Living Revolution, Drinking Revolution: Assuring Wine Quality and Safety in Burgundy during the 1790s

Rod Phillips

In 1791 the French army set out the rations that volunteers should receive when they were billeted with private citizens. In addition to food (mainly bread and meat) hosts were to provide wine, beer, or cider, and volunteers billeted in Burgundy would of course expect to receive wine. In the fall of 1792, François Bertrand, a tinsmith living in Seurre, a commune near Beaune, was billeting a detachment of volunteers when he made an egregious enological error. He served them wine with their meal, but the wine was spoiled (*gâté*) – so badly spoiled that the soldiers declared they would rather "irrigate the earth with it than drink it." They took their complaint to the Société Populaire of nearby Saint-Jean-de-Losne, and the Society called in expert tasters (*experts dégustateurs*), who declared the wine was "of a nature to be harmful to health."

It is not clear what was wrong with the wine. Eighteenth-century wines were not what *we* would think of as delicious because they were generally oxydized, maderized, and tainted by smelly yeasts and dirty barrels. Even at the time and given contemporary taste preferences, many wines might have been unpleasant to drink, but they were not harmful to health. Yet that was the assessment of the expert tasters, which tells us the wine must have been pretty awful. We might think that it was a silly thing for François Bertrand to do – to serve bad wine to volunteers who, he might have thought, should have been thankful to have any wine at all.

But the Société Populaire was not amused. They referred the case to the Tribunal Criminel in Paris, where Bertrand was tried and convicted for "his greed and egoism, putting his own vile interests above the wellbeing of our brave soldiers and, by extension, jeopardizing their success in battle and the survival of the Republic."[1] By this relentless logic, serving bad wine to soldiers became an act of treason and Bertrand was sentenced to death.

Rod Phillips is Professor of History at Carleton University, Ottawa, where he teaches courses on the French Revolution and the history of alcohol and food. He is the author of several books on wine, including: *Wine: A Social and Cultural History of the Drink that Changed our Lives* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2018); *The Wines of Canada* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2017); *9000 Years of Wine: A World History* (Whitecap Books, 2017); *French Wine: A History* (University of California Press, 2016); *Alcohol: A History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014, foreign translations); and *A Short History of Wine* (Penguin UK, 2000; Harper Collins US, 2001, foreign translations). He is currently writing books on the wines of southwest France and editing the wine records of the priest of Volnay (Burgundy) in the 1700s. He is Editor of a volume on food in Early Modern Europe (Routledge, 2020). He also writes on current wine issues for the international wine media and judges in wine competitions.

[1] Dijon, Archives Départementales de la Côte d'Or (hereafter ADCO) L1027, Jugement du Tribunal Criminel Révolutionnaire, 26 Floréal An II.

You might say that the Revolutionaries took their wine seriously. And in many respects wine was a serious matter in France during the Revolution. Noelle Plack has argued that wine became one of the most tangible deliverables of the Revolution. When the French drank wine, she argues, they were consuming liberty. Drinking wine with one's fellow citizens was a sort of republican communion.[2]

In this paper I'm not considering wine at the national or symbolic level, but from provincial and prosaic perspectives. I want to look at the issue of wine quality in Burgundy during the Revolution, as part of a general work on Burgundy – the wine and the place. If wine was a serious matter in France generally, it was no less so in Burgundy. By the eighteenth century Burgundy was known for producing some of the best – meaning some of the most expensive – wines in France. Some of Burgundy's wine villages had gained national reputation and their wines regularly ended up in the royal cellars at Versailles and on the tables of nobles and wealthy bourgeois all over France.

Vines had encroached steadily on arable lands during the 1700s and the economies of more and more of Burgundy's villages had become dependent on wine production. Although much of the vineyard land was owned by secular proprietors, the Church was a major player – especially the order of Cistercians, which owned many of the region's most prestigious vineyards.

In the two or three centuries before the Revolution, two broad methods of classifying wine had emerged in France. One was geographical, where wines from particular regions, notably Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne, had become recognized as superior to other wine-producing regions. Districts and towns within these regions and then individual vineyards won recognition – their cachet expressed in the prices they fetched. On Bordeaux's Left Bank there was already, by 1745, a ranking of wines that was essentially the same as the famous Classification constructed two centuries later, in 1855.

The other classification was by quality. The better, more expensive wines were called *vins fins*, *vins de cru*, sometimes *vins bourgeois*. Wines that were lower in quality and price and intended for mass consumption were known as *vins de boisson* or *vins communs*. These were the *vins ordinaires* of the time.

Of course there were parallel distinctions in other commodities. There was white bread and brown bread, there were luxury textiles and common textiles. Like the distinctions among the different qualities of bread, like the distinctions among textiles, the distinctions among wines, mirrored the social hierarchy of the Ancien Régime, and perforce attracted the attention of leveling politicians during the Revolution.

Like white bread and silk, fine wine was the preserve of aristocrats and their ilk, who filled their cellars with barrels and bottles. In Burgundy, the cellar of the Duc de Tavanes was mainly stocked with wines from Burgundy and Médoc (in Bordeaux) and the cellar of the President of the Parlement de Bourgogne held mostly local wines, from prestigious Burgundy vineyards such as Chambertin, Clos de Vougeot, and Montrachet.[3]

There was a reaction against such fine wines in the first years of the Revolution, as there was against fine bread and fine textiles. In the Year II local authorities were instructed to draw up inventories of the fine wines in the houses of individuals identified as enemies of the Republic – émigrés and those convicted of political crimes. "Liqueurs, foreign wines, and fine wines of all

[2] Plack, "Liberty, Equality and Taxation," 5–22.
[3] Phillips, *French Wine*, 118–19.

kinds that the desire for luxury of their former owners had brought together" were to be listed so that they might be "used advantageously in exchange for basic necessities."[4]

So fine wine was out, but what was in? As it gradually emerged, the aim was to promote wines that held a middle position: to marginalize fine wines and eliminate poor wines from the market and to ensure that French citizens had access to a broad category of honest wines that could be produced easily and sold inexpensively.

The price part of this aim was accomplished by the suppression of the tax on wine in May 1791. What is less known are the attempts to define and ensure the quality of this now much more affordable wine. The aim of the authorities during the Revolution was to ensure that all wines on the market were good quality and safe to drink – "safe to drink" not because poor quality wine was not actually unsafe to drink, but because health was an important reference for wine at the time, as we saw in the case of the unfortunate François Bertrand that began this paper.

The association of wine and health was long-standing and often based on the principles of the humoral system, still in the eighteenth century the principal paradigm of understanding the human body and health. When in 1395 Duke Philip the Bold of Burgundy banned the Gamay grape variety from parts of Burgundy, he said that the "wine of Gamay is of such a nature that it is very harmful to humans, such that a number of people who have used it in the past have been affected by serious illnesses, we have heard." In contrast, wine made from Pinot Noir, the dominant red grape in Burgundy, then and now, was "the most suitable for nourishing and sustaining human beings."[5] Like other foods, then, wine was closely associated with health, and the Revolutionary authorities had to factor that into their evaluation of wine.

Insisting on the quality and safety of all wine on the market became policy during the Revolution – an important shift because there was little interest in regulating quality under the Ancien Régime. Wine was what it was, year by year, and the prices that brokers, merchants, tavern-keepers, and eventually consumers paid reflected its perceived quality, as well as its abundance or scarcity. The incentive to make decent wine was financial: any vigneron who made poor wine could expect to get little for it unless there was a real shortage.

A sense of the importance of quality comes from Beaune in the Year III. There, the municipal council decided there should be a wine market in early November and they nominated commissaires to taste the wine that was to be offered for sale. But they warned that "individuals who bring wines with bad flavours or weak wines will be condemned."[6] Condemned to what was not specified, but the threat probably kept faulty wines away.[7] François Bertrand committed his crime of serving bad wine in Seurre, only twenty-five kilometers from Beaune, and it is likely that such a sensational case would have become well known to those in the wine trade. Perhaps he was a salutary example of the fate that might befall a purveyor of bad wine.

Good quality wine became the order of the day and during the Revolution prizes were offered to vignerons who excelled in their work. In the wine village of Savigny-lès-Beaune awards were given for such achievements as "having vines perfectly cultivated, with no diseased plants and with an abundant crop," for being "an excellent grower, hard-working, and choosing

[4] Dijon, ADCO L544 Subsistances. 19 Germinal, An II. There is an inventory of wines in the cellars of émigrés, suspects, and refractory priests in Bourg-en-Bresse: Bourg-en-Bresse, Archives Départementales de l'Ain 10L 98,14 vendémiaire An IV. Thanks to Carine Renoux for bringing this to my attention.

[5] Beaune, Archives Municipales de Beaune (hereafter AM Beaune), Carton 94/7.

[6] Beaune, AM Beaune1D-2 Registre de délibérations du Conseil municipal de Beaune, 22 Vendémiaire An II.

[7] Beaune, AM Beaune 1D-2, Registre de deliberations, 22 Vendémiaire An II.

his vines well," and being "a good grower and a good son, taking care of his very old father who was one of the best vignerons in Savigny."[8]

Individuals got engaged in the drive to improve wine quality. In the Year III one André Gentil, a former member of the Academy of Sciences of Dijon, wrote a memoire that included a way of moving from "the merely mechanical way of making wine" to one using "science, based on the combined principles of chemistry and physics and my experiments and observations." His wines were made from common grapes and were, he claimed, "similar to the best wines of Burgundy, Champagne, and Bordeaux."[9]

Just as had been done far earlier in 1395, a distinction was made between Gamay and Pinot Noir. (It must be said in defense of Gamay that it can make really excellent wine, but most professionals would say that it does not reach the heights of the best Pinot Noir.) The distinction was a bit awkward during the Revolution, because it echoed the invidious classification of the Ancien Régime. But no one could argue that wine made from Pinot Noir fetched higher prices than wine made from Gamay. A case before a *juge de paix* in the village of Meursault in 1793 revolved around the price that one Françoise Blondeau had paid for wine that year and the year before. She asked the court to appoint assessors to taste the wines and judge their quality because the barrel she had bought in 1792 was a fifty-fifty blend of Gamay and Pinot Noir and the one she bought in 1793 and paid much more for was sold as one hundred percent Pinot Noir. She was not convinced and wanted an expert opinion.[10]

Quality wine was one thing, healthy wine was another, and the effect of wine on health was a preoccupation of those who regulated wine. To this end, the sale of very young wines was prohibited. Beaune's municipal council complained that some people were selling new wine before it was filtered and clarified. "Considering that the distribution of this beverage in this state is infinitely harmful to the health," the sale of wine before 10 Brumaire each year was forbidden.[11] That is the beginning of November, about four or five weeks after the usual harvest. (The most popular primeur wine today, Beaujolais Nouveau, which is made from Gamay, is released on the third Thursday in November each year.)

Citizen Gentil, who, we noted earlier, proposed a new way of making wine, promoted his wines as not only being good quality, but as being healthy: "They will be sought after by the inhabitants of the north where they work effectively on the nerves, strengthen the stomach, help digestion, revive the spirits, and increase the flow of blood in regions that are very cold and damp." He foresaw a good market in Russia, "where they drink our wines as we drink water, and our eau-de-vie as we drink wine." Because it travels well by land or water, he wrote, his wine would be sought after in the Midi and America because people will be assured that it reaches them with all its character intact.[12]

Health also came into play when prestigious vineyards belonging to the Church were auctioned off as *biens nationaux*. We can imagine the challenges that copywriters had to face. The value of these properties lay not simply in the area of land and number of vines but in the fact that they produced wines considered very fine and therefore very expensive – wines that only the wealthy could afford. How does one convey that, so as to get the value of the property at auction without referring to them in terms that were no longer acceptable?

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[8] Dijon, ADCO L465, Fête d'agriculture.
[9] Dijon, Archives Municipales de Dijon (hereafter AM Dijon) 3F/27, 12 Brumaire An III.
[10] Dijon, ADCO L3735, Juge de Paix, Meursault, 14 juin 1793.
[11] Beaune, AM Beaune 1D-6, Registre de deliberations, 25 Fructidor An VI.
[12] Dijon, AM Dijon 3F/27, Registre de deliberations, 12 Brumaire An III.

A case in point was the prospectus for the La Romanée vineyard in the Year II – the vineyard later called Domaine de Romanée Conti (and known to wine aficionados as DRC). The vineyard was described as "having the most advantageous [location] for the perfect ripening of the grapes; higher to the west than the east, it receives the first rays of the sun in all seasons, being thus imbued with the strength of the greatest heat of the day." As for the wine, it was "the most excellent of all those of the Côte d'Or and even of all the vineyards of the French Republic." It had a "brilliant and velvety colour, its ardor and its aroma charm all the senses." If well kept, it was at its best in its eighth or tenth year, when "it is then a balm for the elderly, the weak, and the disabled, and will restore life to the dying."[13]

The wine policy of the Revolutionary authorities in Burgundy seems to have been quite modest: to guarantee an adequate supply of decent, safe wine at an affordable price. In Nivôse Year II all the Gamay wine available in and around Beaune was requisitioned to supply the city.[14] Gamay, which had never disappeared from the region despite Duke Philip's 1395 ordinance, was considered *vin commun*, inferior to the *vin fin* made from Pinot Noir, but still good wine. Its attraction was that it was less expensive. More Gamay was requisitioned, in the Years II and III, for billeted troops.[15]

Wine was clearly considered a staple of the diet, such that people expected to be able to drink it regularly. Beer was very much an outsider in the region: in 1798 when the Beaune city council calculated its tax revenues, its figures were based on the consumption of 14,000 barrels of wine and 200 barrels of beer.[16] The next year, estimated wine consumption was up a thousand barrels to 15,000. Consumption at this level meant that each of Beaune's 10,000 inhabitants had access to 412 liters of wine each year, a little more than a litre a day. But if we subtract some forty percent of the population who were under nineteen, each adult had access to almost two liters of wine a day.

Some must have consumed much more, others much less, but drinking wine daily was clearly an expectation of perhaps most adults. When in 1793 the Minister of War allowed billeters in Burgundy to supply cider or beer to volunteers passing through, because the 1792 harvest had been small and wine prices were high, he was forced to reverse the decision when he was told that substituting cider or beer for wine would "result in disturbances on the part of National Volunteers who wanted their hosts to provide them only with wine."[17]

Wine might have been a staple, but it was a distant second to grain. I have never come across a wine riot, although there is a report of a threatened one, at Meurtigues, near Marseille, in the Year II. The Popular Society complained that the local wine was being exported to other parts of France and it warned that if the wine supply ran out before the next harvest, there could be "a general uprising" by fishermen who relied on it while at sea.[18]

The wine policy of the authorities in the early years of the Revolution were modest and not spectacular – they were simply trying to ensure that citizens had access to a supply of wine that was good quality, safe to drink, and affordable. What is notable is the intervention of the state in the matter of quality. By the end of the eighteenth century, wine was entrenched as a common part of the diet for many French men and women. Although there were widely

[13] Phillips, *French Wine*, 126–27.
[14] Beaune, AM Beaune 1D-2 Registre de délibérations, 1 Nivôse An II.
[15] Ibid., 1D-3 23, Registre de deliberations, Fructidor An III.
[16] Ibid., 1D-7, Registre de deliberations, 14 Fructidor An VII
[17] Dijon ADCO L1027, 26 septembre 1792.
[18] Marseille. Archives Départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, L376, Subsistances, 1792–An VIII. Letter from officiers municipaux. 11 janvier 1793.

recognized quality classifications, nothing was formalized until the Revolution, and even then it was an imprecise designation that defined good quality by negatives: wine should be neither poor and dangerous to health nor so fine that it smacked of aristocracy. This was the wine appropriate for the honest republican citizens.

But there were limits to this levelling exercise. There was no pretense that all wines were the same quality and no effort to make all vignerons sell all their wine at a standard price. There were still inequalities of wealth and people willing to pay more for wines from prestigious districts or regions.

When the Law of the Maximum was applied in Beaune in 1793, top-quality red wines from Volnay and Pommard were priced at 560 to 570 *livres* a *queue* (a barrel of 456 liters), while wines from Savigny were capped at 340 *livres* and those from Monthelie at 250 *livres*. Those wines were made from Pinot Noir. In contrast, wines that were a blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay were priced at a maximum 200 *livres*, while Gamay wines were set at 180 *livres*.[19]

In various ways the Revolution saw unprecedented intervention to guarantee quality standards in the French wine market. We might think of Philip the Bold's 1395 ordinance as predicated on quality – and an argument can be made that his ordinance established the first Apellation d'Origine Contrôlée – but that was pretty much it before the Revolution. Regulations did bear on the activities of brokers and merchants, and there were sporadic ordinances dealing with the extension of land under vines. Guilds acted against the adulteration of wine. But before the Revolution there was no concerted effort to ensure that the wine consumed by ordinary French people met minimum standards.

This brief account of attempts during the Revolution to assure that the nation's wine supply met minimum quality and safety standard and was affordable is not a dramatic story. But it is an important one and it might be said that it expanded the Rights of Man and the Citizen to include the Consumer.

References

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[19] Dijon, ADCO L1401, Maximum.