

The Snobbery of Wine, the Brashness of Beer: A Brief History on Drinking Culture

(published with *Drinkwell.wine*, August 2016)

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A culture clash thousands of years ago gave us the presumption that wine is a drink for the sophisticated elite, and beer is the drink of the lower-class and ill-behaved. Will beer ever have the status wine does?

Until relatively recently (human-history-wise), most people consumed more alcohol than water, because safe drinking water was difficult to come by, and alcohol kills bacteria.

Problem solved.

The consumption of alcohol became a basic, integral part of daily life across all of Europe, to the point of an official rationing (one gallon, per person, per day).

When we think of wine today, we traditionally think of the “Romance countries”— i.e., France, Italy, Portugal, Spain... But actually, wine is believed to have originated further east, in what is now the country of Georgia, 8,000 years ago.

Georgians made wine in *qvevri* (like huge clay jars), lined with beeswax, after being filled with what would become wine, then placed underground to control against extreme temperatures and pests until ready. When the Greeks invaded the area, they lifted the Georgians’ winemaking techniques. With the rise of the Roman Empire, there was relative stability in much of Europe, allowing society to develop in the arts and sciences, including the expansion of *viniculture* (the science and production of wine-growing grapes). New techniques were created for cultivating, storing, and trading wine. Glass bottles and corks were developed, the corkscrew was invented, and the quality of wooden barrels were seen to contribute to the taste.

Viniculture flourished in Mediterranean Europe (what is now France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece) where climate was just right for cultivation. Wine was plentiful, and for 500 years in the 2nd Century B.C., wine was so available, it was often free— including to the general public.

Wine kept well, and so was able to be traded, becoming a commodity in other regions. Monks had the time and resources to cultivate wine, and in fact it is because of their protection of the craft that viniculture (also called *viticulture*) continued after the fall of the Roman Empire. (Note, anytime a people have to reestablish their identities and systems of government, is a precarious time for processes requiring thoughtful cultivation).

Now for the beer culture.

Up north, people had their own alcoholic drink evolution. Even though the Roman Empire technically ruled over many parts of what is now northern Europe, the culture there was different. The language was different (Germanic and Scandinavian), the weather was different (colder!), the perspectives and realities of life were different.

The differences in climate and soil affected possibility for crops. Instead of sensitive grapes which cannot abide strong frosts; heartier crops like corn, potatoes, and grains were grown. Even these, however, were not always stable in the harsh northern climates.

When hops were added to ale as early as the eighth century, (but not becoming widespread until the 10th), this added flavor –and preservation– to the drink, creating *beor* (beer!). *Without the hops*, ale spoiled quickly, making it difficult to trade, and thus suited primarily for local consumption.

The quickness with which heavier alcohols (mead, ale, beer) spoiled, mixed with the unreliable harvests, meant the alcohol had to be consumed quickly. A culture of frequent drunkenness was more or less accepted. Heavy, boisterous, “feast” drinking ensued in the North, influencing customs in religion and politics.

In contrast, the plentiful nature of alcohol in the South, where wine flourished steadily and the people worried less about the dangers of the weather and their crops, created a culture of moderation. Drunkenness, to them, was mostly unacceptable– even in times of celebration. Even children consumed it.

When the Mediterranean cultures were exposed to these Northerners, the Latin-speaking southerners were largely appalled by the nature of these people who operated in frequent flux. When trading and discussing political arrangements, the Northerners were baffled by the sensitivity the Southerners displayed.

The almost antonymic adjectives we associate with wine, versus maltier beverages did not begin with a division between poor and rich, since all economic classes drank. Instead it sprang from a divide between cultures. That’s xenophobia for ya.

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