

WINE

This file contains two texts:

- Wine of the Kingdom (1996)
- And He Shall Laugh Them to Scorn (1997)

The Wine of the Kingdom

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"When I depart this world to appear before my beloved Lord to account for my sins which have been scarlet, I shall say to Him: I cannot remember the name of the village; I do not even recollect the name of the girl, but the wine, my God! was Chambertin."

(Hilaire Belloc)

In autumn, the village of Dunham in the Eastern Townships becomes the centre of civilisation in this part of the world. For where else in Quebec more than in Dunham with its four vineyards, L'Orpailleur, Les Côtes d'Ardoise, Les Trois Clochers, and Les Blancs Côteaux, are the simple gestures of our cultural heritage being repeated more often and with greater reverence: the picking of the grapes, their crushing underfoot (so to speak), and the fermentation of their juice? For civilisation as we know it is inconceivable without wine, but then so is Catholic Christianity which is the religion of wine.

The Blood of the Earth

The recent development of vineyards in our midst finally allows us to do the one sacramental gesture that had hitherto been denied us, viz. to drink the blood of our own land. For wine more than any other product of the earth concentrates the essence of a place. And by this sacramental communion, the blood of the earth becomes our own blood... and in Medieval lore, it was well known that if meat begets flesh and vegetables beget excrement, wine begets blood. So if you feel anaemic, forget your spinach and get yourself a bottle of wine (invalid port?).

Perhaps one of the few glories of our times is that we can drink at will all the wines of the world, yet that obscures local wine, the only one to have any sacramental value. My own first initiation to wine came in 1970 when we spent nearly a year in Toulouse and the High Pyrenees; I vividly recall my first sip of Jurançon, that noble wine of the Pyrenean foothills (near Pau in Béarn)... said by Hoffmann to be "*the perfect accompaniment of religious music*". Until then my experience was that wine (if Canadian Sherry can pass for wine) was what women and children sipped at Christmas in the kitchen, while men gobbled down whisky in the pantry. I later learned in graduate school in Ontario from expatriate "Brits" to drink cheap Australian and South African "sherries", the potables that lubricated our evening musings and gave me my first hangovers. So living in Toulouse amidst the vineyards of Languedoc was a golden opportunity to learn that wine not only came in two colours, but that it offered the most glorious palette of sensual experiences that one could imagine, and that each of these was tied to a particular bit of land. And thus, each meal was a sacramental occasion in which the bottles on the table, the red and the white, the dry and the sweet, opened up for us an unsuspected world of wonders... and civilisation. And we experienced the south of France through the palate: Madiran, Bergerac, Monbazillac, Cahors, Gaillac,

Minervois, Corbières, Frontignan, Listel, Limoux... Back in Canada, the sin tax on wine put an end to all that pleasure and wine changed from a daily companion to a distant and occasional friend. The magic that united the wine we drank and the land we trod vanished... until a few years ago when we lived for the greater part of a year in Germany and the glorious experience began anew, as we enjoyed the great Rieslings of the Moselle, the multifarious hocks of the Rhineland, the generous Bocksbeutel-wines of Franconia, and the endearing red Trollingers and Schwarzrieslings of the Black Forest.

And so the dozen or more vineyards of southern Québec finally offer us the opportunity to act civilised at least on occasion. And it is particularly fitting that the wines they produce not be available at the SAQ where they would be lost and desecrated in the great warehouses of ostentatious consumption amid all the potables of the world, all of them expatriates. The implantation of vineyards is a great step forward and one hopes a permanent one. Some of the old Quebec vineyards have not been so lucky. I recall in boarding school that the good fathers had a vineyard which was in production for nearly a century; it had been planted by Alonzo Wright, "the King of the Gatineau" and the original owner of the estate in the 1850s. The school, **Le Collège apostolique St-Alexandre de la Gatineau**, had been originally founded in 1905 under the patronage of a rich Parisian lady, Madame Lebaudy, as an agricultural school for immigrant French farmers by a group of religious priests and brothers expelled from France by the infamous Combes Laws of 1903. In the mid-1950s, the estate still had all the accoutrements of the earlier institution: 2 000 acres of agricultural land, barns, stables (110 head of prize Holsteins), a pig-sty, a sheep-hold, chicken-houses, a bakery, an apiary (3.5 tons of honey), sugar-works (10 000 maple trees), orchards, and two small vineyards producing four tons of grapes - enough to make more than 3 000 bottles of wine. The farm even won a silver medal at the 1943 Provincial Fair even though "*the bull was found lacking*" (le taureau laissait à désirer). There was a jolly and rubicund Alsatian lay brother by the name of Frère Jean de la Croix (Camille Issler) who tended the vines from 1910 to the late 1950s and made the wine. He produced both for the altar and for the high table. I cannot say if the wine was any good, though I did steal the occasional sip from the sacristy or the Fathers' refectory. One night a group of boys sneaked out of the dormitory and made their way into the wine-cellar; they stole gallon-jugs of what they thought was wine but was actually vinegary lees dregs from the barrels. The stuff was well nigh undrinkable, so they added sugar. To make the story short, they had a great time, but the next morning at 5:40 a.m., they could not make it out of bed and the unmistakable smell of their purple vomit spewed all over the bathrooms gave them away... During class that day they were called to the prefect's office, and by recess time, they had disappeared, never to be seen or heard of again, as if they had never been... And through that silent lesson, we were taught the evils of alcohol... a straightforward illustration of Question #64 of the Catechism: *What is the most dangerous kind of Gluttony? The most dangerous kind of Gluttony is drunkenness, which destroys reason, makes man like a beast, and often causes his death....* and evidently his expulsion from boarding school!

A Sacred Drink

From earliest times, wine appeared mysterious to humans. The ancient Mesopotamians could not fail to see that in order to get wine, the grapes had to die and rot, and from the rot rose the glorious drink. Life-death-resurrection, the latter body greater than the former.

In the classical world, wine was associated with the god Dyonisios or Bacchus. Bacchus is a drunken god, whose essence lies in madness, but madness is of divine origin.

- Bacchus is the god of the earth and of the seasons, god of the toil necessary to grow the grape, and therefore the god of order;
- he is the god of pleasure, of joie de vivre, of love and conviviality;
- he is the god of drunkenness, madness and disorder;
- he is the god of culture, of artistic creation, of poetical inspiration, and of theatre;
- since Bacchus and Venus are siblings by their father Jupiter, wine is the great catalyst of Love, "*Wine, taken in moderation, predisposes to love, as a light breeze kindles the fire*" (Ovid's Art of Love); still a great wind will extinguish the fire as surely as drunkenness is the enemy of Love. It is through its capacity to create illusion that wine succeed in this feat. "*For thy love is better than wine*" proclaims the Song of Solomon (1:2).

Wine abolishes modesty and encourages transgressions and is thus the stimulus of illicit love affairs and is associated with the corruption of the world, as Noah, Loth and Holophernes can testify. St. Jerome in his treatise "*On Maintaining Virginity*" warns young women who wish to keep their virtue against wine. The prophets speak of those who "*erred through wine*" (Is 28:7) and remind the people that "*Whoredom and wine... take away the heart*" (Hos 4:11).

Wine also generates truthfulness as the old saying proclaims "*In vino veritas*". The trouble is all truth is not fit to be said out loud; luckily the truth is often said to another as drunk as oneself, and hopefully he will have forgotten by the next morning.

Drunkenness is now currently used, especially by men, as an excuse for criminal behaviour, and some judges have let the accused go scot-free because they were apparently not responsible for their actions. Not so, in Scottish tradition, the opposite would be argued: "*If he would do this when he was drunk, what would he no' do when he was sober!*"

Finally wine is the "noir mélange - the dark brew" and the glaucous poison which engenders sottishness and solitude, as we are reminded by the "poètes maudits" of the 19th century, Baudelaire, Verlaine,...

The Church has always maintained an ambiguous relationship with wine, and practically none at all with spirits (alcoholic, that is). Drinking wine is in many ways a Christian pleasure, in that it contains in itself its own punishment, as anyone who has experienced a hangover can testify, and the passage from the "deceptive joys" to the "anguish of the sobering down" is often brutal and relentless. But Scripture does warn us enough: "*He that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich*" (Prov 21:17), and "*Look not upon the wine when it is red... at the last it biteth like a serpent... thine eyes shall behold strange women and thy heart shall utter perverse things*" (Prov 23:29ss).

Christianity finds no god in wine, because God cannot be experienced through chemicals. The experience of God brings rapture not drunkenness; "sobria ebrietas - sober intoxication", as the oxymoron puts it so nicely. Christ was, we are told, "*a man gluttonous, and a wine bibber*" (Mt. 11:18) and His presence at Cana and His changing of water not only into wine but into "good wine" has opened up a new way of looking at wine and banquets; Cana supersedes the Feast of Balthazar. There is a famous painting of Bacchus in the Louvre by Leonardo da Vinci in his usual sfumato style. It is generally thought to have been designed at first as a picture of the Baptist to whom a thyrsus and a crown of vine branches were later added. The upheld finger originally pointing to the coming Christ, now presumably refers to the new religion and the new role taken on by wine. Still, ultimately it is the "wine of the Kingdom (Mt. 26:29)" that we are called to share and to partake of the "*perfumed Blood of Christ*".

Wine for the Body

Wine is good for us, especially red wine. Although all good Catholics have known that instinctively for a long time, we are now told that it is because wine contains phenols which are antioxidants which prevent lipoproteins from oxidising (rusting) and blocking our arteries and also protect us from cancer. Just think of all the cabbage and turnips teetotallers have to eat to get the same effect. Talking about phenol, there are (new?) throat lozenges on the market containing phenol which anaesthetises and disinfects,... and also gives you a breath reminiscent of the dissecting room (where cadavers are injected with phenol as a preservative). So give me my daily phenol in a crystal glass, disguised as wine any day!

The Scriptures themselves tell of the medicinal properties of wine, as an antiseptic (in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Lk 10:34), as a belly-ease ("*use a little wine for thy stomach's sake*", 1Tm 5:23), and as a pain killer ("*they gave him to drink wine mixed with myrrh*", Mk 15:23). They also recognise the psychological benefit of "*wine that maketh glad the heart of man*" (Ps 104:15).

Drinking wine is one of the few pleasures in which the five senses are involved: the hand (touch) lifts the glass, the eyes dwells on the colour ("*la robe*") of the wine, the glass is brought up to the nose to suck in the aroma or bouquet ("*le nez*"), and the liquid is slipped into the mouth for taste. What about the ear, you say? Why do you think that the cork pops and the glasses clink together?

There is a diversity in wine that hardly knows a limit. There are wines for all occasions, such as burgundies for love ("*les vins de Bourgogne ont de l'amour*") and clarets for intellectual pursuits. Rabelais liked to sip Aunis, a red wine from his native Loire Valley, while reading his breviary. Others have historical or romantic connections: Abélard and Héloïse enjoyed Muscadet; Louis XIV drank burgundy on his doctor's instructions ("*To have an illness which makes one discover such vines is a gift of God*") and when again on his doctor's advice he changed to claret, it created an uproar; Napoléon liked Chambertin; French presidents traditionally drink Romanée-Conti... And my significant other delights in Zinfandel, that mysterious variety of unknown origin (Central European?) first planted near San Francisco in 1852 by Agoston Haraszthy, a

Hungarian nobleman who settled in California in 1848 and which produces hearty reds with a high tannin content. Champagnes command a great price and have a large following. They owe their reputation to Dom Pierre Pérignon, the blind monk who was cellarer from 1668 to 1715 at the Abbey of Hautvilliers; he had a great "nose" for wine and was a famous blender; yet he is remembered as the man who "put the bubbles in the champagne", by retaining in the bottle the gas produced by the "new wine", which in the Gospel is said to make "*the (old) bottles break*" (Mt 9:17).

Burgundy has always claimed to produce the best wines in Christendom and Erasmus concurs that the province can "*befitly be called the mother of men, having such noble milk within her breasts wherewith to suckle her sons*". It is even reported that one of the reasons for the cardinals' reluctance to return to Rome after the Babylonian Captivity in Avignon was their sadness at leaving the vineyards of Burgundy (Petrarch). The nearby castle in Savigny boasts on its transom: "*The wines of Savigny are nourishing, theological and morbifuge*".

My own favourite wines are those of Sauternes, Barsac and Monbazillac, once the "milks of gourmets", and the spätlese wines of Germany. All are sweet liquorous wines, made from overripe grapes which have shrivelled on the stock and been overtaken by *Botrytis cinerea*, the fungus of "noble rot", which gives them their peculiar musty taste and smell. But they are not fashionable any more, though in Victorian times they were served with fish. Voltaire also drank sweet wines during meals and he preferred muscatel (Muscat de Frontignac). In the first recorded wine-contest in Paris in 1214, the monk Rudolph being the rapporteur and King Philip Augustus the chairman of the jury, the winners were wines from Cyprus and Alicante, a malmsey and a local Parisian wine (Goutte d'Or), probably all sweet. "*De gustibus non est disputandum*", indeed one cannot argue about fashion or individual taste. "*There are people who have been known to prefer bad wine to good, just as there are men who are fascinated by bad women*" (André Simon).

But bad wine is better than no wine at all. And over the centuries, all kinds of recipes have been tried to improve on bad wine or at least to keep it from getting worse. Some of the tricks are dubious to say the least, as was the custom of Ancient Greeks of adding resin, thus foreshadowing modern spruce- and root-beers. The current version is called Retsina, "*the taste for (which) can be acquired, but there is no need to acquire it*". Other attempts include the addition of spices, fruits and nuts, giving rise to the various warm spiced and mulled wines which traditionally reappear at Christmastime, particularly in northern climes, the most famous being the German Glühweins, the Scandinavian Glöggs, the mysterious and aphrodisiac Hippocras, and, for summer, the treacherous Sangria. Given the right atmosphere and temperature, say a cold and windy winter day at an outside Advent market, such as the Christkindlmarkt of Nuremberg, the potions are quite welcome. But by far the best recipe has been to add brandy, and this gave rise to our fortified wines, in particular to port and sherry, those staples of British gentility.

Wine for the Soul

There are two ways of telling the story of wine. The Catholic writer usually stresses the care the Church took of the ancient traditions and her role in maintaining and developing the culture of the grape and the making of the wine, as part of her overall mission as savior of Western civilisation. The Protestant, though acknowledging the Church's interest in at least sacramental wine, insists on the role of the laity in the matter and usually paints the Church as the great despoiler, robbing successive generations of their vineyards. The truth is probably somewhere in between.

There are obvious examples, such as the Benedictine nuns who first planted the vines in Franconia, near Kitzingen and Ochsenfurt in early Medieval times. In the 10th century, according to the Roll of Abbot Irminon, the Abbey of St. Germain des Prés in Paris had vineyards which produced some 12 000 gallons of wine a year, of which 2 000 were reserved for the Sacrament. The rest was for public sale or for the use of the monks. The Rule of St. Benedict allowed each monk a pint a day, but the wine was often poor and clouded; then as today, the best was sold out. They used to do the same trick to us in boarding school: in the spring each class in turn went out to the sugar-bush to collect the sap; it was hard work for small boys to paddle through the snow on snowshoes carrying the large pails; but there were compensations: classes cancelled, smoking allowed, the sugar-bush lunch... and we were promised a block of maple sugar at a later date... But, invariably, we were given the final batches of sugar made after the maple tree buds began to burst,... and whose acrid taste rendered them unsalable.

Wherever the Church went, it planted vines and there are records of many vineyards in Medieval England. Granted the weather was milder then, but the harvest must have been of verjuice more often than not... And some sweetener, such as honey, had to be added in order to produce wine. But that is a problem common to all northern vineyards, and to this day German hocks are often so enhanced (chaptalising, they call it).

St. Vincent, martyred in 304 under Diocletian, became the patron of winemakers, but for no apparent reason. It has been suggested, it might be a pun on his name: Vin-Sang (Wine-Blood). There was a St. Bacchus in Syria in the time of St. Chrysostom, but the relation with the pagan god was too obvious, and he has long disappeared.

In Catholic tradition, wine is the first and last thing a person should drink. At birth (now generally at Baptism), the mother dips her finger in wine and gives it to the suckling. Thus, when the future King Henri IV of France was born in Pau, he was given a sip of the local Jurançon and had his lips rubbed with garlic. Similarly the dying is traditionally given a sip of wine; this is a sort of libation ritual between the living and the dead (cf. pouring wine on a grave), meant to relieve the "thirst of the dead". But it is also the farewell glass before the great separation. The wine used at the deathbed is called "St. John's Wine" and is especially blessed by the priest after the last Gospel at Mass on the saint's day. The connection is the poisoned wine that John is said to have consumed with impunity. The wine is also used at the sickbed for ordinary illnesses.

The obvious connection that Christians make is between wine and the saving Blood of Christ. In the cloister of St. Etienne du Mont, arguably the finest church in

Paris, there is a window of 1622 attributed to Nicolas Pinaigrier representing the Mystical Wine Press, in which Christ is shown in the cross-press, his blood flowing to heal his people. There is a painting on a similar theme in the Tate Gallery in London, "The Winepress" by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (+1908) showing Christ barefoot, wearing a dalmatic over a short and sleeveless tunic, a gold crown on his head, trampling the grapes with bare feet in a wooden press. The winepress is taken here as a symbol of the Cross, although it also occurs in the Bible as the image of the wrath of God (Is. 63:3), as do the grapes (Rev. 14:8). By contrast, the grapes carried on pole by Hebrew spies (Nm 13:17-33) are a symbol of the bountifulness of the Promised Land, but also the promise of Christ (Augustine). Grapes held by Child Jesus symbolise both his death and the Eucharist. Finally, the vine represents the Church (Jn 15:1) as it did Israel (Is. 5:1)

At the Last Supper, the wine used by Christ was probably cut with water, as was the universal custom in ancient times and still is in wine-drinking countries. The Church Fathers saw in this an image of the union of Christ and his people (Irenaeus and Cyprian) or else of the blood and water flowing from the Saviour's side (Ambrose). The addition of water has been the universal practice of the Church in its liturgy. In 1549, in our First Prayer Book, the practice was abandoned, only to be revived during the 19th century and it was finally incorporated into the 1928 Deposited Prayer Book as "an ancient tradition of the Church". We lost in the process the most beautiful Gallican prayer that used to be said during the pouring of the water (*Deus, qui humanae substantiae...*); and it is always a blessing to hear Fr. Simons use it, as he leaves the sacristy for the Entrance Procession at Mass.

The wine used for Mass has to be grape wine to the exclusion of that made from any other fruit or plant. It must contain alcohol and not too much vinegar (more than a third would make it invalid). Wine alcohol or brandy can be added to it during or after fermentation to stabilise it and to make it more palatable, but the alcohol content should generally not be higher than 12% (dry) to 18% (sweet wines), and in no case beyond 21%. The wine used can be either red or white, though the former is more symbolic. Since the 16th century when purificators came into use, white has been more popular for practical reasons. It can also be dry or sweet, and again sweet wines are generally used, as more acceptable on an empty stomach. We use Muscatel, a sweet liquorous wine made from the Muscat grape; until recently, it came from some Mediterranean island, but presently we are using a Californian wine.

In the Ancient Church, some heretics, known as Aquarians or Hydroparastatae, among the Ebionites, the Encratites, and the Marcionites, celebrated the Eucharist with water apparently for ascetic reasons. More recently, dissenting churches and extreme Protestants, who reject the sacramental system entirely, have argued for the use of unfermented grape juice. The reason has more to do with the Temperance Movement than with anything else. Such a change has no warranty of any orthodox tradition, though apparently Durandus, the great Medieval liturgist, had envisaged the possibility. Two privately published tracts by one James Miller of Toronto in the McGill Library attest of this movement: "*The Forlorn Hope: An appeal to the Church on the*

Unpropriety of Using Fermented Things in the Sacrament" (1853) and *"The Decree and Commission of the Almighty Appointing Jeremiah and his Representatives the Ministers of Religion to Intoxicate the Nations"* (1862).

A final "religious" connection is the use of Biblical names for the nomenclature of wine bottles: Jeroboam (4 bottles), Rehoboam (6), Mathusalem (8), Salmanazar (12), Balthazar (16), Nabuchodonozor (20).

Muslims do not drink alcoholic beverages, though some have argued that the prohibition applies only to drinks known to the Prophet, which therefore excludes the likes of Scotch. Once King François I of France sent a delegation to Suliman the Magnificent and among other gifts there were two cases of Graves labelled "mineral water". Suliman is said to have replied: *"It is foolish to drink wine when they have such delicious mineral water"*.

The Ageing of Wine

A remarkable feature of great wines is their ability to age gracefully, reaching their peak slowly and maintaining it for a very long time. In this they are like the best people among us. Most wines, however, peak early and they gradually lose their flavour, like so many of us do as we grow older. This ability to age was particularly true of wines made before the great Phylloxera epidemic of 1879. Since then, wines are said not to be as long-lived. Alec Waugh recalls drinking in 1952 a Margaux of 1875, which he described as magnificent. Oldtimers used to say that the post-phylloxera wines never did equal the wines they enjoyed when they were young. My theory is that their taste-buds had aged in the meantime, and they were no longer able to judge adequately; I wonder what the same men would have answered if the question were about sex instead of wine. In 1936 Alec Waugh had the opportunity to compare two Chateau Margaux, one of 1875 and the other of 1920, and he swears he could not tell the difference. St. Emilion is said to be *"a robust old man that age strengthens rather than enfeebles"*. Bordeaux wines age remarkably well; they easily survive a century and there is a rumour that there are still bottles from the year of the comet (1811) gathering dust in some wine cellar in France which has escaped Goering's despoliations.

Wine is also part of the particular amusements of older men, when the pleasures of Venus have waned. I recall in the now vanished Maison des vins listening to middle-aged men endlessly discussing the tone and taste of \$200 bottles, with the fervour and attention they once reserved for a woman's body. I often looked at these men enter the inner sanctum and being welcomed by name by the haughty wine-peddlers of the establishment. My first reaction was to think: "these men have really arrived in life; they have been consecrated..." But my second reaction, generated no doubt by my envy, was "but then impotent men should be allowed to savour the few pleasures nature still has in store for them..."

There is a lot of snobbery associated with wine, and expensive wines are part of our vice of ostentatious consumption. That wine offers great pleasure no one will deny, but to concentrate on the pleasure to such an extent... must be sinful. When I see connoisseurs spitting out their mouthfuls of wine, I cannot but think of Onan. A lot of

abuse has been written about the "*bookish wine snobs*" who "*learnt wine out of books and not out of bottles*" who "*are infallible provided the bottle has been correctly labelled*" (Aeneas Macdonald). Yet, wine-drinking confraternities have done much to improve and guarantee the quality of wine. Some of the oldest are the Confraternité de St. Étienne d'Amerschwihhr known before 1440 and the Confraternité de la Corne founded by John of Mandershedt-Blanckenheim in 1586, whose initiation rite required one to drink down the wine from the horn which contained a full five litres.

One day King Henri IV of France was in Beaune and complimenting the town fathers on the quality of their wine. "*But, they replied, we have some even nicer wines*" ... "*which you are keeping, I presume, for a better occasion!*", replied the king. This is a constant problem for any wine-owner, since all his guests deem themselves worthy of partaking in the finest and rarest, not to say most expensive, bottle; the only solution to that conundrum is to have bottles with false labels and to refill great bottles once empty with lesser wines. "*Servez-leur des étiquettes - Serve labels (not wines)*" is the rule. So be wary of your compliments when offered the precious bottle (or the rare scotch), you may be unmasked as a false connoisseur.

Wine for the Spirit

There is also a reductionist attitude to wine, which consists of foregoing the wine itself and drinking only its spirit ("l'esprit de vin") removed by distillation. The process of distillation was apparently known to the Ancients for Pliny writes of the "spirit of turpentine"; the Arabs are, however, credited with its refinement (and to this day we use their terms "alembic" for the still, and "alcohol" and "elixir" for the result) and passed on the recipe to the Medieval alchemists who, by distilling everything they could lay their hands on, discovered a great number of volatile substances. These they used for various concoctions, many of them medicinal, though they always had to be careful, lest they be taxed with sorcery. Nonetheless, it is to them that we owe "burnt wine", or brandy as we call it. The brandy, like its nobler relatives cognac and armagnac, must age in casks where up to half of it is lost into the air through evaporation and thus becomes "**angels' drink**".

By adding herbs and sugar to the brandy, as the great Paracelsus did, tonics and cordials were obtained, which were more palatable than the early brandies and supposedly had curative properties. Monks whose credentials for orthodoxy were surer than those of the alchemists and the apothecaries took on the task in a great way and pretty soon every monastery was peddling its own magical potion from its pharmacía. Benedictine and Chartreuse are the two most famous survivors of these early concoctions. Benedictine was a cordial invented by Dom Bruno Vincelli in 1510 and made by the Benedictine monks in Fécamps in Normandy till the French Revolution, when the congregation was disbanded and the recipe lost. It was supposedly retrieved among old papers by one Alexandre Leblanc in the 19th c. who resumed its production; it is said to contain 28 herbs as well as honey and China tea. The production of Chartreuse, however, has always remained in the hands of the Cartusian monks and is reputed to contain as many as 130 different secret plants and

herbs (which beats Col. Sanders by an order of magnitude). It is said that in 1860 the monks installed a larger still and the quality dropped markedly. When the monks were expelled from France in 1903, they moved to Tarragona in Spain, but the liqueur they produced from there was not the same. Since 1931, the Cartusians are back and have been producing the potion we know.

Actually alcohol can be distilled from any fermented drink, and what brandy is to wine, calvados is to cider, and schnapps and whisky are to beer. So one finds on the market a multitude of "spirits", whose colours, smells, flavours, and flowery or fruity origins seem to rival only hair shampoo for diversity and inventiveness. And so it has been for the last four hundred years, the only difference being the changes in names and taste. The ultimate in this matter are the various anise-flavoured "cirrhosis in the bottle" drinks whose high alcohol content makes them so devastatingly dangerous, none more so than the now illegal absinthe, which contained as well the poisonous wormwood (originally a vermifuge!)

The degree of flavouring varies considerably, from next to nothing in some of the schnapps and "hot waters" to the most intricate concoctions. At one time, Rossolis was very popular: it had been brewed by Fagon for his patient Louis XIV and contained anise, fennel, dill, coriander, caraway, camomile, and sugar. Others, such as Populo used musk, ambergris, and anise, while Rossolio contained rose petals, jasmine, orange blossoms, spices and was coloured with carmine. In the 18th c., love potions were both diverse and popular, and their names (Eau nuptiale, Belle de nuit, Huile de Cythère, Huile de Vénus) leave not doubt as to their intended use. At least one of them (Le Parfait Amour) is still with us, but the colour alone is enough to make one want to remain celibate.

Is Whisky a Good Catholic Drink?

Ever since the word whisky has been mentioned from our pulpit on Induction night, I have been wondering about the stuff. I am afraid that I am biased: the word Whisky makes me recall two childhood experiences, both unpleasant. Whisky and phenolphthalein were the two staples of my father's drug cabinet, and he used the former as a cordial and the other as a physic; so to this day I associate the smell of whisky with the sick-room. But worse: my father was one of those unfortunate men who had to spend his holidays at a cottage he hated (it was originally his in-laws'); so on the first day, he would go out and buy two quarts of Haig & Haig "for visitors" and would then proceed to pour the stuff systematically down his gullet by the tumbler-full. This having been done, he would enjoy the greatest hangover in the world ("*I am surely going to die*" and "*Two men are holding me down*" (Haig and Haig), being favourite moans), and by the end of the first week, he would reappear to "enjoy" the rest of his vacation... and would not drink a drop till vacation-time the following year.

I will therefore call on an expert of all things Catholic, Hilaire Belloc (*The Path to Rome*, 1902): "*I knew a man once that was given to drinking, and I made up this rule for him to distinguish between Bacchus and the Devil. To wit: that he should never drink what has been made and sold since the Reformation - I mean especially spirits and champagne. Let him (said I)*

drink red wine and white, good beer and mead, (...) liqueurs made by monks, and, in a word, all those feeding, fortifying, and confirming beverages that our fathers drank in old time; but not whisky, nor brandy, nor sparkling wines, nor absinthe, nor the kind of drink called gin. This he promised to do, and all went well. He became a very merry companion, (...) when one fatal day (...) the host of that evening offered him whisky and water, and, my back being turned, he took it. (...) What do you think, then, was the consequence? Why, he had to take some nasty pledge or other to drink nothing whatever, and became a spectacle and a judgement, whereas if he had kept his exact word he might by this time have been a happy man."

In all fairness, Whisk(e)y and its deadly relative Poteen first appeared in Ireland in late Medieval times and whisky was popular at the court of Scottish King James IV; it therefore has a "catholic" pedigree, but I am afraid it eventually took sides with the Covenanters, though Bonnie Prince Charlie far from despised the stuff, and it was part of his downfall in the end - Drambuie the mulled concoction made from it recalls his memory and that of Flora MacDonald.

Again one only has to read what Scotsmen themselves - the "*most anticlerical people in the world; for what is the Presbyterian system but a drastic putting the clergy in place by the laity?*" - write about whisky to have grave doubts about its orthodoxy: "*Whisky and freedom gang together*", sings Robbie Burns. And listen to Aeneas Macdonald (*Whisky*, 1930): "*(Whisky-drinkers) do not bang their mugs on the table and roar about the jolly Middle Ages; they are not impressed by the well-padded spiritual comforts of Catholicism. Some might say that whisky is a Protestant drink, but it is rather a rationalistic, metaphysical and dialectical drink.*" Even Dr. Johnson could not bring himself to say a good word about the stuff which he considered unworthy of a gentleman. To Boswell who remarked that there was a great deal of drunkenness in Scotland, he replied: "*No, Sir, there are people who died of dropsies which they contracted in trying to get drunk.*" But do remember that every evening, Johnson and Boswell would each drink a bottle of negus (warm port sweetened with sugar and laced with brandy) and share a third one before retiring. And those were the days of the "three-bottle men" who would sit and soak until they slipped under the table and the servants carried them away. Johnson's conclusion was that "*Claret is the liquor for boys, port for men, but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy.*"

But that is only their talk; their actions are worse. On the eve of Culloden, a (Scottish Episcopal) priest by the name of John Maitland celebrated Holy Communion on the battlefield with oat cakes and whisky, "*the requisite elements not being attainable*"... No wonder Prince Charlie's army was reduced to mush on the morrow... Any person who believes such a sacrifice to be agreeable to God probably also firmly believes that the secret language by which the Persons of the Trinity communicate is Gaelic!

Whisky is only one of a trio of great "modern" spirits, the other two being Rum and Gin. I have little to say about the former, but the latter was introduced into England by William of Orange which makes it a highly suspicious (Calvinist) drink, to say the least; it first appeared in the form of what used to be called locally in Quebec "gros gin", the potent rotgut our grandfathers used to drink. But gin became gentrified in England and was transformed into the milder London Gin (flavoured with coriander

and juniper berries) which we all know and use as a crutch before supper after a particularly "bad day at the office". A close relative is vodka, which used to be the favourite drink of students in boarding-schools because it does not produce the telltale alcoholic breath. All of these, when diluted in hot water and flavoured with lemon, honey and spices, make grogs, the sailors' drink and the age-old remedy against the flu.

Wine and Damnation - The Demon-Gin

"The glasses were half-full, which meant that the guests were completely so" (de Maupassant). The pleasures of drinking necessarily evoke the spectre of drunkenness and the ghost of Carrie Nation rises from her tomb. Our own church was involved in a great temperance crusade in the 1890s and the early 1900s, with Father French as the spearhead.

Then as now our church was in the middle of the tenderloin. In 1904, the Taschereau enquiry revealed the existence of 150 brothels in the city and in 1911, the police raided 260 houses of ill repute and arrested 2000 people, some of the girls as young as 12, and 70% of them diseased. There was even a famous house for male homosexuals held by a Monsieur Carreau, whose earlier calling was selling church vestments! There were game houses (barbottes), cocaine and opium dens, and innumerable blind pigs. There were strip-houses where the likes of Millie de Leon, "The Woman in Blue", took their garters off on the stage, a spectacle which Judge Dupuis called *"the most demoralising that one can give in public"*. Armand Lavergne went so far as to qualify Montréal *"as one of the most dangerous cities in the world"*.

Testifying before Judge McDonald of the Royal Commission on the Liquor Traffic in 1894, Fr. French argued for fewer outlets, better owners and increased power for the law. Though he recognized that he was *"one who very seldom takes wine or beer or anything else in that line as beverage"*, he admitted that *"a good publican can be the means of doing a great deal of good"* and that *"there was no harm when the beer was good"*. The problem was no worse in Montréal than elsewhere: *"it is an evil everywhere"* and that *"the best way to deal with evil"* is to *"work on the individual."* In 1906 Bishop Bruchési founded the Ligue anti-alcoolique and the same year the French crusader for public morality, Abbé Luche, inaugurated La Ligue des Moeurs at Notre-Dame. But in the end, Abbé Gauthier from St. Jacques' Parish had to recognise that his *"sermons were of little effect on the situation"*.

Ultimately, human nature being what it is and alcoholism a curse and an illness, there only remains the golden rules, such as: *"Drink what you please at dinner, but don't sit and drink after dinner"* (Report on Cheap Wine, London 1865). And Jean-Jacques Rousseau gets the last (biased) word: *"No people has ever perished from an excess of wine; all perish through the disorder of women. (...) The former of these vices diverts from the others, while the latter engenders them all."*

And He Shall Laugh Them to Scorn!

(Smoke Signals #28, December 1997)

If drinking wine is one of the greater pleasures of life, listening to someone else talking about wine has to be one of its greater annoyances. To my mind, wine is like sex, it is best enjoyed, not talked about. All hate those who kiss and tell. Still there are unrepentant talkers on both topics. And did you notice that curiously they often use the same vocabulary for both activities: full body, great nose, foxy, sweaty, perfumed, sun-cooked, peachy, young, ripe, ... but also musty, flabby, flat... are they talking about wine or the body of a lover? An expression which amuses me when used by a woman: "*il est long en bouche*" - wine or lover, or both?

But we live in non-romantic age, in which you can count on someone debunking all the great things in life. And so it is with wine, and scientists are hard at work to find what is behind the bouquet-aroma of wine. Armed with gas-chromatographers, mass-spectrometers, and other paraphernalia, they are probing the chemical composition of wine to discover the secret mix which distinguishes a great wine from a rot-gut.

Professeur Dubourdiou of the Université de Bordeaux reminds us that if wine is 80-85% water and 9-15% alcohol, it also contains some 4 000-odd chemicals of which about 500 enter into the composition of the aroma. It is this 0.1-0.15% of the bottle that makes the real difference. Among the common ingredients are sugars (0.2-15%), glycerine (0.8-1.5%), 30 or so organic acids (1-1.5%), vinegar (0.02-0.05%), 20 or more minerals (0.3-0.4%), and about 40 phenolic compounds (0.2-0.6%). A study of the Sauvignon grape used for Sancerre and Pouilly wines indicates that its "tropical note" is due to mercatohexanol as in passion fruit and the greenery taste comes from mercatomethylpentanone as in box-tree.

Similar studies are being conducted by flavour chemists on the same topic at the Universities of Erlangen (Germany), California at Davis, and Cornell and they were recently reported on by the New Scientist (26 July 97) in an irreverent article entitled "**Château La Feet**". There is no bad aroma, but only a combination of pleasant and unpleasant smells, which occur in good or bad proportions. "*The delicate fragrance of cat pee is one of the key components in the bouquet of a Sauvignon blanc - just as cow urine and horse manure are crucial to the noses of an old Riesling and a complex Bordeaux. And bubbling under the brew are the odours of mouldy socks, rotten eggs and burning rubber. Such are the delights revealed by scientists trying to deconstruct the chemistry of the perfect summer wine.*" And so dimethyl disulphide gives off a smell of onion, dimethyl sulphide one of asparagus. Methoxypyrazine at low levels provides a smell of chalk dust or old books and at higher concentrations of bell peppers, and is one of the main aromas of Cabernet Sauvignon. The glycoside associated aromatics are released by the action of acids and provide flavours such as honey, tobacco, chocolate, and dried fig.

Other chemicals are ambivalent: methyl mercaptan smells like burnt rubber, but a low concentration gives wine character, complexity and interest. 2-acetyl-1-pyrroline is responsible for the long-lasting taste of some wines (the "long en bouche" referred to

above), but it actually smells like rodent urine and leaves on the tongue the feeling of having licked "a mouse nest". Some of the chemicals come from the yeast: they add a floral or spicy taste to Rieslings, but others smell more like wet horse blankets, cow manure, or plastic bandages. The wine cask provides octalactone (coconut), eugenol (clove) and vanilin (vanilla) all adding interest to the wine. Even the cork adds to the aromas, but sometimes can ruin a wine by rendering it corky: the musty smell it can generate comes from 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, one of the most potent smells to affect the human nose.

And so next time you drink a fine wine, remember that like so many other great gifts of the Creator, it is a perfect blend of the best and the worse that nature has to offer. And who says God doesn't have a sense of humour... and I am sure that he gets a great laugh listening to wine connoisseurs, discussing the merits of... cat pee.