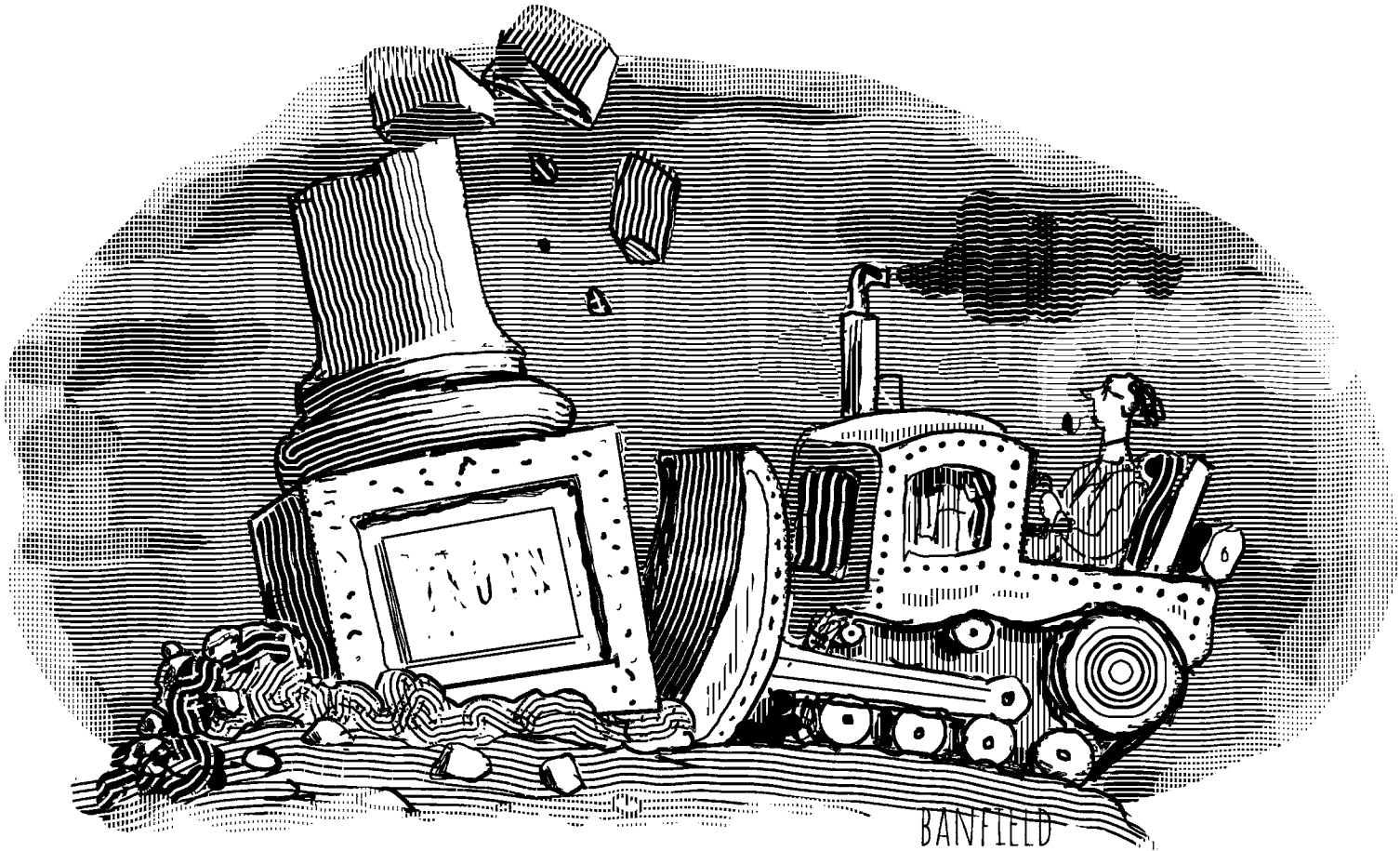


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THE FOUNDERS' CUPS

by Sam Schneider

ON SEPTEMBER 14, 1787, JUST DAYS before the Constitution would be voted out of the Philadelphia Convention, the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry threw a farewell party for George Washington. The volunteer cavalry had joined his command in 1776 and early 1777 for the Delaware River crossing, as well as the battles at Trenton and Princeton, and remained with him through Valley Forge. The bar tab from this “tippling” tells the story: 54 bottles of Madeira, 60 bottles of Claret, 22 bottles of porter, 8 of hard cider, 12 of beer, and 7 bowls of punch. Plus fees for the glasses, tumblers, and decanters the 55 gentlemen destroyed that evening. Of all these libations, the one that dominated the night dominated the Revolutionary era: Madeira.

To step into a Revolutionary-era tavern was to encounter, above all, the potent wine (17-22% alcohol) from an island some 400 miles due west of Morocco. Madeira was the king of the colonial table, carried to American shores in the hulls of laden ships, propelled by the Atlantic trade winds. Madeira’s signature style—fortified with brandy, oxidized, and heat aged—was one of history’s happy accidents. Shippers discovered that the intense heat and jostling of a long tropical sea voyage—which normally would have obliterated a delicate white wine—somehow improved Madeira. This established a maturation process called *vinho da roda* (“wine of the round voyage”) in which barrels were shipped off to bake and age in the hulls of ships. Casks were even marked with the ship’s name and the length of its voyage to denote the wine’s quality.

Once the wines were transformed by aging and oxidation, they effectively became immortal. Benjamin Franklin joked in a 1773 letter that he wished no “ordinary death,” but instead to be “immersed in a cask of Madeira wine, with a few friends, until that time” when he might be revived, à la Rip Van Winkle, to witness the state of the nation. The wines can indeed last a century or more.

Madeira’s place at the center of colonial life began with King Charles II’s Navigation Acts, particularly the Staple Act of 1663, which made French wines prohibitively expensive. Madeira, from a Portuguese territory, was exempted—making it an affordable staple for over a century. By the late 1700s, as revolutionary fervor took hold, drinking the wine

was a kind of patriotic duty—a way to avoid paying taxes to the British Crown.

The wine seemed ubiquitous during the founding period. John Hancock became involved in revolutionary activities in part due to Madeira. In 1768, when British officials seized Hancock’s sloop *Liberty*—and its 25 casks of Madeira—on charges of smuggling, a mob of 3,000 enraged patriots participated in one of Boston’s worst riots.



John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, that Continental Congress delegates would “sitt drinking Madeira, Claret and Burgundy till six or seven, and then go home, fatigued to death.” Washington liked to drink Madeira, and a lot of it. He secured over a thousand bottles for his circle during the war. As president, he ordered six “pipes”—massive, 110-gallon casks—for his Philadelphia residence. On December 13, 1799, the day before his death, his household sent an urgent request for one pipe “of a very superior quality.”

I recently recreated a Revolutionary-era tippling with several friends and the portfolio of Blandy’s, the venerable Madeira house established in 1811. We began the revelry with the house’s leaner Madeira styles: Sercial and Verdelho—two of Madeira’s four principal grape varieties, each lending its name to the

style it produces. Blandy’s five-year Sercial is acidic, saline, nutty; their Verdelho high-toned, semi-sweet, with notes of honey and pear. Excellent with green olives and country ham. Next came the richer fig-flavored Bual, followed by the opulent, caramelized Malmsey (Thomas Jefferson’s preferred varietal). We enjoyed them with salty blue cheese—and chocolate. The wines suited the complete range of my compatriots’ tastes: savory, sweet, high alcohol.

Sommelier in Chief

ONCE THE AMERICANS WON INDEPENDENCE, the same patriots who had rioted against British wine taxes now imposed tariffs on imported wines—including Madeira—to pay Revolutionary War debts. As Madeira’s dominance faded, Jefferson hoped to wean Americans off the tavern’s highly inebriating beverages (besides Madeira, they enjoyed fortified Sherry and Port, and especially punch—a potent concoction of rum, citrus, sugar, and spice) and toward a less alcoholic fare befitting the new republic’s culture of civility. Fine wines were one avenue to do so.

John Hailman’s definitive *Thomas Jefferson on Wine* (2006) chronicles the Virginian’s own wine evolution in painstaking detail. Jefferson, like many of the founders, occasionally enjoyed French wine before the Revolution, but his interest deepened once he experienced the pleasures of French culture firsthand. Jefferson arrived in Paris in 1784 as minister plenipotentiary, joining Franklin (there since 1776) and John Adams (since 1778). For a brief period in 1784-85, all three wine enthusiasts served together as diplomatic commissioners to France.

Franklin, a favorite of the French, had built an impressive 1,100-bottle cellar of Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne, well before Jefferson’s arrival. Adams had developed such a thirst for French wine that he would plead with Jefferson to use his position as minister to remove import duties on his shipments home. But it was Jefferson who would emerge as the republic’s sommelier in chief, hosting lavish wine dinners for Franklin, the Adamses (including 17-year-old John Quincy), the Lafayettes, and various luminaries of the salon scene.



Paris had given him an initial wine education, but Jefferson's palate was formed during a three-and-a-half-month tour through the continent's most prestigious wine regions. He didn't just drink; he meticulously catalogued soil types, varietals, and vinification. In Burgundy's Côte d'Or, he noted the terroir's resemblance to his Virginia, and purchased wines from his favorite vineyards in Meursault, Montrachet, and Volnay. He described the rolling hills of Beaujolais as "the richest country I ever beheld." In the Rhône, he discovered Hermitage Blanc, which he called "the first wine in the world without a single exception."

In Bordeaux, Jefferson identified four estates of "first quality": Haut-Brion, Margaux, Latour, Lafite—all of which he ordered in large quantities for himself and President Washington. But he fell most deeply for Château d'Yquem in Sauternes: "a most excellent wine," he wrote, that "hit the palate of the Americans more than any wine I have ever seen in France." The Official Bordeaux Classification of 1855, which stands nearly unchanged today, would almost totally affirm Jefferson's preferences, except for Mouton—originally a Second Growth, bumped to First in 1973—which he ranked in his third tier.

Jefferson drank his wines "young," recommending they be consumed after just four years (three for Lafite), convinced they began losing their vitality by age seven. Perhaps Jefferson was overeager. More likely, he knew the wines of this period were unruly creatures. Before the mid-1700s, a barrel of wine was a ticking clock; once tapped, its transformation to vinegar was swift and inevitable.

Two breakthroughs of the 18th century—the cylindrical glass bottle and the widespread adoption of high-quality cork—transformed fine wine into something close to what we'd recognize today. Unlike bulbous "mallet" bottles, the new shape allowed for horizontal storage—keeping corks wet and swollen, creating a nearly airtight seal. This better protected wine from oxygen—the grim reaper of the cellar—allowing it to age longer, soften, and improve.

The 18th-Century Cellar

JEFFERSON EXPERIENCED THESE INNOVATIONS and other modern techniques, but likely before winemakers had fully mastered them. For a window into the taste profiles that he might have enjoyed, I sourced several

bottles that share distinctive characteristics of 18th-century cellars: wines touched by oxygen (think deeper hues and savory flavors), wines shaped by cooler temperatures (producing lighter bodies, higher acidity, and lower alcohol), and *sec* (dry) variations of Jefferson's beloved Sauternes.

First, the *blancs*. Today's white wine is typically a product of sterile, temperature-controlled stainless steel aimed at creating fresh, aromatic, and fruity wines. The 18th-century vintner lacked the ability to completely eliminate oxygen's contact with the wine. The old-school Rioja house López de Heredia provides one window to a more oxidative style. Their Viña Gravonia, made entirely from the Viura grape, is released only after significant aging in oak barrels—whose staves allow for slow, nearly microscopic exchange with air. The 2017 vintage (their current release) shows an intense copper color and savory flavors of hazelnuts, dried fruit, wood, and brine—the results of deliberate, gentle oxidation.

The cool, sub-alpine Jura region in eastern France shows another approach to oxygen. Winemakers there employ a traditional *sous voile* ("under the veil") technique: barrels are aged without being topped off, leaving more surface of the wine exposed to air, save for a natural, protective layer of yeast. Domaine de Montbourgeau's "L'Étoile En Banode," a *sous voile* Chardonnay and Savagnin blend, features pleasing, Sherry-like oxidation. The wine is salty and bracingly acidic—a profile that might have been common in Europe during the cooler harvests of the late 18th century, when solar minimums of the Little Ice Age (approximately 1300 to 1850) challenged ripening.

The reds pose a different puzzle. The Clarets beloved by the founders—a term derived from the French *clairret*, referring to a pale red—would have been a bit different from today's robust, full-bodied Bordeaux. In the 1700s, red wines received less contact on the skins during the maceration process, meaning the wines extracted fewer tannins and thus had less color and aging potential. Clarets were probably a translucent, low-alcohol wine, closer in weight to a heavy rosé.

To evoke old-style Claret, turn to the 400-year-old Château le Puy situated on *Le Coteau de Merveilles* on the Right Bank. Their "Rose-Marie" benefits from the *saignée* method, in which pink juice is "bled off" from a red wine fermentation. The result is a full-bodied

Merlot rosé with an unexpectedly ripe strawberry flavor. For another taste of 18th-century Claret, head north to the Loire Valley, where Côt (also known as Malbec)—a centerpiece of historic Bordeaux blends—survives long after it disappeared from the Gironde. Vignoble Dinocheau's "Les Côts" is bright, floral, and low-alcohol at just 12%—a fresh expression of a grape Jefferson knew well.

Finally, there is some dispute over whether Jefferson's beloved Yquem would have experienced the process of "noble rot," in which a beneficial fungus (*Botrytis cinerea*) raisinates the grapes, concentrating their sugars. Some believe the technique did not take hold until after Jefferson's death, meaning his Sauternes may not have been the luscious, honeyed, sweet wine we know today. In any case, the "dry" Sauternes style is well worth experiencing. Seek out Yquem's sublime "Ygrec" bottling—lush apricot, pineapple, and honeysuckle balanced by citrus and spicy ginger. For more of a bargain, try "S" by Château Suduiraut—another of Jefferson's favorite châteaux in the region.

Jefferson would spend much of his career—and most of his fortune—promoting the wine culture he discovered in Europe. He advised Washington on his cellar, deployed wine to diplomatic effect during his own presidency, and made it a centerpiece of his correspondence with other founders. He attempted to establish vineyards at Monticello, hoping to prove that Virginia could one day produce world-class wine. His oenological vision came at a cost: a good deal of his \$25,000 annual presidential salary went to wine, leaving him in a state of financial distress in his later years. But Jefferson succeeded in introducing America to a new world of flavors beyond the tavern's fortified wines, even if few would immediately follow him.

Recommended:

Blandy's 5-Year Verdelho, Sercial, Boal, and Malmsey
López de Heredia "Viña Gravonia," 2017
Domaine de Montbourgeau "L'Étoile En Banode," 2018
Château Le Puy "Rosé-Marie," 2023
Vignoble Dinocheau "Les Côts," 2021
"Ygrec" de Château d'Yquem, 2021
"S" de Château Suduiraut, 2019

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