

You are what you drink

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Chad Ludington was a guest on the show a few years ago explaining how it was that the Irish became involved in the creation of some of the great wines of France. Today, we're looking at the other end of the pipeline. For the English, what you drank said a great deal about who you were.

To begin with, when the English first got a taste for wine, most of it came from the area around Bordeaux, which had a historical connection with England. This claret was pretty rough stuff; made by small producers, shipped over before the winter storms set in and usually rotten or spoiled by next summer. That meant a thirsty gap before the new wine arrived. If people said they liked the taste of the wine over and above what it did to their heads, it was because they were familiar with it. They weren't making a choice because there was no choice to make.

Chad: People were happy to get the wine and that was enough for them. Once more careful production took place — because now the producers were having to get to a market that was more competitive, they had to put more energy and costs into producing the wine — and suddenly the consumers thought, “wow, there's a choice here and we actually prefer this other one that's more expensive”.

And why did producers start competing? Well, that's the other side of Chad's story, the one that involves the Irish. In essence, it's because of the wars between England and France. For wine makers and wine drinkers, the fights that mattered took place not on the battlefields, but in taxes and embargoes.

Chad: The embargoes and the wars, they help, they spur production changes and help to increase the quality of the wine. Because if you had a flat tax or if you were going to have to smuggle and risk going to jail or being fine for smuggling, the product itself had to be something that was worthwhile to go to those extreme ends to do.

Jeremy: But you describe it as higher quality, which suggests that it was better in ways that also affected its taste. If people like what

they're used to, how did they come to like this new kind of wine from Bordeaux?

Chad: While they liked what they had, now, having been exposed to this new wine, people often preferred it. Those who could afford it would pay the extra money to get it. What happens is that the wine, because of its cost, takes on a social meaning as well. And so that's very important. At the very time that this wine is increasing in cost, you also see a major socio-political shift from the Tory aristocrats and the old Whig Republican tradition into a new mercantile Whig tradition, in which the new elite, especially post 1688-89 is a combination of aristocratic and commercial wealth.

But in particular, these new Whigs couldn't necessarily (and didn't want to) say that what legitimised their power was the fact that they were the eighth Duke of Mucky Muck, whatever it might be, instead of taste. Whether that's taste for wine or taste for architecture or painting or China or mahogany tables, whatever it must be. In all of these, material goods becomes a way for the new leaders of the society to legitimise their power and their position in society, and one of those things that represented their good taste because taste was conflated with moral soundness also.

So one of the ways that they could present their good taste was by drinking this good wine. Now, of course, there's a class component because the only ones who can ever develop this taste or show this taste are also those who can afford to buy it.

Jeremy: But now you've got people with money, who are not necessarily born to money, who can afford to buy it. So are they the ones who are really driving this?

Chad: In many ways, yes. They are the ones who are really driving it because they're the ones who are having to convince the old order, as it were, that they are legitimate. They have the most at stake. In arguing that tastes legitimise political authority. The Tories were still clinging to the notion that their authority came from God and the ancient lineages of their family. If you don't have that, you're looking for something else, and that's exactly what this new Whig elite was doing.

The human embodiment of these big changes in society is Robert Walpole, son of a country Squire, who became England's first effective prime

minister in the 1720s. Walpole's taste in wine, which Chad Ludington has studied in detail, reflects his times and circumstances perfectly.

Chad: He didn't come from a commercial background *per se*, but those were in many ways his people and his fellow Whigs, and you see it in his own taste, especially when you compare it to his father's tastes.

When you see his father's wine orders back in Norfolk, as a Squire, the father was drinking inexpensive wine. He was a country gentleman. And after the embargoes began, his father orders port wine. That was the wine that was thought of as a substitute for the inexpensive claret that was no longer available, and his father's records show it was cost that did it for him. It was cost and antipathy to the French too. That's important to say. So, that's what Walpole senior is drinking.

Robert Walpole, his taste is dramatic in its changes, inasmuch as he now begins to buy the fanciest wines. If you look at his records, they show Château Haut-Brion or Château Latour, Château Margaux, Château Lafite. And it's remarkable, Walpole's own taste is for these wines and whenever he was entertaining his fellow, high ranking Whigs he would use to impress them. "Look what being on my team can do for you." He's regaling them with bottle after bottle of Château Haut-Brion, for example. It's fascinating.

Meanwhile, other records suggest back in London, when he's meeting with more middle ranking Whigs, those records suggest that for that crowd, he's regaling them with port. So he understood the social meaning of these wines. He couldn't ignore the lesser merchants and for them, port was the wine. That was the patriotic wine. At the same time, he couldn't ignore the very powerful merchant, legal, aristocratic blend that had come to dominate the nation, who were very wealthy. And for them, he had this wine that clearly indicated his superior taste.

Jeremy: Okay. But now for me, my impression of port is that it is actually a pretty high end tippie. Port is a drink of the aristocrats. And yet, to begin with it was a substitute for French wine that was patriotic and cheap. So when did port become associated with money and aristocracy — and how?

Chad: Port was initially, at least in the late 17th and throughout the 18th, throughout most of the 18th century, it was the wine of the middle ranks.

Not of the poor; for whom wine was still too expensive. But of the middle ranks, the respectable middle ranks, port was their wine. Now, what happens is, in the second half of the 18th century, but especially beginning in the 1760s, the critique of the aristocracy by the middle ranks — that they were effeminate, that they were foppish, that they were essentially French — began to stick. There was a lot of critique of the English officer class as being not up to the job. Not masculine enough. And this is also a class critique, that they, by drinking French wine, by wearing French lace, by hiring French dancing masters, all of this is hurting their own masculinity. The middle ranks equated this masculinity with Britishness. That began to undermine the social prestige of claret.

So you have that going on. Meanwhile, at this very same time, in the third quarter of the 18th century, you get the creation of the cylindrical bottle, and that cylindrical bottle meant that you could now stack bottles on their sides and lay them down for a long period of time, which hadn't occurred before.

Wealthy consumers begin to ask for port as a way to represent their true British masculinity, as opposed to this French foppishness that they've been accused of. And what's also fascinating is, and this really isn't till the 19th century, once you get to the post Napoleonic world in which you have this aristocratic retrenchment. But a lot of that aristocracy is new money still. But it's also a very insecure aristocracy, because they've been, at least on the continent, overthrown for a period of roughly 1789 to about 1815; the old aristocracy was in trouble.

So now you have this conservative reaction. And one of the things that is important is to show to consumers just how deep and inveterate your family and you as a human being are, and to justify your position. So in that situation, port becomes especially helpful because port, as a result of its high alcohol and sugar content, can last for a very, very, very long time, longer than claret.

So now think about 1830. And your family, in the 18th century they were merchants, they were lawyers. But now you've become part of the British aristocracy. You have a big pile that you can point to as

your country residence. You have a title. 1830 — and you can go down into your cellar and you can pull out a bottle of wine from the 1790s. The whole idea, that my family has been around for a long time, you know, we can take this back 40 years, and we can also afford to sit on this wine for that many years.

Who else can do that?

Jeremy: It's quite astonishing how much taste reflects in the different ways, but one of the things you wrote about port that I found particularly interesting is; you write: port appealed to the Brits because it was "honest, genuine, masculine and patriotic". And when I read that, what I think of is American beer and Budweiser.

If you take what you've been describing about wine in Britain and look at beer in the US, do you see the same, not the same story, but the same sorts of stories?

Chad: The sentence you just referenced refers mostly to the 18th century conception of port in Britain. By the 19th century, as I just explained, it would become a wine that had some pretensions because it had gone upscale. Very much the same thing happens with beer in America. And there is a sense American-style lager had been the dominant wine, especially in the post World War II period, until very recently. And statistically it still is the dominant wine in America. And its consumers feel the same way about it. That it is honest, patriotic.

I mean, Budweiser goes to great lengths to spell this out. Every summer, the Budweiser can is simply an American flag. It's red, white, and blue. It's the flag you are ... They want you to think you are drinking America.

Jeremy: But it's reflected also in the kind of denigration of craft beer as hipster, effeminate, even though they have big beards. Real Americans don't drink craft beer.

Chad: That's akin to what was happening with port. The port drinkers were denigrating the claret drinkers, as I said, by the 1760s as upper-class toffs, effeminate, essentially French. That's the same reputation that craft beer has for many of the consumers of American lager.

Of course, is a class based element there. There is also your urban versus rural divide. All of those. Of course, given my own politics, I'll tell you that all of the above are real Americans, but that's part of what goes on with taste. Taste is used as a way to... In the British case, it wasn't British. It was essentially French. In the American case, it's, you know, real Americans versus fake Americans.

Again, in my own view. We're all real Americans.

But if they're all real Americans, and beer is the really American drink, you won't be surprised to learn that Chad Ludington has found a real American equivalent to his story about Robert Walpole. It involves Henry Louis Gates Jr, a Harvard professor and public intellectual who happens to be an African American originally from West Virginia, and Sergeant James Crowley of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, police.

I'll let Chad tell you about how Sergeant Crowley came to arrest Professor Gates for disorderly conduct, and what happened next.

Chad: He had locked himself out of his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was trying to get back in, and presumably some neighbour said, yeah, there's a black man trying to break into a home. And next thing you know, police are dispatched, an officer shows up, and Gates is arrested for trying to get into his own home.

Of course, this was, in his mind, understandably, an example of callous racism and the expectation that, you know, that any black person seen trying to undo a door lock must be a thief.

There was a big hullabaloo over this and there was a class element too. You know, here you have the Harvard professor, you have the working class, Irish American policemen. The whole thing becomes a national to do.

And Obama? He invites Officer Crowley and Skip Gates down to the White House and they share beers. They all get to choose their own beers, and that itself was very revealing because I'm not sure if Gates is much of a ... I think he's probably more of a wine drinker, if I had to guess. He chose Sam Adams Light. And Sam Adams is, despite being owned by a very conservative man who was a Trump supporter, as I understand, he nevertheless chooses a craft beer from his new hometown of Boston. But it's also the light version. He's just showing in many ways, sort of haut-bourgeoisie status of, I'm worried about my calorie intake here, I'm drinking a light beer.

Crowley revealed his own concerns and aspirations because he chose what looks like — to those who are not aware — a craft beer. So it's a craft beer called Blue Moon Belgian White. It's actually a product of Molson-Coors. It's made in Golden, Colorado, comes from nowhere near Belgium and nowhere near Boston. And yet I think in his case, he knows he's going into this environment where he, despite being the white man, is the odd man out. He's not the educated one. He's not the wealthy one. He's not the erudite and cosmopolitan one. But he has to put on something of a persona. In his insecurities, he chooses a wine that in fact, gives the away the game. It gives away his own lack of knowledge, because it's not really a craft beer.

And then Obama — and this is what's the most wonderful part, he, being in the position of ultimate power of the United States, doesn't have to prove anything to anybody. And so he drinks the most low-brow of all. He drinks a Budweiser Light, which, and I'm sure he had learned this somewhere. Is America's number one selling beer and is politically straight down the middle. It was going to offend nobody. And it divides the political spectrum. And it was also an assertion of his own power and self confidence that he doesn't need to, to drink anything, craft or highfalutin' or that's craft. Instead, he can slum it, as it were. And he understood probably better than the other two, the political theatre that was involved because he was a masterful politician.

And because he was such a masterful politician, we don't know what Obama thought of the taste of the beer. Although we do know that he was the first president to brew his own beer at the White House. I'm guessing he wouldn't have done that if he thought, Bud Light is such great drink.