

Wellness

Under the influence

Wine-lovers, read this and weep: we're no longer just drinking the good stuff, we're soaking in it. **Anne Fullerton** tries vinotherapy.



I BELIEVE red wine is good for my health for the same reason I trust my horoscope: not because of compelling evidence but because I want to believe. As someone who regularly enjoys a glass of wine with dinner, followed by three more, it's in my personal interest to imagine every sip is packed with skin-plumping, heart-fortifying antioxidants.

"Grapes contain a high concentration of antioxidants called polyphenols, which are great for the skin," says Silvia Barnett from Aire Ancient Baths (beaire.com), a high-end bathhouse in New York. She might be right but it's hard not to feel faintly ridiculous about marinating in a 17th-century Venetian well filled with tempranillo. Which is what I'm about to do.

"I'll be back in a moment," says an attendant, leaving me alone in the candlelit glow of Aire's subterranean chamber.

Vinotherapy sounds like a bacchanalian cult ritual – the soft lighting, black-clad staff and soundtrack of New Age instrumentals certainly add to that effect – but there's nothing debauched about bathing in wine. Rather, it's being touted by its proponents as the latest cutting-edge treatment for everything from sluggish circulation to cellulite and wrinkles.

When American basketball player Amar'e Stoudemire posted an Instagram photo of himself sitting in a bath of red wine in 2014, later telling reporters it was part of his post-surgery recovery, it was viewed as a kooky, bourgeois indulgence. But since then it's become the spa treatment de jour, especially in wine regions such as Bordeaux, Rioja and Sonoma, where wineries can make use of by-products such as grape skin, pips and vines.

French beauty brand Caudalie pioneered the cosmetic use of grapes in the late 1990s but Greek physician Hippocrates was using a wine solution to treat external injuries as far back as the fourth century BCE. The Spartans even bathed newborns in the stuff, though this was, admittedly, to kill the weak. As you'd imagine, modern-day vinotherapy is slightly more sophisticated (and not endorsed for infants).

The therapy is based on the theory that resveratrol, the red-grape polyphenol that supports heart health, also reduces the free radicals that cause lines.

"We created a formula that would have all of the anti-ageing properties, colour, look and feel of wine but didn't have the alcohol component," explains Barnett. (That's right, there's no sipping the bathwater.) "From a cosmetic standpoint, alcohol wasn't going to be beneficial for the skin."

With its exposed brick walls, high vaulted ceilings and historical finishes (like my well-

turned tub), Aire Ancient Baths feels like the kind of exotic, hidden oasis that a *Game of Thrones* character would bring their lover to for a clandestine rendezvous. White-robed patrons walk its marble floors in a hushed reverie, while Moroccan-style lamps cast just enough light to let you navigate the maze of enticing blue plunge pools.

The bathhouse is located in upmarket TriBeCa, an area that boasts baby yoga, lunchbreak cryotherapy sessions and stores selling "couture" leggings with triple-digit price tags – but it feels centuries away from the outside world.

After drinking mint tea and signing the health and safety waiver, which contains a curious "no public displays of affection" clause, I'm asked to change into my swimsuit and fluffy robe. The word "swimsuit" is emphasised in a way that suggests some past guests have veered uncomfortably close to Graeco-Roman tradition.

I spend the next 45 minutes floating in each of the pools – hot, cold and ice baths – except the tepidarium (warm bath), which contains a couple conspicuously flouting the display-of-affection rule, before making my way to the vinotherapy room.

As the clover-shaped well fills with "wine" (a solution that smells more like grapes), I snack on the complimentary cheese platter and gaze at the artificial vines hanging overhead. Over the next half-hour – the optimal time to absorb polyphenols, I'm told – I receive a relaxing head massage and start to understand the monk-like peace radiating from the other patrons. The three-hour treatment also includes a grapeseed oil massage and I depart feeling like an off-duty empress.

In the days after my treatment, I don't notice any major difference in my skin tone but I do feel more relaxed. Even better, I have a good story to share with friends over wine at dinner – and, let's face it, that's the best kind of vinotherapy there is. ●

Try it here...

Forget taking the waters, these spas are all about taking the wines.

BARNBOUGLE SPA

📍 *Bridport, Tasmania*

Soak in a local vintage at Barnbogle Spa (barnbogle.com.au), an hour's drive north-east from Launceston. The three-hour experience begins with a vinotherapy bath and includes a jojoba body polish and thermal face mask.

SPA VINOThÉRAPIE, LES SOURCES DES CAUDALIE

📍 *Bordeaux, France*

Founded in 1999 by Mathilde Thomas, the brains behind luxury beauty brand Caudalie, this is the original vinotherapy spa (sources-caudalie.com). It puts you in the heart of Bordeaux's wine country, to be scrubbed, pampered and massaged in an idyllic setting.

YUNESSUN SPA RESORT

📍 *Hakone, Japan*

More theme park than spa, this unconventional establishment (yunessun.com) takes the *onsen* (hot-spring bath) to the next level with red wine, green tea and even ramen pools. The water flows out of a huge novelty wine bottle at the pool's edge and there's a wine-pouring ceremony several times a day.

CAVAS WINE LODGE

📍 *Mendoza, Argentina*

In Mendoza wine country, at the foot of the Andes, the five-star Cavas Wine Lodge (cavaswinelodge.com) offers vino-based body treatments such as a crushed malbec scrub and wine wrap and vinotherapy baths for couples.