

Second Birth of the Bottle (18th century)

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Abstract

The recovery during the summer of 2010 of a batch of bottles of champagne from the first half of the nineteenth century, found in a shipwreck at the bottom of the Baltic, is a reminder that the great European beverage trade was marked by the abandon of wood barrels in favour of glass bottles. This fundamental shift began in the eighteenth century, in a context marked simultaneously by the rise of quality wines, as well as technical progress in glassmaking.

Article

During the summer of 2010, the recovery of 168 bottles of champagne, buried in a shipwreck lying off the coast of the Åland Islands in the Baltic Sea, received international attention. Initially presented as being from the 1780s, then precisely dated to the late 1830s or early 1840s, the bottles were from the producers Veuve Clicquot-Werlé, Heidsieck & Co., and the now-defunct Juglar, most likely for the Russian market. After being opened and tasted by wine specialists, 70 of the bottles were declared fit for consumption, and then stoppered with new cork for sale at auction. People marvelled at the quality of the wines thanks to this event, however much less attention was paid to the container, certainly because everyone today is accustomed to seeing wine travel in glass bottles throughout Europe and the world. Yet this material reality was the result of a remarkable historical evolution that had not yet ended at the time this champagne was brought to market.

In fact, the bottle was long relegated to a marginal role in the world of exchange. Until the end of the seventeenth century, almost all beverages throughout Europe—beer, cider, wine and spirits, along with other liquids for consumption, such as oil or table vinegar—were sold in bulk and shipped afar in wooden barrels of all shapes and capacities. The trade thus disregarded the bottle, or used it at most to send samples allowing buyers to taste products without having to travel, or primarily at the end of the chain as the recipient for a retail sale, which a merchant or innkeeper filled from the barrel at the client's request. Even for this latter purpose it was not widespread, since its capacity seems to have been poorly guaranteed in the eyes of the public and the authorities. The bottle was a domestic object used at the table or in the kitchen, but without the distinction of the carafe, or other finely crafted recipients.

It was only at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a major change began, at least with respect to the wine trade. In France especially, progress in winemaking made certain wines from Burgundy, Bordeaux and Champagne age better and better, particularly when they were conserved in bottles, preferably stoppered with cork, and sometimes capped with wax. Moreover, sparkling white champagnes, which sold briskly from their very introduction on the market, more or less required being packaged in a bottle. This emergence of quality wines also benefited from progress in glassmaking, for if most seventeenth century bottles were almost as thin as drinking glasses, to the point of having to be covered in wickerwork to protect them against the slightest impact, eighteenth century bottles grew thicker and more solid. These improvements were nevertheless gradual, and production remained irregular for a long time. This was certainly unfortunate for sparkling champagnes, for in years when the wine was especially sparkling, up to a third or even more of the bottles could spontaneously burst. But breakage, which diminished over the course of the century with increasing glass quality, never discouraged buyers.

It is clear that quality wines stored in bottles were immediately adopted by European elites, who turned them into objects of social distinction, beginning in the first decades of the eighteenth century. We know that demand on the part of British high society was a driving force in the export of fine Bordeaux wines in bottles, even if for a long time bottling was the business of wine traders, rather than the châteaux that produced the wine. It is also worth noting that two of the most famous contemporary paintings showing wine bottles at the table, Lancret's *Le Déjeuner de jambon* [The Ham Lunch] and Troy's *Le Déjeuner d'huîtres* [The Oyster Lunch], both depict aristocratic feasts. Moreover, these paintings were personally commissioned by Louis XV for the arrangement of his *petits appartements* in Versailles in 1735. In a coincidence which, in the end, was not really one at all, 1735 was the exact year in which the monarchy endeavoured to regulate bottles, through a declaration fixing—for the entire kingdom, and thus for export as well—content at one pint (0.93 litre), and glass weight at 25 ounces (0.98 kilogramme). Although this attempt at uniformity encountered obstacles, and allowed a large variety of bottle shapes to continue to exist, it demonstrates a desire to guarantee the capacity and solidity of this container for the benefit of both the consumer and the trade.

The supremacy of the bottle was nonetheless far from established at the end of the eighteenth century, as its cost and weight obviously prevented it from winning the market for ordinary liquids, or even of dominating in the area of quality beverages. Thus, in the Franco-Russian trade treaty of 1787, which notably established the customs rights for Champagne and Burgundy entering Russia, a clear distinction was maintained between those arriving in barrels and bottles, even though the clientele for these wines was undeniably aristocratic. Even more telling was the shift from barrels to bottles for the cognac trade, which did not take place until the early decades of the nineteenth century, even though this beverage enjoyed a prodigious rise in quality and sales during the eighteenth century.

As for the champagne bottles that emerged from the Baltic, despite their apparent familiarity, they are not exactly the same as ours. In addition to the fact that their corks were tied in place with string instead of with metal wire-caps, they had no labels, which was the rule at the time; as a matter of fact, identification of the producer relied exclusively on the branding mark imprinted on the cork. It took decades longer for the bottle to become, both technically and commercially, the common container for consumable liquids. In other words, despite its apparent banality and its long history, the glass bottle was the product of a long European adventure that achieved decisive momentum in the eighteenth century.

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