The British Paradox: how a beer-drinking nation transformed the world of wine

Motivation for the thesis

Studying history helps us to understand the present. Each module of my Diploma studies included history of wine regions and styles, and every so often Britain has emerged in the background – as contributor to the emergence and development of Bordeaux, Porto, Jerez, among other. This continuing presence felt even more when learnt that the Diploma programme itself is structured around the WSET, a wine education body based in the United Kingdom, rather than in France, which many still regard as the spiritual heart of wine.

I've often found myself wondering how a country that produces so little wine could shape so much of what is said, written, and taught about it.

Research question

It seems to me paradoxical that the leading voices in wine writing and education are not found in France or Italy - with their centuries-old wine growing traditions - but in Britain, one of the leading nations in brewing and beer consumption.

Beer, not wine, has been central to British drinking culture for centuries. Comparative per-capita consumption of beer, spirits, and wine in Great Britain from 1800 to 1935 shows that beer remained far higher, at around 100–150 litres per person a year, while wine stayed at just 1–2 litres. Although wine consumption in Britain increased markedly during the 20th century, in 2023 beer consumption in the UK remained nearly three times higher than that of wine. And jet Allan Sichel, the president of the *Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux* said in a recent interview*:* "The UK differentiates itself from other foreign markets, down to the sheer level of expertise found on these shores, and the level of influence it has on other key markets. From wine critics to journalists and world-renowned qualifications such as the WSET, the UK continues to exert a disproportionate influence on other global markets."

How did this paradox emerge, and what forces brought it into being?

Methodology

I turned myself to reviewing books, printed and online articles on history of wine. The literature sources I used included a broad range, from high-level overview of origins of modern winemaking, emergence of different wine regions and styles to more specific topics such as history of particular wine regions, history of wine trade and history of alcohol consumption in Britain.

I limited my scope of review to a period which I consider the most relevant to the question that I posed: the few centuries when, from my current perspective, the British influence on the wine world was the most noticeable. It begins in 1152 (when the marriage of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine brought Bordeaux under English control) and ends in 1914, the beginning of the First World War, which dramatically reordered not only the geopolitical map of the world but also the international wine market.

Content of the thesis

I start by examining major case studies of Britain's influence over the wine world from medieval times up until the early 20th century: Bordeaux, port, sherry, Marsala, Champagne and the New World wines.

Next, I examine the economic, cultural and geopolitical factors that allowed Britain to emerge as a significant influence on global wine tastes. The world's richest economy by the start of the 19th century, with its dominant navy and powerful army, Britain was a geopolitical hegemony that lasted up to the First World War. The British upper classes, lacking a domestic viticultural tradition yet cultivating an appreciation for luxury goods and beverages, played a central role in stimulating wine imports. This demand was supported by Britain's extensive merchant fleet and a network of traders experienced in international commerce. Britain's colonial expansion laid foundations of the wine sectors in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, thus influencing the wine industry development in the New World for the years to come.

Conclusion

The concluding sections provide an overview of the lessons that the contemporary wine industry can draw from the case studies reviewed, as well as the continuing influence Britain exerts on the wine world today. Looking at wine through commercial lens provides us with a fresh perspective on a business long dominated by wine-producing nations: approaching wine as a commercial commodity shaped by consumer taste and demand rather than a product of a cherished and protected national industry or an object of cultural heritage. We learn that, before the 20th century, access to major commercial trade routes largely determined where wineries were established; poor roads, slow transport and weak communications made logistical networks a source of market access and commercial power.

And as any producer of a commercial product designed to meet specific consumer needs, the wine industry stands to gain significantly from listening to its customers.

The history of tariffs and restrictions on wine imports in Britain shows us to what extent wine is political, and how consumption of wine was affected by and contributed to trade wars, empire building, ideas of nationalism and of social class.

This thesis concludes that Britain continues to exert influence over the global wine industry, though in ways that differ from those observed in the historical period reviewed. Today, its influence shows up in its strong demand for imported wine, a vibrant wine trade and its influence on wine education and writing.