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By Steve Heimoff

I suppose I shouldn't complain whenever people are buying wine, even when it's bad wine, because after all, drinking bad wine is better than not drinking wine at all…I think. But I do like to think that the quality curve of what consumers are buying goes consistently in one direction: up. Lately, though, I'm beginning to wonder if the country's wine taste isn't heading in the wrong direction.

This concern on my part started earlier this year, when I first became aware of the Moscato boomlet. Someone at the magazine heard about it before I did. I looked into it, and discovered that, yes, there is something of a Moscato trend happening–but at such a low level that it was below my radar. I'm pretty good at wine trends, but I can't know everything; most of what I know is about premium wines. The Moscato thing was more about the bottom of the supermarket shelf–not normally a location I'm concerned with.

And yet, there it was: suddenly the gigantic wine companies are rushing to buy Moscato, or bud their vineyards over to it, in order to satisfy this burgeoning demand. What of the wines themselves? From what I've tasted, they're simple, sugary sweet, and generally cost less than $10.

At around the same time, last summer, I started hearing about another boomlet, this time in sweet red wines. Certain key people mentioned it to me. Then, I began getting tasting samples. They usually had words like "delicious" and "sweet" in their proprietary names. The accompanying paperwork seldom mentioned what the grape varieties were, but it hardly mattered. The wines were boringly sweet to the point of insipid. But I did my job, reviewed them as assiduously as anything else, and, based on my tasting experiences, blind, routinely gave them scores ranging from 22 (undrinkable) to the low and mid-80s.

Somewhere in the back of my mind since last summer I've thought, "What's up with these sweet red and white wines?" but I never really developed it. It was one of those inchoate notions that doesn't go anywhere, until something external pops up and pushes it along. Well, that external thing finally happened two days ago, in the form of this article from the San Francisco Chronicle, entitled *"New drinkers get crush on sweet reds."*
[In the online version, they changed the headline to
"Beginner drinkers get a crush on sweet red wines."
This is due to the Editors' Full Employment Act, whereby print editors are not online editors, and vice versa, meaning each gets to write his own headline.]

The article says the popularity of these wines is with younger drinkers, and quotes a marketing manager that it's mainly in the southern and midwestern states. I'm not surprised at either assertion. Younger drinkers, having bad taste, would naturally gravitate toward sweet wines. And I suspect that, when it comes to epicurean things such as wine and cuisine, standards are lower in the rural, Bible Belt parts of the country than in the big cities. Maybe these sweet wines pair well with a Hardee's Double Bacon Cheese Thickburger and a White Castle Chocolate Shake, which together contain 3,000 calories. I wouldn't know.

I do know all about the theory that beginning drinkers start with the cheap stuff, then move upward to fine wine. I did that myself. But the reason I'm thinking that things may be moving in the wrong direction–devolving, as it were–is this: If these beginning drinkers were starting with inexpensive dry wine–and there's a boatload of it out there, red and white–that would be fine. They could get into wine via (let's say) a nice Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling for 9 bucks, then move on up to whatever.

But to start with sweet insipid wines? I don't see how that ever evolves. Once these people are addicted to syrup, it's awfully hard to get them to like anything actually dry. They'd find it "sour" or "bitter" or just "Eeew." That's why I'm talking about devolution. Let's face it, the country is dumbing down–we all know it. More and more people believe in creationism, that the world is 5,700 years old and dinosaurs used to play with little human babies. They think proven scientific fact is just somebody's opinion. A lot of them don't drink alcohol (either because they're former abusers, or they think it's against their religion), but I bet that, of those who do, they prefer these cheap, sweet wines to anything decent.