

Tbilisi 2022 Abstract Submission

Title

'Lafite or Margaux in the village store?' The retailing, marketing and consumption of 'luxury wine', 1800-1939

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

Luxury wine, Marketing, Advertising, Branding, Consumption

Research Question

'Luxury wine' is now recognised (Thach and Yeung, 2019) as a discrete category. Did 'luxury wines' exist in the period 1800-1939? If so, what distinguished them?

Methods

Analysis of a self-compiled database of C19-20 prices to identify candidate wines / sectors supplemented by analysis of the marketing strategies of relevant producers.

Results

Clear identification of luxury wine sector (particularly Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and Rhine /Mosel). Emergence in C19 of luxury marketing strategies that anticipate C21 marketing guidance for luxury producers.

Abstract

In recent years 'luxury wine' has been recognised as a discrete sub-sector of the global wine market. Such wines are defined not just by quality and / or price but by their scarcity, their heritage (which often linked to a specific geographic site), and by the prestige accruing to their consumers.

The core criteria suggested by Liz Thach and Peter Yeung for C21 'luxury wine' are:

- Highest level of quality (defined as 'globally recognized' with 20 years of heritage and proof of capacity to age)
- Special place: cultural and historical significance of location
- Sense of scarcity: difficult to obtain / higher prices on secondary market
- Elevated price: 'foundational element' with price of 100 USD / 75 GBP (therefore around 10-12s per bottle, or 120-150s per dozen in the second half of the 19th century). They also suggest a 25x mark up on 'overall wine market (though no 19th century wines appear to meet this criterion).
- Sense of privilege: confers status on its owner
- Provokes pleasure: aesthetically pleasing (visual) and 'hedonistic experience' (tasting).

The proposed conference paper will be the first to examine whether the 'luxury wine' sector is a purely 21st century phenomenon or whether it existed in the past and, if so, in what form. Drawing on the general and trade press, archival records of producers and surviving promotional material issued by producers and merchants, it focuses on how the most expensive wines were presented and sold to British consumers in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Central to the paper is the analysis of a database of prices for the period 1800-1939 compiled by the author from hundreds of newspaper advertisements and from surviving merchant records. This shows which wines in which categories met the Thach/Yeung criteria.

The marketing and branding strategies of the producers are analysed through agent letters, examination of surviving price lists and through extensive press commentary in both the wine trade press of the era and the voluminous 19th and early 20th press.

Wine in general was typically considered by the government(s) of the day as a luxury item. William Gladstone, in his budgets of 1860-2 lowered duties across the board in a (partially) successful attempt to make it accessible to the general public but subsequent chancellors imposed specific taxes on wines they perceived as luxuries.

My analysis focuses on which wines might be classed as 'luxury wines' in this period and on what criteria. Do such wines anticipate the current definitional characteristics and attributes? What does their pricing and marketing tell us about the purchase and consumption of wine in Britain in the last two centuries? What were the motives of those who purchased them? What were the key themes and tropes used in promotional material and how did they change over time? The article shows how, as power slowly shifted from merchants to producers from the mid-nineteenth onwards, a set of luxury marketing strategies were developed and deployed in a strikingly modern fashion.

Wines which - following the Thach/Yeung guidelines - might be classed as luxury cover a number of segments of the market. Wines from Bordeaux (claret), Burgundy, Champagne and the Rhine region of Germany were all marketed at elevated price levels and with a wide spread of prices between the lowest and highest-priced lines. In addition, the producers of champagne, under the guidance of their London agents, appeared to anticipate many of the luxury marketing strategies that have become standard practice in the late 20th and early 21st century: namely a focus on price maximisation, development of vintage-dated wines (starting with Pommery 1874) to foster the 'illusion of scarcity', control over distribution and a focus on product placement in exclusive circles.

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Luxury wine marketing abstract

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The author

Dr Graham Harding has an Oxford DPhil based on his study of the champagne and sparkling wine trade in Britain in the nineteenth century was published by Bloomsbury Academic in November 2021 under the title *Champagne in Britain 1800-1914: how the British transformed a French luxury*.

Since completing the doctorate in 2018, over a dozen articles and chapters in peer-reviewed publications have been published or are in press. These deal with wine (and food) in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and cover such topics as the Gilbey’s marketing and retailing system, the gendering of champagne, connoisseurship in wine, changing tastes and changing fashions at the dinner table (in both nineteenth century Britain and late nineteenth / early twentieth century America), the gifting of wine, the role of ‘fashion’ in C19 consumption and the marketing and branding of both champagne and still wine. He is an Associate of the Oxford History Faculty.

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