

EDITORIAL

Wine, blood and religion



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He did not wear his scarlet coat, for blood and wine are red, and blood and wine were on his hands when they found him with the dead...

The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wilde (known as Oscar Wilde). Irish poet/playwright. 1852–1900.

Can you make white wine from red grapes? Yes. Can you make red wine from white grapes? No, in spite of all the miraculous powers attributed to grapes/wine. The best example of making white wine from red grapes is champagne. Chardonnay is the main (and sometimes exclusive grape) grape although Pinot Noir grapes are often added.

A number of religions have influenced wine consumption since Biblical times. Noah apparently planted a vineyard and was the first winemaker [1] In chapter 63 of the Book of the Prophet, Isaiah says:

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.

Jesus, for his first miracle, changed water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. The changing of wine into the blood of Christ (transubstantiation) has been alluded to earlier [2] and this phenomenon is believed by Roman Catholics and some other Christian sects (Fig. 1).

The so-called Mystic Winepress (Fig. 2) became popular with artists during the twelfth century. There are claims that it is the



Fig. 1 The Eucharist. The Eucharist at a Roman catholic Mass.

result of interpretation of the words of St Augustine. Seemingly he compared the crucified Christ to a cluster of grapes. The other possibility, according to Pastoureau is that the Mystic Winepress was inspired by the passage from the Old Testament in which the Promised Land was described as a fertile and nurturing vineyard [3].

During the Middle Ages monasteries, especially in France and Germany, played a huge role in developing the wine trade. Monasteries in France were given large tracts of land by the nobility and wealthy landowners in the hope that it would ease their passage to heaven in the afterlife. The land was often of poor quality but turned out to be excellent for growing vines. Some of the best known are Cluny (Benedictine), the Cistercians in Citeaux and Clos du Vougeot [1] and, of course, Dom Pérignon (the most widely known) [4]. Many monasteries lost their vineyards after the French Revolution and when Napoleon was emperor.

Moving to a more recent connection between religion and wine is 'prohibition' in the United States. Prohibition was a nationwide ban on the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933. Needless to say, this ban did not meet with everyone's approval. There had been a strong temperance movement in the United States since the early nineteenth century and the push for prohibition came largely from 'do-gooder' females. Prohibition changed the California wine business into an industry in crisis. The Volstead Act (1919–1920), which enforced the 18th Amendment, exempted alcohol that was used for medicinal, cosmetic or religious purposes, specifically sacramental wine. So, the production and sales of 'altar wine' increased dramatically during 'Prohibition'. According to Gregory Elder, a Roman Catholic priest and Professor Emeritus of Humanities and History at Moreno Valley College, California, the production of wine increased by 700 % during



Fig. 2 Mystic Winepress. Christ crushing grapes in 'mystic wine press'. c1490. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria. Public domain.

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Fig. 3 Speakeasy. A speakeasy in Washington, D.C. 1921. National Photo Company Collection. Public Domain.

'Prohibition'. It seems highly unlikely that all this 'altar' wine was exclusively used in religious services.

The term speakeasy (Fig. 3) came into use in the United States during Prohibition to denote premises that sold illicit alcohol. Dominic Sandbrook writing in the 'The Guardian' newspaper claims that there were 100,000 illicit establishments in New York city. People went to ingenious lengths to smuggle alcohol including the use of hot water bottles! [5]. The major unintended consequence of prohibition was the involvement of gangsters in illicit alcohol sales. The most infamous was Al Capone who was eventually gaoled for tax evasion and died in prison.

Language used to describe wine was relatively uncomplicated until 1978 when Robert Parker launched a direct—mail newsletter called The Baltimore Wine Advocate later to become The Wine Advocate. He introduced a scoring system (out of 100 points) and became very influential on the descriptive language used by many wine critics. Of course, the taste of wine is heavily influenced by the context in which it is consumed. Your mood, the surroundings, proper aeration, slowly bringing the wine to room temperature or chilling in the case of white wine and most important the

company with whom you are engaged. Fanciful descriptions such as 'a hint of cigar boxes', a flinty taste (when did you last taste flint?), and references to various fruits and vegetables, are to my mind unhelpful. I suggest that tasting wine is like visiting an art gallery, look at the art work before reading the wall caption provided by the curator. Taste the wine and make up your own mind and, if you feel inclined, then consult the opinion of a wine critic.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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