your inebriation levels.

So do these new low-alcohol wines, typically 9% or lower, present a decent alternative, taste- and fun-wise? I invited four of my white-wine friends round for an evening on the (more) sensible stuff to find out. First under scrutiny was taste, and here, the two rieslings we were trying (Dr Loosen, 7.5%) got a thumbs-down. They tasted as if they'd been saturated with low-calorie sweetener, and were more reminiscent of a nasty pudding wine than the refreshing white we all hankered after. Then there was the lack of feeling. Normally, when that first bottle is cracked open, a tangible sense of relief and a hint of fun fills the room. But we might as well have been drinking lemon barley water for all the fizz this booze gave us. As the evening progressed, it became harder to keep everyone drinking it. My friends didn't like it — and neither did they like what it wasn't doing for them.

I continued on the low-alcohol wine all night, so I didn't get as drunk as I normally do. No slightly fuzzy feeling hit me post-dinner — even though I had consumed damn near a bottle of the stuff. I felt totally sober, albeit with an intense sugary rush. But the next day, the effects of the lower alcohol content really came into their own. I didn't have a headache and felt as if I'd had only one glass rather than a whole bottle.

For those who would like to lower their weekly units, and for whom that feeling of being a little bit tipsy is not a vital part of the evening, these wines may well prove handy. And I'm sure, as the low-alcohol production techniques are developed further, more brands will get in on the game and taste will improve. But, for me, it won't be the same. I like wine, and I also like what it does for me. However convincing these new lower percentages might be, I'd rather have the headache if it means I've had the

fun.

### Just what is low-alcohol wine? Bob Tyrer explains

The alcohol in wine comes from the sugar in the grapes. Abundant sunshine equals ripe grapes equals lots of sugar equals high alcohol, unless the winemaker intervenes. Alcohol can be kept low by stopping the fermentation and leaving sugar in the wine. That's how the Germans make their 8.5% sweet wines and the Italians their Moscato d'Asti, 4%.

Another trick is to make wine with slightly underripe grapes — but with the danger of a weakly flavoured and acidic result. Third, alcohol can be removed through “reverse osmosis”, which I won't even try to explain. Fourth (and probably most common), wine is simply watered down before bottling.

So why bother? Mucking about with wine takes the heart out of it. We don't have to drink 14% blockbusters. There are plenty of naturally lowish-alcohol bottles around. Try the understated yet invigorating [Côte Tariquet Chardonnay-Sauvignon 2008 \(11%, £7.95, \[thewinesociety.com\]\(#\)\)](#). This is at the upper edge of “low alcohol”, but there's a big difference between its 11% and a typical 14% chardonnay. Chapel Down Nectar 2005 (8.5%, £9.50 for 50cl, [ethicalwine.com](#)) is sweet because fermentation has been stopped, but it has a good slash of acidity to keep it refreshing.

Or try something entirely different: Poiré Granit is a dry and ethereal 3.5%. Yes, it's made from pears, but from 300-year-old trees by the former sommelier Eric Bordelet. Think of it as a brilliant, low-alcohol champagne, then the price doesn't seem so stiff (£14.99, [smilinggrape.com](#)).

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