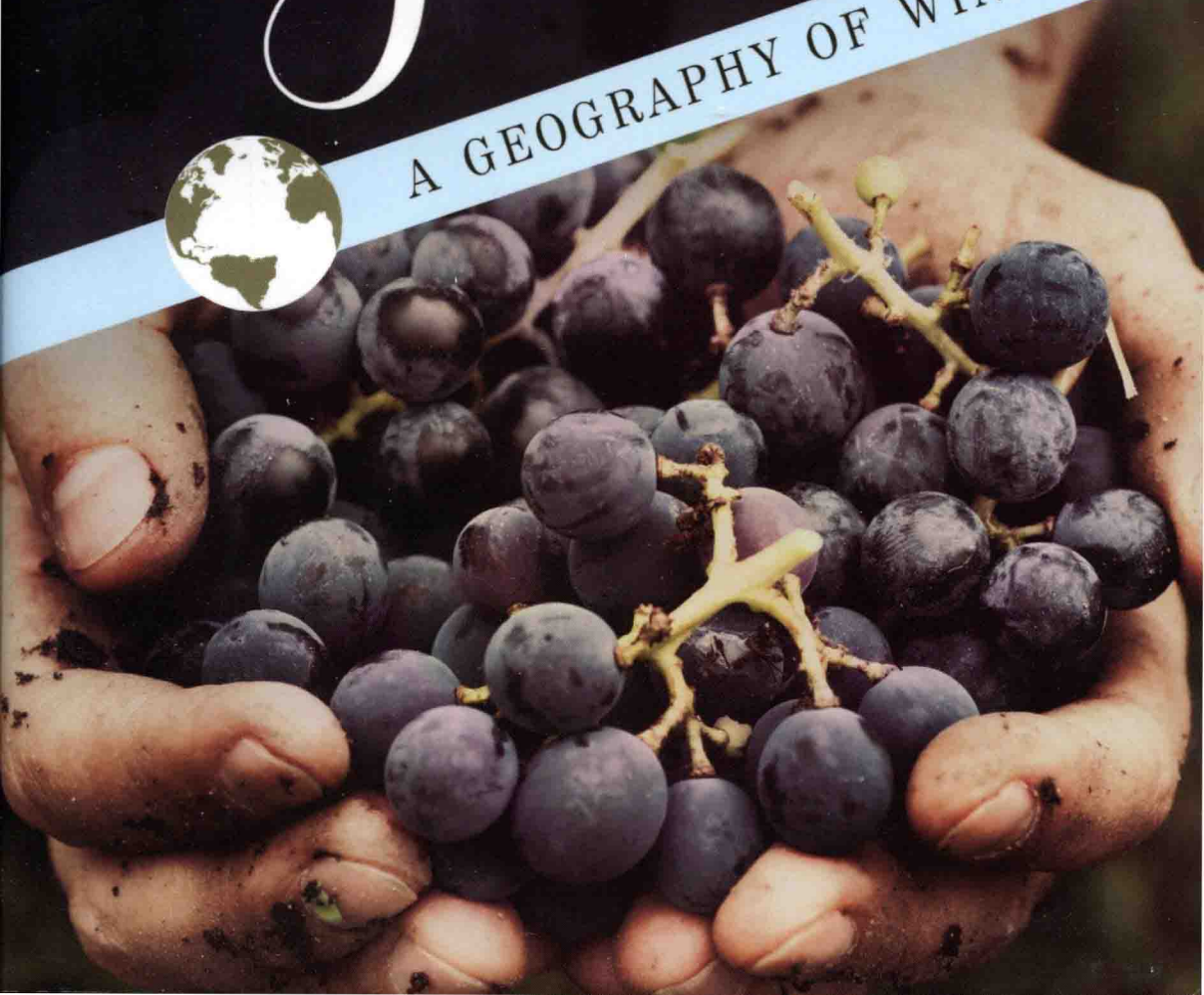


Planet ^{OF THE} Grapes

Robert Sechrist

A GEOGRAPHY OF WINE



PLANET OF THE GRAPES

A Geography of Wine

Robert Sechrist



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Planet of the Grapes

Preface

*All night I drink, and study hard all day: Bacchus and Phoebus hold divided sway.*¹

—Martial

I wrote this book to help others understand the fundamental role wine played in past civilizations, in the shaping of the modern world, and the pivotal role wine plays in modern geography, society, and economy. This role is expressed in the landscapes, trade patterns, and economic structures of many nations. Adored and abhorred, wine is unique among all global commodities. The cultural, historical, economic, social, religious, and medical significance of wine is not given its due in the American educational system, a wrong I hope to partially correct with this book. My title, *Planet of the Grapes*, refers to the pervasive importance that fermented grape juice had and continues to have in world affairs. Pierre Boule, I apologize.

Geography is the science that studies patterns, flows, and distributions in and on the earth's surface and beyond. Geographers identify what makes places unique, what makes them similar, what is possible at a location (climatically, biologically, agriculturally, technologically, or socially), and what is not possible, the ebbs and flows of phenomena across the earth's surface, and the interaction of phenomena in space. Many geographic principles, theories, and methods are exemplified here by studying the spatial distribution, patterns, and place interactions resulting from the human love affair with wine. The models discussed in the following pages apply to wine's discovery, its spread, its transport, its role in globalization, its trade, its character, its spatial variability, its role in society, its manufacture, its horticultural practices, its flavors and aromas, its lovers, and its detractors.

Vitis vinifera, the wine grape, is endlessly variable; even clones show changes. Each seed carries a unique vine, a new variety. Successful seeds have characteristics suited to the local environment. Each seedling emerges in a unique location and experiences unique conditions. Prehistoric peoples over many generations went from eating ripe grapes once a year, to nurturing particular plants, to creating vineyards and wineries. How grapes from those vines became wine (the symbol and the drink) results from the cultural and geographic heritage of Western civilization.

The varietal distribution of wines is an interpretation of physical, cultural, and economic geography. Economic geography evaluates the shape and structure of the global flow of wine from source (vine) to destination (mouth). Among those who consume wine, knowledge of geography improves their ability to select wine based on the character of regional variations in wine production methods. Tastes and aromas trigger memory. Knowledge of the local environmental characteristics and tradition enhance the wine drinking experience by tying those pleasant (and even unpleasant) memories to the specific flavors and fragrances of a specific wine.

Reflect on the quotations that introduce each chapter and you begin to appreciate the depth of the role of wine in Western society, from the transformative act of domesticating a wild man with wine (as portrayed in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Greek rise from barbarism) to modern political battles regarding public access to alcoholic beverages.

One indication of the importance of wine in Western civilization is reflected in the number and location of places named for wine or for the vine. Vienna, Austria and Venice, Italy are the two most prominent European cities whose name translates as wine. In the United States many towns have a Vine Street, Concord is a common town name. Many regional names have also become synonymous with the types of wines produced there. Champagne, Port, Burgundy, Tokay, and Marsala are just a few wine place names protected by international agreement.

To maximize your experience, I suggest readers do two things. First, visit your local wine merchant. Examine the bottles, varieties, and styles that correspond to the portion of this text you are reading. Second, take the words of the Roman poet Martial (above) to heart and accompany the reading of each section with a glass of the appropriate wine.

Indiana, Pennsylvania

A Note on Numbers and Maps

Standard conventions are followed when recording and reporting numbers. Dates are presented in years BCE and CE. BCE ended about 2015 years ago. Whenever possible statistics are presented in their native, published, measurement units. Measures of area are generally presented in acres, thousands of acres, or hectares (2.5 acres). Volume is either in gallons or hectoliters (100 liters or 26.4 gallons), depending on the source. Tonne(s) refers to a weight of 1,000 kg and tons refers to 2,000 lbs. Descriptions of bottle and barrel sizes, capacities, and additional measures can be found in chapter 11.

The maps accompanying the text are simple and general references to major wine regions. There are two sources I recommend for accessing high-quality detailed maps of wine regions. The first is the Society of Wine Educators' online wine maps at: <http://winewitandwisdomswe.com/wine-spirits-maps/wine-maps-2015-csw-study-guide/>. Produced by Bill Lembeck, they show all the world's wine regions in a consistent format. The second source is the *World Atlas of Wine* by Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson. This volume contains large-scale topographic maps of wine regions and vineyard locations. A third set of sources are the regional and national websites promoting each region's wine. However, while often quite informative individually, these often lack consistency and availability across regions.

Introduction: The World of Wine

When it comes to wine, there is no ingredient more important than location. The land, air, water, and weather where grapes are grown are what make each wine unique.¹

—Origins.wine

The world of wine was much simpler just a few years ago. At the beginning of the millennium New Zealand's Sauvignon Blanc swept the planet as *the* newly discovered source for this already famous international variety. Since 2003, a succession of places and grape varieties have become media darlings. In 2005, thanks to the movie *Sideways*, Pinot Noir popularity spiked and Merlot sales plummeted. Argentinean wines made from Malbec and Torrontes were introduced to North America with great success. Calls for Riesling revivals echoed in the corners of wine shops and magazines. Many U.S. consumers got headaches trying to distinguish between Pinot Gris, Grauburgunder, and Pinot Grigio (all the same variety but from France, Germany, and Italy, respectively).

The establishment and subsequent discovery of new wine regions are a global trend, with wine consumers the winners. Wine, and the search for new places where grapes could grow, was a driving factor in European colonialism. China, which had very limited vineyards under the strict communist regime of the past, is now number six in wine grape acreage. Virginia is becoming known for its Petit Verdot and the Finger Lakes region of New York for its Riesling, which tastes entirely different from Washington State's Riesling. The countries of Georgia and Turkey have reemerged as net exporters. The hunt is on for new wine lands, often in unlikely places. Researchers are developing varieties capable of succeeding where no grape has grown before. What or where will be next?

Wine has been a major component of the global economy for centuries. Carefully stored and transported on wooden ships, wine was a widely traded liquid commodity. Proven by millennia of consumers, wine is a tasty, healthy food, consumed around the world by tens of millions daily. Producing the world's wine supply employs millions across six continents. The distribution and sales network delivering wine to consumers, including food service personnel, employs many millions more.

Grapes have the amazing capacity to produce a high-value crop in soils and locales where other fruits, vegetables, and even grains wither. The vine makes otherwise barren land green and productive, resulting in significantly higher population densities than otherwise possible. The potential for great financial returns makes grape growing one of the most studied agricultural fields. The first books on farming dealt solely with grape growing. In the regions where they grow, grapes are a keystone species, a defining element of the cultural landscape. In these places (and others) the grape symbolizes wealth, plenty, sophistication, and civilization.

Portland state geographer Teresa Bulman supported this view in her 2003 presidential address to the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers when she said, "Many subfields of geography intersect with the world of wine. . . . [T]raining in geography enables geographers to see and understand numerous aspects of the physical and human dimensions of . . . wine."² Or, as geographers John Dickenson and John Salt expressed it in their 1982 analysis of the relationship between wine and geography, wine

may be studied from a variety of perspectives and encompasses the influence of the physical environment, historical diffusion of the vine and viticulture, economic geographies of cultivation and marketing, political influences on trade and production, and cultural perceptions of landscape, products, and people.³

The evolution of the global network of wine producers, shippers, distributors, retailers, and consumers is rife with opportunities to explain geographic theories, concepts, and models regarding economics and global trade. Geography, and the related concept of *terroir*, can go a long way toward explaining why each wine is as individualistic as a fingerprint. Geographer Warren Moran explained *terroir* from the geographic perspective this way: "That the physical environment influences the vine and its production is incontestable. The vine has its roots in the soil and leaves and fruit in the atmosphere. Its juice, musts, and wines inevitably reflect these conditions."⁴

Despite the acknowledged connection between place and grape, wine has a murky and ill-studied geography. In the United States nativism and religious fervor led to ostracism of those who consumed alcohol. For decades the topic was shunned by social scientists because of the long-standing social stigma associated with it. Research dollars flowed from state and federal

agencies, whose sole existence is the demonizing of alcoholic beverages, to those who “discovered” health and social problems caused by drinking. The open mind of the researcher is questioned when government officials like U.K. chief medical officer Sally Davies said on British TV, “There is no safe level of drinking.”⁵ To be fair, other state and federal agricultural agencies promote the production of wine grapes and alcoholic beverages. Revenue and treasury agencies promote drinking as a source of tax revenue.

Drinking fermented products with premeditated intoxication in mind began more than 100,000 years ago. Initially consumption was fortuitous: eating overripe and fermenting fruit or honey mixed with enough water to permit fermentation. Later it became more regularized, as people camped near the fruit groves and saved honey for subsequent fermentation at ceremonial events. Drinking fermented grape juice (wine) began at least 10,000 years ago in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. In these places and others, the grape symbolizes wealth, plenty, sophistication, and civilization. Diffusionary studies tell us of wine’s spread from the Caucasian foothills to Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, and the world.

For most of Mediterranean history wine was a given; everyone knew the process (although not why or how grape juice transformed into wine) as well as anyone today in that same region. Numerous Egyptian tomb paintings depict wine making and consumption. Cato’s *De Agri Cultura*, written in 134 BCE, is the oldest extant Latin text. Its topic is grape production and wine making.

Where and when people could not obtain wine they drank less potent alcoholic beverages (grain beer, fermented milk, banana beer, and fruit wines) while still craving the grape wine enjoyed by royalty. Since its discovery wine has always been the leading high-value liquid commodity. As a liquid commodity it required specialized containers and transport.

Wine, as identified by cultural anthropologist Donald Horton, satisfies four basic human needs: (1) hunger and thirst, (2) medicine, (3) religious ecstasy, and (4) social jollification.⁶ Together these characteristics make wine an important factor in human physical and mental health.

Ancients considered wine to be the “food with two faces.” The comedy and drama masks derive directly from the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine. In moderation wine is good for both mind and body. Wine was used to kill microorganisms in water millennia before the microscope first allowed us to see them. Unlike beer and liquor, wine contains many trace nutrients. People throughout the centuries have consumed wine to escape their daily worries and physical ailments. Wine, a natural tranquilizer and depressant, has the capacity to dull mental and physical pain. For centuries it was practically the only medication available to most of the world’s population.

The ancients also drank wine for its nutritional value. Red wine, through the compound resveratrol, scavenges free radicals. Charred foods have free

radicals; physiologically red wine is, therefore, an appropriate counterbalance to grilled (charred) food. Radiation also creates free radicals. Medical researchers believe red wine is especially useful for patients undergoing chemotherapy. This capacity of wine was well understood as early as the 1950s, when it was rumored that Soviet nuclear submarine crews were issued red wine to combat exposure. The advice “In Case of Nuclear Attack, Drink Red Wine,” long an urban myth, was verified by University of Pittsburgh researchers in 2008.⁷

Consume too much, however, and the alcohol begins to have a poisonous effect on internal organs. Consume way too much (in one sitting) and your body will violently reject it. Before you reach that point, however, you will probably be physically discordant and your mental processes will be attenuated. Worst of all, you will reach a state of boorishness that can only be tolerated by others in your condition.

The newly (re)discovered health advantages of wine drinking encouraged many Americans to start enjoying it in the 1990s. During the Prohibition era medical texts were purged of any mention of the positive effects of wine. For almost fifty years after Prohibition’s repeal, this information was suppressed by government health professionals. In the 1970s medical research discovered that moderate wine consumption reduced coronary disease, but the government was uninterested in promoting wine as having medicinal benefits.

The concepts of regional geography and *terroir* are closely related. They both consist of studying and classifying a location’s geology, topography, soil, weather, and climate. Geographers commonly specialize in a region, cataloging, inventorying, and tracking some or all of the characteristics of that region with the goal of deriving explanations for the patterns observed. Grape growers rely on the products of geography, including climatological, meteorological, geomorphological, and pedological (soil) data, to select vineyard sites and grape varieties. Someone evaluating a location’s *terroir* does so with the goal of identifying the potential of the land to produce a grape crop and ultimately revenue.

Finally, wine is politically and socially controversial. The conflicting messages associated with wine are expressed and visible on the American landscape. Social wine geography in the United States is greatly influenced by paternalistic governmental control, which in turn is controlled by vocal, often fear-mongering, minorities whose primary arguments are replete with pseudo-science, opinion expressed as fact, and outright lies. All wine labels require federal approval. When *60 Minutes* aired the story “The French Paradox” in 1991, the government’s anti-alcohol stance came to light. Since then, grudging officials have acknowledged that moderate daily wine consumption is good for the average adult. Political kickback from the “concerned” resulted in the use of scary terms to describe alcohol consumption and reduced legal alcohol limits for vehicle operation.

Governmental suppression of freedom of speech regarding wine ended in 1996 in the Supreme Court case 44 *Liquormart, Inc. v. Rhode Island*. A Rhode Island law forbade the public advertising of wine prices in flyers, newspapers, and/or posters in store windows. The Court decided the Rhode Island law was an unconstitutional suppression of free speech, as the store's statements were true. The Court's action simultaneously struck down several other state laws and federal policies.

In international geo-econo-politics wine is among the most intensely debated commodities. Historically, wine exports and imports were controlled by national policy either to assist friendly nations or to hurt enemies. For the last 1,000 years British wine imports fluctuated with changing Continental relationships. Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iranians smashed wine bottles found in the cellars of Western hotels. In 1991, Americans smashed French wine bottles when the French government objected to U.S. actions in Iraq. In local socio-geo-econo-politics the locations and rules under which wine may be produced, possessed, and consumed demonstrate the complexity and intensity of opinions regarding this simple natural product. Wine is seen as a source of government revenue, a cultural trait depicting both elegance and ruin, wholesome, and a danger to our youth.

Look around! Are there grape and vine symbols incorporated into the architecture of the buildings? Is there any artwork that contains grapes, wine, vines, or wine gods in sight? How about advertising? How many stores retail wine in your community? They exist all around you and you will see them when you look.

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