

## What Is Wine Politics?

The year 2005 was the best of times and the worst of times in Bordeaux. While some producers' wines fetched record prices, others went to the distillery to be turned into ethanol. The unusually dry summer gave way to sufficient rain to endow the vintage with a legendary quality. Château Haut-Brion, whose wines many critics called outstanding or perfect, priced its wine at \$500 a bottle. Other châteaux doubled or tripled their prices from the previous year. Wine from Château Petrus, always among the costliest, sold for \$2,000 a bottle—where it could be found. Retailers in London and Los Angeles could not get enough of it.

At the same time, however, many growers in the region were going out of business. In 2005, Bordeaux had about ten thousand wine-grape growers, roughly two and a half times the total in all of the United States. But that number was down from fifteen thousand a decade earlier. Producers of nondescript wine sold under the Bordeaux regional name could not sell their wine for consumption. Instead they sold 18 million liters of it to be distilled into ethanol for use as a fuel additive.

Granted, high oil prices have stimulated a search for alternative fuels. But wine? What had gone so terribly wrong that wine bearing the Bordeaux appellation—often viewed as synonymous with quality—was distilled so that cars could run on Cabernet? In a word, politics.



Jeff Lefevere, a wine consumer in Indianapolis, loves Sonoma Zinfandel. Whenever they are in the area, Lefevere and his wife visit A. Rafanelli, their favorite winery in the Dry Creek Valley. They would love to purchase the hard-to-find wines directly from the winery. But the winery won't send them wine. Are they debtors? Or under twenty-one? No, the reason for their blacklisting is simple: it is a felony to ship wine to residents of Indiana.

American consumers can buy computers and clothes directly from producers, cutting out the middleman. But many wine consumers must live with distributor monopolies that restrict the range of wines available. Lefevere describes the challenge in Indianapolis: because consumers “can't join wine clubs, can't ship back from wineries, can't buy off the Internet, you can't get on boutique winery mailing lists like Rafanelli—you just can't get access to a lot of the good stuff.” Why is it often easier in America to buy guns, cigarettes, and pornography than it is to buy serious wine from California? In a word, politics.



In his home in Monkton, Maryland, Robert Parker swirls, spits, and scribbles. Although he grew up in dairy country in a household without wine, he is the world's most influential wine critic. His notes and scores can send the fortunes of wineries around the world soaring or plummeting. Parker has been called both the “emperor of wine” and the “dictator of taste.”<sup>1</sup>

Parker's influence is so great that many wineries have styled their wines into what he calls “hedonistic fruit bombs” simply to please his palate. Why does one man's palate decide the winners and losers in the world of wine? Why are consumers at risk of confronting a sea of undifferentiated wine? In a word, politics.



Critics and commentators widely acknowledge the importance of the growing area and winemaking style in creating what ends up in the bottle. But, more than wine consumers realize, politics matters, too. Politics determines not only which grapes grow where, what can be written on the label, which wines are exported or imported, which wines are available in local stores, and how much a wine costs, but, perhaps most important, it also affects the quality of the wine in the bottle.

In this book I follow the travels that a bottle of wine takes from the vineyard to the dining-room table. Along the way it may encounter flying winemakers, humble *vignerons*, dull regulators, passionate activists, and powerful critics. I tell the neglected backstory of wine, which, as with Hollywood movies, can often be more interesting than the finished product.

While touching on issues as broad as dictatorship and democracy or international relations (the effects of showdowns in the United Nations, for example), battles over the politics of wine are more often fought on the ground—sometimes literally. Where are the lines of the best growing zones drawn? Will society stigmatize wine or praise it? How can consumers buy their favorite wines or discover new ones? Is a wine “made in the vineyard,” as the industry likes to claim, or is it made in the lab and tested on focus groups for its consumer appeal? At stake in these battles are not only the livelihoods of those in the industry but also the prestige and the profits of an industry whose sales reach \$25 billion in the United States alone.

Although the interplay between business and government affects winemaking and wine consuming everywhere, I focus on the two leading producer nations, France and the United States, and, within them, the prestigious regions of Bordeaux and Napa. As the leading producers of the Old World and the New World, respectively, these two countries and regions serve as models of their particular styles of wine production as well as of wine governance. The divergent paths they have taken hold lessons not only for each other but also for other countries and for consumers.

Both countries produce wines of outstanding quality. The notion that French wine is superior was effectively laid to rest thirty years ago, when American wines upstaged top French wines at a blind tasting in Paris. Since then, although their styles differ, both American wines and French wines have commanded stratospheric prices and received the highest scores from critics such as Robert Parker. But the trajectories of the two nations’ wine industries have been dramatically different. In France, grapevines have occupied a natural place in the soil since before Roman times. Wine and France are symbolically intertwined, and that relationship transcends other social divisions. Wine was poured at Versailles as well as at peasants’ tables. Americans, by contrast, have been trying to grow wine grapes for four hundred years and have only really succeeded in the past forty. And a widespread thirst for the fruits of the vine in the United States has

developed only in the past fifteen years. American winemakers have had to overcome challenges from both soil and society. These legacies influence the wines we drink and will shape the future of the industry in both countries.

These separate paths are now converging. France, although still the world's most esteemed wine producer and its largest wine producer by value, has suffered setbacks. Exports have softened. Domestic sales have been crimped by the rise of antialcohol campaigns, which were a major obstacle to the development of quality wine in the United States in the early twentieth century. As a result, the French appellation system that governs the production of wine, including wines bound for the finest tables in the world as well as some of those now bound for the distillery, is being put under the microscope. At the same time America, is on track to become the world's largest wine-consuming country in 2008, and wine is now being produced in all fifty states. And the notion of *terroir*, the French way of interpreting the characteristics of the growing area that lies at the very root of the appellation system, is being adopted and explored in the United States as well.

Looking at the two countries through the lens of the wine glass reveals paradoxes. We tend to think of France as a country whose economy is heavily regulated by the state, whereas the United States is the land of the free-market economy. Yet if that is the case, why does each of the fifty states have different rules for bringing in wine, as if each were a sovereign nation? The question is of particular importance for wine consumers outside California, where 90 percent of all American wine is made. It frustrates wine drinkers from Maryland to Montana who just want to be able to enjoy the wine of their choice. And why does France have strong and influential associations of wine producers, while in America they are weak? In his journey through mid-nineteenth-century America, Alexis de Tocqueville lavished praise on associational life in America while bemoaning the paucity of associations in his home country. Yet today, an abundance of French producers' associations may not be providing the vitality and social capital needed to improve quality sufficiently to enable their products to compete in a saturated global market for wine.

Will France be able to regain its lost luster? Are Americans doomed to drink standardized wine that is more expressive of the marketing department's recommendations than it is of the growing area? After reading this book, you may detect much more in a glass of wine than

simply hints of blackberries, leather, or truffles on the palate; you will understand the convoluted path the wine took to reach you. This tale adds depth and complexity to every glass of wine by providing the story of who has tramped the grapes, both literally and metaphorically.

Chapter 2 traces the history of the wine industry in the United States and France, leading up to the crucial turning points in the 1930s that launched each country down its current path. Chapter 3 looks at the challenge of authenticating origins, the crisis facing the French wine industry, and the ways consumers may benefit from producers' pain. Chapter 4 examines the political foundation for the current laws on producing and selling alcohol in the United States as well as the changing pattern of alliances that sustains them, restricting the access of many American consumers to wines they want at prices they can afford. Chapter 5 considers questions of control: what are the effects of globally influential critics, flying winemakers, and new technologies? And what exerts the greatest influence in making the wine we find on retailers' shelves: the soil where it is grown, the winemaker, or a focus group? In a coda to the use of technology, chapter 6 looks at the increasing prevalence of "natural" winemaking, as many winemakers are turning over a new, greener leaf, prompted in part by environmental activists and in part by a blend of beliefs and marketing research. Understanding wine politics can bring the issues of yesterday and today into clearer focus and make for a more rewarding drink.

