Title
The French Revolution: A Pivotal Period in the History of French Wine

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Conference Presentation

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Keywords
Wine, viticulture, France, French Revolution, wine trade, wine quality

Research Question
The place of the French Revolution (1789-99) in the long-term history of wine in France

Methods
Archival research

Results
The French Revolution was pivotal in terms of vineyard ownership, state intervention in wine quality and pricing, and the place of wine in French culture.

Abstract
Note: This paper is based on my current research for a book on the French Revolution and wine. The paper will be illustrated with contemporary images.

The French Revolution: A Pivotal Period in the History of French Wine

This paper argues that the French Revolution (1789-1799) was a pivotal period in the longer history of the French wine industry and the place of wine in French culture. The Revolution represented a rupture in the history of French wine, and it established the economic and cultural foundations of wine in France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue for the significance of this rupture by examining several of its component parts.

First, the Revolution broadened and secularized the ownership of wine production. In 1790, all properties of the French Church not needed for spiritual purposes were expropriated by the state for sale by auction. The properties thus targeted included vineyards, wineries, cellars, and winemaking equipment (presses, vats, barrels, etc.) that belonged to religious orders and other Church entities such as parishes and cathedrals. This affected wine production across France, particularly in regions, such as Burgundy, where religious orders (notably the Cistercians) were heavily invested in viticulture. The policy ended the centuries-long involvement in wine production by Church entities and broadened the ownership of production by allowing the entry of new owners to the industry and allowing existing owners to expand their holdings.

At the same time, the fluid social and economic conditions brought on by the Revolution enabled individuals in some parts of France unilaterally to extend land under vines, sometimes to common lands, sometimes to terrain...
that had not been cultivated. This unregulated expansion of viticultural land contrasted with periodic attempts before the Revolution to limit the spread of viticulture. Although probably marginal, these land seizures reinforced the expansion of ownership resulting from the sale of Church lands.

The Revolution further increased the number of vineyard owners by its reform of inheritance law. Between 1793 and 1795, a series of laws made it mandatory for proprietors to divide 90 per cent of their property equally among all their children. (The remaining 10 per cent was discretionary.) The result was the division of land planted in vines at each generation and the fractionalization of vineyards. This law is often attributed to Napoleon, but in fact he adopted it from Revolutionary law and, if anything, weakened it by increasing the percentage of land exempt from mandatory equal division.

Second, tax changes during the French Revolution bore on the price of wine and patterns of wine consumption. In 1791 sales taxes on basic goods were abolished, as were the duties imposed by municipalities on these goods as they were brought into towns. The effect was to reduce the price of wine suddenly and dramatically, thus creating a socially broader and deeper wine market and/or a higher level of wine consumption. Although taxes were reimposed on wine toward the end of the 1790s, the price of wine remained consistently lower during the Revolution than it had been before. Moreover, wine was declared to be a basic necessity when price controls (Law of the Maximum) were imposed on basic goods in 1793 in order to protect citizens from inflation.

Third, and related to wine's being declared a basic necessity, the Revolutionary authorities sought to ensure that French consumers had access to a ready supply of affordable, good-quality wine. Affordability was achieved by fiscal policy but ensuring wine quality was a new venture for the French state. Wine fraud had been regulated by guilds before the Revolution, but guilds were abolished in 1791 and state agencies stepped in. They punished fraud and the purveyors of poor-quality wine believed to be harmful to health, and they also insisted that wine sold commercially should meet a minimum quality.

To achieve this, they encouraged improved methods of viticulture and winemaking by such means as awarding prizes and honors for careful vine management and for grape quality. Various methods of improving wine quality were encouraged during the Revolution and this period saw Jean-Antoine Chaptal carry out his experiments with sugar and grape-juice near Montpellier.

Fourth, the drive to assure that all wine was good quality meshed with political policies. In 1793-1794, the radical phase of the Revolution, local authorities were empowered to seize the cellars of fine wines belonging to anyone known or suspected of being hostile to the Revolution, such as nobles, people who had emigrated, and priests. Fine wines were viewed as symbols of the luxury and egoism of pre-Revolutionary elites, and the wines seized were to be sold to benefit the treasury. There was a broad attempt to bring wine within the political culture of the French Revolution. Good-quality wine was praised as a patriotic beverage and there are many images of citizens of varying social ranks drinking wine together. Wine was thus portrayed as a unifying commodity rather than one whose various quality levels divided citizens.

Overall, the French Revolution presents a number of original components that would feature in the subsequent history of wine in France: secular ownership distributed among many small owners (vignerons); the widespread consumption of wine; the regulation of quality by the state; and the explicit integration of wine into French national culture.

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