

From James the Sommelier – The Geography of Wine

‘Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours’

The Geography of Wine

Can wine be considered the world’s drink? I believe so. If there is one item still thriving in the world today that has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the deaths of great rulers, the colonization of the world and the redrawing of the world map it has got to be wine.

Significant, then, seems a fitting description for this historically omnipresent drink, maybe even a little feeble. How can you refer to something that not only spans geographical space but also time? It must be more than a ‘drink’, surely. Whatever the classification, you can be certain that wine has become so much more than a beverage... more of an institution of sorts. Ideology, culture, tradition, rules, regulations, distinctions all feature in the composition of the world’s drink.

Over this second month I will be exploring how wine has metamorphosed from simply a food and beverage item to the realms of distinction in its own right. It is, in a word, epic.

Wine’s Timeline

Guess when the first records of wine date from? The Romans. The Egyptians. The Greeks. Transport yourself to 2000 years before the Greek civilization to Eastern Europe and you stumble on the first recorded Eurasian wine grape grown in Georgia in 6000 B.C. To put that into perspective, it was the millennium when the plough was invented and rice began to be cultivated in Asia. A long time ago. By 4000 B.C. the Greeks had developed viticulture in order to fuel offerings to their god of revelry, Dionysus. Egypt, in 3000 B.C., recorded wine production in its superstitious ceremonial life. Of course the quality of these wines is debatable in comparison to wines we drink today but, nonetheless, they existed.

Not until the Roman Empire were wine’s institutional roots established. The major European wine producing regions were laid in France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Viticulture increased along with oenology, as the Romans began storing their wines facing north because the conditions were “constant and unshifting.” Perhaps the most important event was the invention of the wine press. This revolutionary technology enabled the grapes to be crushed without including excess seeds and stems releasing undesirable tannins. The quality of wine inevitably increased.

Jump to Medieval Europe via the Islamic Caliphate and wine is still bringing health and happiness to people’s lives. By this time, the Church had taken control of major European wine growing regions and developed them into a capitalist enterprise. They had to grow it for communion, of course, so what else could they have done with the surplus!? In the early 16th century wine followed the first conquistadors to discover the New World and these ‘mission grapes’ laid the foundations for South American wines today.

Nowadays, wine spans the globe and has many followers, like me and, possibly, you. Slightly epic, wouldn’t you say?

TIPS: Viticulture: the study and action of growing wine and grape harvesting; Oenology: the study of wine making

For more information about wine join our wine classes at That Little Wine Bar, 54 Chow Thye Road, George Town, Penang

Email thatlittlewinebar@gmail.com for details