



Wine and War (2001)

by Don and Petie Kladstrup (Random House)

A book discussion by Andrew Mason

Synopsis.

How the French protected one of their most beloved possessions – their wine during WW2 from German Occupation.

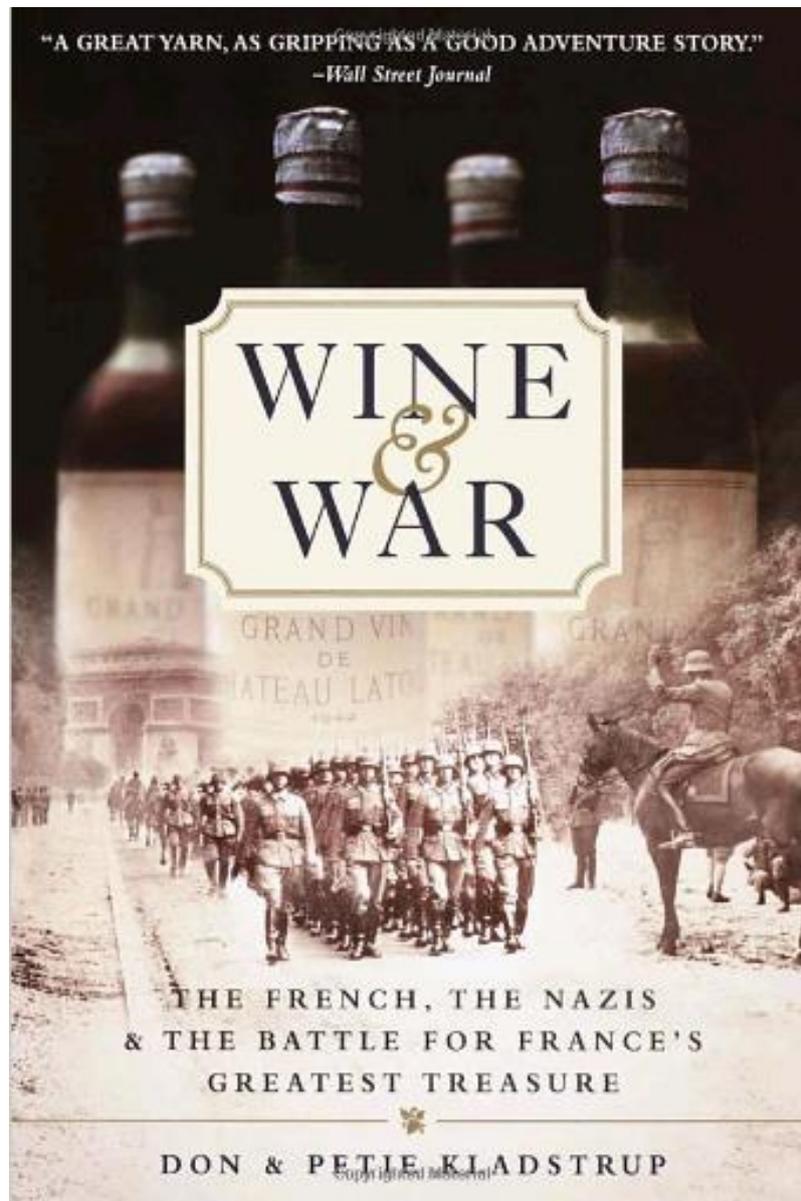
The beginning. Much discussion on French Wine houses of Champagne during WW1 – how those vintages were often poor, from effects of war: artillery, strafing, Mustard Gas penetrating vines and root systems leaving disastrous results for wine makers. This was also compounded by the late 19th century disease known as Phylloxera. Winemakers tried many and varied attempts to rid their vines of the louse from watering with seawater and white wine, to burning their vines. It was only stopped by propagating the vines with American ones as the latter contained a natural immunity. Having survived the depths of WW1 and the Great Depression, winemakers were thrust with their next monumental challenge of the 20th Century. The marauding German Army that took France in six weeks during 1940.

Wine Protection.

Some winemakers like the owner of the famous La Tour d 'Argent Restaurant in Paris was typical of those who had prized wines in their cellars. This restaurant was famous around the world and luminaries, the rich and famous were drawn to its collection. When France fell, one of the first places Hitler's appointed successor, Herman Göring (the Luftwaffe Commander) visited was this restaurant - he was in search of the famed 1867 vintage. Before the fall of Paris, a false wall in their vast cellar was created and they hid their 1867's and 20,000 of their best bottles. This left 80,000 bottles to the clutches of the Third Reich. Many other cellars or 'caves' built false walls and hid their best wines from the pilfering army; some even removed spiders from other parts of their cellars to the new walls to spin webs and create an 'old' look on the newly built walls. La Tour d 'Argent is still in business today; meals are offered at €135 & €305 per person, with half a bottle of wine. (www.latourdargent.com)

Bordeaux Chateaus were taken over by the Germans, Champagne houses looted of millions of bottles, in Burgundy German soldiers broke down cellar doors and pillaged the contents. France had not only lost its liberation it was losing its soul. The House of Salon Champagne was raided and boxes of its famed 1928 vintage removed over several days by the enemy; this wine being one that is made of the best vintage, from a vineyard of only one hectare of selected land.

Death Railway



The book Cover

"The wine produced here is rare on all counts: always a single harvest, single cru, single grape variety and to complete the singularity in this wine, it is only produced in the best vintages. In the 20th century only 37 vintages were declared, with an average production of 60,000 bottles per declared vintage". (Vineyard Brands.com 2012).

To the Conquerors go the spoils?

Herman Göring was an aficionado of Bordeaux wines and in particular wines from Chateau Lafite-Rothschild. Propaganda Minister Goebbels enjoyed wines of Burgundy and Foreign Minister Ribbentrop a lover of Champagne in particular Mumm and Pommery (he had also married into the Henkel (Champagne) family of Germany). It was noted in the book that Hitler himself was not a notable drinker however it goes on to say

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(subjectively) he was a reported beer drinker or practiced asceticist/abstinent; some say he held an addiction to amphetamines to encourage his long hours; but who knows? Some say this abstinence was invented by Goebbels to enhance his 'appearance' and perceived dedication to the national premise.

It is with interest why he held a vast cellar at the base of his Bavarian Country Home known as the Berchtesgaden or Eagles Nest. Perhaps to entertain and impress members of his Third Reich; it was at this cellar at the close of war that French Soldiers discovered this cave filled with French treasures – including stolen cases of the 1928 Salon.

The book goes on to say some German Officers were polite in their takeover of the vast wineries of France where others were downright brutal. Some vineyards were turned into shooting ranges; some Chateau's into hospitals, ammunition dumps and instances where they vandalised museum pieces including shooting paintings on the walls at Chateau Mouton-Rothschild.

Weinfuhrer Bömers & KIAebisch

Wine Merchants or Weinfuhrers began acting as the conduit between the Germans and the wineries as négociants. One famous merchant was Heinz Bömers; he worked with the wineries and treaded a fine line between trader, sympathiser and collaborator in Bordeaux. He despised the Nazi's and considered Hitler a criminal. As possibly the most influential wine merchant he was well sought out by wine makers. He even was chided by Herman Göring in Berlin for favouring wine merchants and brokering one-sided deals. Göring demanded cases of his favourite Rothschild wines from Bömers and on several instances the latter organised what the book describes as 'vin ordinaire' with glued on Rothschild labels for the Luftwaffe General.

Some say Bömers was the saviour of Bordeaux wines, that when he came no more wine was stolen.

Even Champagne had their own Weinfuhrer: Otto KIAebisch of Matteüs-Müller from Germany's Rhineland brokered deals between institutions. The Champagne region of properties formed an association that still exists today in order to deal enmasse with the Germans at the time. The head of this association was Count Robert-Jean de Vogüe head of Moët & Chandon, known as a great diplomat and negotiator. When François Taittinger supplied inferior Champagne to KIAebisch intended for Berlin, he was imprisoned temporarily until his brother bailed him out. He shared a cell with other producers who tried to pass off bad wine; KIAebisch began random checks on assignments & he knew his wine.

Moët & Chandon

The mass exportation of wine was providing an addition valuable resource: Intelligence. Shipments could be studied to calculate troop numbers and positions, even before the enemy arrived!

'The Chalk cellars, the Crayères of Champagne were being used by the Resistance, both as a refuge and as a place to stockpile arms and supplies.' (Kladstrup, 2001: 85) Moët's Chateau was burned down by the Third Reich, its buildings taken over by the Army and it was forced to provide 50,000 bottles a week or one-tenth of the total requisitioned by the Germans. The Moët House became a direct supporter of the French Resistance over the years culminating in the arrest of de Vogüe by the Gestapo who was

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later sentenced to death. This order only rescinded when all of the Champenois went on strike.



My wife and I outside Moët & Chandon (winery and cellar tour) 2009

I made inquiries with Moët when in Epernay several years ago; about the war and how business was conducted, their Cellar Guide mentioned that whilst they suffered oppression, they still sold their bottles – at a reduced cost. Recent requests about an interview pointed me in the direction of this book, 'Wine and War', which answered all my questions. The Moët of today: 26 million bottles produced annually, 2011 revenue of €1.2 Billion, co-owner of Moët-Hennessy and Louis Vuitton; it also holds a Royal Warrant to supply its main product to Queen Elizabeth. (Source: Wikipedia).

The history of WW1, the Great Depression to WW2 and French wine is told in great detail. This is a fabulous book that is well written, researched and a fascinating read to find out how France and its wine survived during these dark days of occupation and tyranny.

Verdict on the book: Highly recommended for those with an eye to history and a love of wine.

Verdict on the Moët Cellar Tour: An incredible experience that will be remembered forever by my family. The tour in 2012 costs €29 per adult and includes a small video presentation, a tour of the cellars and two glasses of Impèriale. A must on any holiday itinerary to France.

'Salute, à la vôtre santé.' (Cheers, to your health).