

# Skyrocketing prices, Gen Z avoiding alcohol, health trends: John Gillespie of Wine Opinions assesses the American wine crisis

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*The latest Wine Opinions report from March 2026 reveals shifting dynamics in the US wine market. John Gillespie explains how Gen Z's preference for practical RTDs, economic pressures, and health trends challenge wine consumption. True market drivers remain older adults, while the industry must adapt to demands for accessible prices and formats rather than endless premiumization.*

When discussing the wine crisis, it is often a matter of

perception, such as Generation Z avoiding alcohol in favor of beer and mixology, and the health trend suggesting even a glass of wine is harmful. **But how much of this narrative is based on real data and how much is merely a story we are telling ourselves?** To understand this, we interviewed John Gillespie, founder of Wine Opinions and one of the most lucid and long-standing observers of the United States wine market. **Gillespie's journey with wine began almost by chance, as a university student in New York working as an editor for a trade magazine without specific oenological knowledge but with great talent as a writer.** It was the mid-Seventies. Shortly after, he was hired by a public relations agency managing the communication of the CIVB, the Bordeaux Wine Council, for the American market. **At the same time, he worked on a French government program dedicated to everyday wines, which was exactly the opposite of the Bordeaux spectrum.** He later moved to California, where he became the communications director for a large conglomerate controlling several wineries. **In 1995 he was called to lead the Wine Market Council, a non-profit association dedicated exclusively to researching the American wine consumer.** He remained there for twenty-two years, traveling the country extensively to present data to the trade and the press.

It was exactly during those presentations that the idea for Wine Opinions was born, which he founded in 2005. **Gillespie shared with us the results of a survey conducted by Wine Opinions in January 2026 on 1,351 American alcoholic beverage consumers, published on March 30.** According to the report, in the 21 to 39 age group, 30% claim to consume wine frequently, compared to 23% for beer and 28% for spirits. At first glance, it would seem that young people prefer wine over beer and spirits. Is this the case?

Those percentages refer to people who already drink alcohol. They do not represent the generation as a whole. From our perspective, most 21 to 39-year-olds do not drink at

all. **Among those who drink wine in that bracket, occasional and sporadic consumers are more than double the frequent ones.** The true wine drinker, the one who drives the market, is between 40 and 59 years old or older.

The 21 to 39 age group, however, drives the consumption of RTDs, ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages. With RTDs, you buy a single format, take it to the beach, and consume it wherever and whenever you want. A bottle of wine equals roughly five glasses and requires a goblet, opening, and the right occasion. **With three dollars you can buy a can of RTD, but you cannot buy a decent bottle of wine, creating a triple factor of format convenience, quantity, and cost.** The critical point is that 14% of those who drink wine less frequently cite RTDs as a direct alternative. **According to Wine Opinions, this is a signal that the market is changing its selection logic.** Are RTDs and low or zero-alcohol options structurally eroding wine consumption occasions, or are they complementary behaviors?

RTDs are clearly gaining ground, while for no or low-alcohol options, the issue is more nuanced: the consumer seeking alternatives to wine for health reasons was perhaps not a major wine drinker to begin with. **But the most important signal comes from elsewhere, as among those who drink wine less frequently, the main motivation is not health but the desire to reduce alcohol consumption in general, which is a response to widespread cultural pressure.** The spending trend analyses reported by the research show that more than half of the respondents across all age groups purchase wine under 20 dollars, and wines under 15 dollars are particularly concentrated in the 21 to 39 age bracket. **But weren't we talking about premiumization and about drinking less but better?** In recent years, the term premiumization has become a mantra, with consumers wanting to spend more and move up in category. The industry responded by raising prices and launching new products in the high-end segments. **But I would like to know of another consumer goods sector that succeeds by**

**raising prices year after year, because it simply does not exist.** What we experienced was a collective hallucination and today's data confirms it.

In fact, the report shows that among those spending less per bottle, the primary reason is that they cannot afford to spend as much as before. It is not about finding better wines elsewhere or stopping appreciating wine, it has simply become too expensive. **In this context, Gallo, the Californian giant that recently acquired the Whiny Baby brand, launched its entry-level wines in 250ml Tetra Paks in four-packs.** If Gallo is doing these two things simultaneously, it means they have understood where the consumer is heading, which is towards the practical format, the accessible price, and the single portion. **It will be very interesting to see how everything will proceed.** Do you think health consciousness is changing the cultural legitimacy of wine as a daily choice?

Let's think about all the things we do every day that involve a risk, like going out without sunscreen, eating a hamburger at McDonald's, riding a bicycle in busy cities, or swimming in the open sea. Each of these things has a risk profile. **Yet, they are all things we do without even thinking too much about it.** Life is a series of choices in which we weigh the risks and pleasures and decide. Wine is one of these choices. **If we put it on an equal footing with all the other things we do, it stops being the cause of all evil and becomes what it has always been, an adult and conscious choice.**

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## **Key points**

- 1. The American wine crisis stems mostly from a communication problem,** while young people increasingly prefer RTD beverages.
- 2. Real wine market drivers are consumers aged 40 to 59, as**

most Generation Z individuals avoid drinking entirely.

3. **Premiumization is described as a collective hallucination**, since consumers actively demand **lower prices** and accessible formats.
4. **Health trends reduce consumption, but the main goal is lowering overall alcohol intake** due to strong cultural pressure.