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The Curious History Of Wine Consumption In America

By Ben Bicaais

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The history of wine consumption in America has been fraught with starts, stops, and inconsistencies. The American population has always had a love-hate relationship with alcohol. Historic prohibitionist attitudes amongst much of the American population have blurred the line between moderate wine consumption and detrimental alcoholism. As a result, regular, moderate consumption of wine by the American public continues to face ideological and legal impediments.

The History of Wine Consumption During the Colonial Years

Since its origins, the history of wine consumption in America has been both encouraged and despised by different demographic groups. Spanish missionaries produced the earliest New World wine during the early 17th Century. Shortly thereafter, French immigrants began to cultivate grapes in the Hudson River Valley. They made wine, juice, and preserves.

The early history of wine consumption in America was dominated by immigrants whom were primarily Catholic, and of Central or Southern European descent. The bulk of wine-drinking immigrants came from the wine loving nations of France, Italy, Germany, and Spain. They descended from cultural traditions that valued social wine consumption with the evening meal.

The aforementioned wine drinkers were counterbalanced by immigrants from Northern Europe. Many held Puritan belief systems that discouraged or banned alcohol consumption of any kind. The nativist movements of the early 18th Century cast suspicion on immigrant groups that retained Old World customs and did not entirely assimilate into American society.

Wine consumption was a lightning rod for these discriminatory points of view. Although not accurate, alcoholism was seen as a problem only associated with certain ethnic groups that enjoyed wine. Whiskey and beer was the actual source of vast majority of problematic inebriation. Nonetheless, early prohibitionist forces were very effective at linking wine to the ills of American society.

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History of Wine Consumption During the 19th Century

In the 1830s, Americans consumed massive amounts of whiskey and beer. Alcoholism was extremely widespread and was affecting the stability of the American family. Husbands spent time in the saloons instead of with their families, and rampant drunkenness increased instances of philandering and crime.

Ironically, as Prohibitionist fervor gained national momentum in the nineteenth century, the American wine industry boomed. From 1860–1880, Phylloxera devastated the vineyards of France. California wine production greatly increased to fill the international void. Huge tracts of vineyards were planted in Southern California to satisfy the international demand for wine. However, most of this production was exported and it did not have a major impact on the history of wine consumption in America.

By the mid–1880s, European wine production rebounded, causing a glut of American wine. To make matters worse, Pierce's Disease and Phylloxera simultaneously struck Southern California's vineyards. Rising population and real estate values in the Los Angeles Basin was the last nail in the coffin of extensive viticulture in the region. With Prohibitionist attitudes constantly gaining momentum, American demand for wine was insufficient to make up for the loss of the much larger European market.

History of Wine During the Prohibition Years

In response to the massive outcry of many Americans against alcohol consumption, Congress passed the 18th Amendment in 1917. It banned the commercial production and sale of alcohol in America. The Volstead Act was ratified in 1920 and expounded on the actual implementation of Prohibition. It also mandated several loopholes in alcohol production and consumption. Physicians could prescribe alcohol and it could be consumed for religious purposes. Additionally, a head of household was legally allowed to produce 200 gallons of wine a year for personal use. This was largely a concession to the significant Italian–American electorate.

Because of the Volstead Act, American wine consumption actually increased during Prohibition. The traditional American alcoholic beverages of beer and distilled spirits were illegal to produce and sell from 1920–1933. As a result, regions like Lodi saw a massive increase in demand for grapes used for home winemaking.

Prohibition did not curtail the American appetite for alcohol, it merely destroyed the legal framework that governed alcohol sales. Due to the inaccessibility of alcohol, the use of other drugs, including cocaine and marijuana greatly increased. Additionally, the government lost a major source of revenue from taxing alcohol as organized crime took over the means of production and distribution. The American public became increasingly disillusioned with the government's stubborn attempt to attain the impossible.

The 21st Amendment: Repeal of Prohibition

After a decade of the "noble experiment", Congress passed the 21st Amendment. It ended national Prohibition and transferred the authority to allow or ban production and sale of alcohol to individual

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states. Many states relegated this authority to the county level. Counties in some states prohibit alcohol to this day. The history of wine production and sales since the repeal of Prohibition has been governed by the 21st Amendment, not the free trade mandates of the U.S. Constitution.

Because every state has the power to make their own laws regarding wine sales, it has effectively made commercial wine distribution a convoluted mess. Marketing wine in the U.S. continues to be a difficult and frustrating task, especially for smaller wineries.

The effects of the 21st Amendment have had a major impact on the history of wine consumption in the U.S. during the 20th and 21st Centuries. Its legacy is a tangle of state and county laws that regulate the production and sale of wine.

The Fortified Wine Years

Immediately after the repeal of Prohibition, wine consumption dropped as Americans had renewed access to spirits and beer. From the repeal of Prohibition to the late 1950s, high-alcohol dessert and

fortified wines dominated the market. These were the darkest days of the history of wine production and consumption. Many fortified wines were produced and sold extremely cheaply, and catered to the "misery market". "Winos" drank these overly alcoholic concoctions because they were the cheapest way to get drunk. In the quest for short-term profits, unscrupulous producers stamped a black mark on the history of wine in America.

From 1934 to the early 1950s, immigrant families consumed the majority of table wines. Unfortunately, many of their offspring did not follow their parents traditional drink choices and began consuming beer and cocktails as they assimilated into American society. Table wine was a mysterious beverage to most Americans and was associated with high-society and recent arrivals from Southern and Central Europe.

The Jug Wine Years

America's taste for non-fortified wines finally began to develop in the early 1960s. The majority of these new wine drinkers were young, well-traveled, and relatively affluent. As the Baby Boom generation came of age, the ranks of wine drinkers increased. Even still, the majority of consumers bought simple, sweet wines.

The early 1980s saw the height of the frenzy to promote and sell inexpensive wines to the American public. The White Zinfandel rage was and continues to be a major part of the market. Total American wine consumption reached an all-time high due to a massive influx of capital and advertising. Despite predictions of continued increases, it did not materialize.

At the same time, overall alcohol consumption decreased in the United States during the 1980s. The anti-drug and alcohol movement justifiably discouraged dangerous levels of drug and alcohol ingestion. Unfortunately, extremists in the movement also attacked the history of wine consumption in America. Zero-tolerance attitudes portrayed moderate wine consumption as not only hazardous to the

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individual, but also as detrimental to the entire population.

The Renaissance Years

In the late 1980s, jug wine consumption fell sharply. American tastes were changing, and the market began to demand wines with defined characteristics. Mike Benziger's Glen Ellen Winery entered the void, creating the hugely popular "fighting varietals" genre. These wines bridged the gap between the generic production of the past, and the boutique wineries of the following decade.

Much of America's current interest in quality wine stems from a 1991 60 Minutes Program that examined the health benefits of moderate wine consumption. The "French Paradox" is the fact that the French consume fatty foods, significant red wine, and have a very low incidence of heart disease. This news had a major impact on American wine consumption, especially in aging, affluent demographic groups.

The Future...Factors to Consider

As American society becomes increasingly more fast-paced and hectic, fewer families are sitting down together for dinner. This is not a positive sign for American wine consumption as few people open up a bottle of wine to drink with their drive-thru or take-out dinners.

Wine enjoyment is symptomatic of relaxation, and these days American society is anything but relaxed. The history of wine is also synonymous with stable family relationships, and the divorce rate in the U.S. is currently about 50%.

Furthermore, wine is a complicated subject that generally requires a certain amount of leisure time and money to become a true adherent. Additionally, wine has an unflattering image amongst many American alcohol consumers who prefer beer or liquor. In my opinion, there are limits to how large the quality wine market can increase.

On a more positive note, the American population is aging, and older, more affluent people tend to enjoy wine more than other demographic groups. Hopefully they will pass their appreciation of wine to the next generation.

In many ways, the history of wine consumption in the U.S. is a microcosm of both the positives and negatives that have come with the innate American experience. Studying the history of wine consumption in the U.S. illuminates the political, cultural, religious, and racial diversity that has made the nation what it is today.

America has a relatively small but growing population of wine-lovers. Although the number of regular wine drinkers are far from being a majority, they will continue to grow as the population ages. Future trends will probably include an increase in consumption of quality varietals grown in specific, terroir-driven locations.

Ben Bicais lives in the Napa Valley and is the webmaster of

Why Are Wine Cellars Beneficial?

By Julia Martinez

Drinking wine is not only for occasions as we all know. What happens when you feel like drinking wine and it is not available? You have a surprise visitor and you want to have this wine but it is not on the market? These situations would be less tough if you have a wine cellar.

A wine cellar could store the wines you have and keep them more delicious as time passes by.

Is having a wine cellar not expensive?

Like any other home equipment, you need of course a sum of money to buy your own wine cellar. The expense will not be that long-termed for sooner you could gradually attain the long-term benefits of the wine cellar you have.

How does a wine cellar improve one's entrepreneurial skills?

Owning a wine cellar and increasing the number of wines you store on it is a way of polishing you as a future entrepreneur. As your knowledge of wines improves along the process, you could never ignore the fact that you would also be interested in starting your own wine business.

What is the best wine cellar?

Different wine cellars have their individual strengths and they vary a lot. It depends on how one sees a good wine cellar. To make your choices better, you could read about helpful tips on choosing the right wine cellar. To add, online search would be convenient and effective too.

Why is a wine cellar important?

Wine is more than a delightful drink. It has with its contents healthful benefits. Having a cellar to keep it with you without having to worry much every time you need some of it is the meaning of convenience and assurance as well.

Wine cellars are the chest that holds within them the treasure- the bottles of wine!

Julia Martinez is a freelance writer for the Wine Times. She writes a regular column which is published every Thursday. Her latest 'favorite pick' is

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