

The pleasure matters as much as the risk

scritto da Fabio Piccoli | 20 Febbraio 2025



As public health messages intensify against alcohol, the debate over balancing risk and pleasure grows. The Economist argues that excessive warnings might backfire, while scientific studies suggest moderate drinking has benefits. This article explores the cultural, social, and statistical aspects of alcohol consumption, questioning whether demonization is the right approach.

The more I try to stay away from the topic of “wine and health,” the more I encounter daily **provocations** that push me to add evaluations to a problem with countless facets.

The latest provocation—this time, in my view, a positive one—comes from a fascinating article in *The Economist* (one of the most historical and authoritative magazines globally)

titled: "Health warnings about alcohol give only half the story." But it was the subtitle that further intrigued me: "The **pleasure** matters as much as the risk."

The article highlights how "with increasing evidence of alcohol-related **harm**, public health messages have become more severe." The WHO categorically states that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption. U.S. guidelines declare that those who do not drink should not start "for any reason." In 2023, Canada published new guidelines recommending a maximum of two drinks per week to remain in the "low-risk" category, compared to the previous 15 drinks for men and 10 for women.

At the same time, *The Economist* questions whether excessive **severity** could be counterproductive.

"If a public health advisory seems absurd—such as the WHO's implication that even a sip of wine during communion is dangerous—people might start to doubt other messages."

"While there is unanimity that excessive alcohol consumption is very harmful," the article continues, "there is less agreement regarding moderate **indulgence**." In December, the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded, with "moderate certainty," that "moderate consumption (up to two beers per day for men and one for women, as indicated by U.S. guidelines) is associated with benefits rather than harms. Cardiovascular health benefits seemed to outweigh the risks of cancer and other diseases, though this effect quickly disappeared with higher **consumption**."

Yet, while the WHO emphasizes that no level of alcohol intake is "safe," this is only part of the **issue**. If we applied the same principle absolutely, we would also have to avoid flying, crossing the street, or even walking, since every activity carries a certain degree of **risk**.

The reality is that we constantly balance risks and benefits

in our **daily** choices. Moderate alcohol consumption is not just a statistical issue but also a cultural and social one: sharing a good wine at dinner, sipping a beer with friends, celebrating with a toast. The **conviviality** and pleasure derived from these experiences cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant.

Pierre Bourdieu—a French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher (who passed away in 2002), considered one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century in the field of social sciences—emphasized in his book *Distinction* that consumption (including alcohol) is not just a **physiological** need or a habit but an experience loaded with social and cultural meanings. Drinking a glass of wine at dinner or during a celebration is often a ritual that strengthens social bonds and personal identity.

Often, the pleasure of drinking lies not just in the **taste** or the effect but in conviviality and the celebration of life.

Many sociological and anthropological studies highlight how well-being is not just the absence of **risks** but the ability to find pleasure, meaning, and relationships in everyday experiences. Prohibiting or demonizing activities that provide pleasure, if done in moderation, can deprive people of moments of joy and satisfaction.

If we still want to rely on **statistics** and risks, the new Canadian guidelines suggest that drinking up to six drinks per week increases the risk of alcohol-related premature death to 1 in 100. It's a statistic worth considering, especially when compared to other everyday risks—such as being hit by a car (1 in 470 in the U.S.)—which highlights the need to put the issue into context.

The crucial point is **moderation** and awareness. For those who consume alcohol excessively, reducing it is a wise choice. For those who drink in moderation, demonizing a glass of wine at

dinner risks turning into a moralistic rather than a scientific stance. Society has always accepted certain compromises between safety and **pleasure**: wine, like many other things, is part of this equation.

Recognizing the value of **pleasure** in consumption does not mean ignoring the risks but balancing them with more nuanced and realistic messages. For example, public education campaigns that encourage **moderation** without guilt-tripping could be far more effective than radical approaches.

Read also: [Why wine should not fear the “mindful well-being” trend](#)

Key points

1. **The Economist** argues that extreme warnings on alcohol might weaken public trust in health recommendations.
2. WHO claims no alcohol level is “safe”, but studies suggest moderate drinking may have cardiovascular benefits.
3. **Social and cultural factors make alcohol consumption more than just a health statistic.**
4. **Demonizing moderate drinking** risks becoming a moral stance rather than a scientific argument.
5. **Effective public health** campaigns should encourage moderation without creating unnecessary fear.