

Idahoans appreciate their wine

by Cady McGovern

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If you've lived in Idaho long, you know the state is gung-ho on promoting local goods and services. Campaigns like Buy Idaho, Idaho Preferred and Think Boise First remind us frequently that, population-wise, we may be small potatoes, but potatoes aren't all we have to offer.

So it came as a bit of a shock to me when I read in the coverage of the Idaho Business Review Breakfast Series on Idaho wines that local wines make up just 5 percent of Idaho's wine market. With all the "buy local" organizations in this state, we only buy 5 percent of our wine locally? How the heck does that work? As it turns out, Idahoans have a thirst for wine that Idaho's wine producers come nowhere near quenching.

"People drink a lot of wine in Idaho," says Moya Shatz Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission. "We don't make enough wine, even if Idahoans want to drink it all." Dolsby says Idaho wineries produce about 200,000 cases of wine per year. In a standard 750 ml bottle size, that works out to roughly 237,800 gallons.

But according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Idahoans drink about 8.6 million gallons of wine each year. That means Idaho's producing only about 3 percent of the wine (by volume) Idahoans are enjoying every year.

And that's not even the craziest part: Not only do Idahoans imbibe 8.6 million gallons of wine per year, but Idaho is also the No. 2 consumer of wine per capita in the United States, out-swilled by only Washington, D.C.

It is possible NIAAA's data isn't a perfect reflection of consumption. After all, Idaho has a large Mormon population (26 percent according to the church and 23 percent according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life), and that religion prohibits alcohol consumption. In fact, the prohibition specifically mentions "wine or strong drink."

The NIAAA report measures "apparent alcohol consumption," which comes from sales tax receipt data for states that provide it (that includes Idaho) and shipment data from the beverage industry for the other states.

The report cautions that several factors could result in inaccuracies. Cross-border sales could skew the data. Excise taxes for wine are higher in most of Idaho's neighboring states than in Idaho, according to the Federation of Tax Administrators, but the differences don't seem outrageous.

Tourists' consumption of alcohol (the report specifically singles out D.C.) can also be a factor. I suppose the Hollywood types who frequent Idaho's resort towns probably partake of an extra glass or two (or three) while they're on vacation, but I can't see our tourists' wine drinking habits boosting us all the way to No. 2.

Idaho's consumption data for other types of alcohol doesn't make the picture any clearer. Idahoans still seem to love beer more than wine, drinking about 29 million gallons per year. But consumption of

29 million gallons of beer only makes Idaho the 39th biggest per capita consumer of beer. Idaho ties with Hawaii as the 31st biggest per capita consumer of spirits, with Idahoans drinking about 2.1 million gallons of spirits per year.

As far as our surrounding states go, every one but Utah has higher per capita rates of consumption for beer and spirits than Idaho.

So what makes Idaho the wine-savoring powerhouse it is today? How is it that Idahoans love wine more than Californians, Oregonians and Washingtonians, whose own vineyards yield much of the grapes U.S. producers use to make the wines that grace tables nationwide?

I don't have a science-based answer to those questions. I do, however, have a theory: I think that, in a state whose constitution promotes temperance, Idahoans simply view wine as a more socially acceptable libation than beer or liquor.

After all, in the wasted days of youth, the debate over the vehicle by which one should get plastered is usually not cabernet vs. chardonnay, but rather Keystone Ice vs. Pancho Villa. Wine has a certain cachet, whether from price or flavor, that makes it a beverage rather than a vehicle to intoxication.

Which is not, of course, to say wine won't get you drunk. The term "wino" didn't spring from the primordial ooze.

But I'm inclined to agree with Bittercreek Alehouse and Red Feather Lounge Founding Partner Dave Krick, who said at the Breakfast Series, "I don't know many people that abuse \$80 bottles of wine, but I know plenty who abuse \$5 bottles of vodka." I'll drink to that; pour me a Snake River Valley pinot.