

Burgundy's Vineyards during World War 1

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Vineyards without men

One century after the First World War, many historians are still taking a keen interest in this subject. We may come to regret that Europe wasn't governed by winegrowers: the harvest looked promising in all viticultural regions and young growers thought of preparing vintage more than they did of going to war. Yet, when they were mobilized, soldiers coming from wine regions believed the conflict would be rapid and victorious. On August 2nd, 1914, they left their villages shouting: *"We'll be back in time for the grape harvest."*

Even before the declaration of war, the shortage of manpower began to be felt. In Yonne, in Côte d'Or, in Chalonais, Mâconnais, Beaujolais, young people tended to desert the vineyards in spite of the regularity of viticultural work, the absence of unemployment and wages higher than in agriculture. They aspired to a five-day week and work conditions they considered more advantageous in the town than in the country...

When the war was declared, not only were healthy men mobilized but in each village, military veterinarians sorted out the horses and mules deemed fit for military duties. Wagons and harnesses were also requisitioned. Horses and wagons would be used for the transport of provisions and artillery. Only lame and one-eyed horses escaped the requisition, which was a drama for many an estate.

Crédit Agricole, the farmers' bank, granted loans for the grape harvest work but few growers' families seized the opportunity because people didn't *"run up debts"*! Instead of credit facilities, they would have preferred the State to pay cash for the horses which would have been very useful for cartage tasks. Horses which had been valued at half their worth!

Patriotic to the core, the men who stayed put on a brave face and told themselves they'd be better off relying on the fraternal solidarity of villagers by assisting one another. During the beautiful fall of 1914, school children, youngsters, women and old people picked grapes together. In the Côte vintage was held October 10th and 20th. There was no rain, a dry cool wind, hoarfrost in the morning which didn't damage the harvest; in the daytime after the mist had been dispelled, the sun shone, so that the first fall of the war was one of the most beautiful for a long time. In the Chablis area, the harvest was not plentiful but the villagers thought that the local cider production would help them through the winter.

In order to help people who weren't used to making wine, *Le Progrès Agricole et Viticole*, the growers' bi-monthly magazine gave sound advice: *"Just like tincture of iodine enables wounded soldiers to heal rapidly, vinification has an effective medicine: sulphur."* Besides, the journalist, observing that the Austrians refused to buy French wines, suggested *"Let's pay them back in their own coin: no more German farm machinery, no more German chemical products, no more Teutonic junk!"* And the following warning: *"Le Progrès won't accept any advertisement from German industrialists or traders"* was inserted in the magazine.

During the rainy and snowy winter of 1915-1916, people worked without much enthusiasm. As strong men were fighting on the front, little manure was dug in and not much eroded soil was replaced. Pruning was hastened because of the fear of the lack of manpower in spring. In order to speed up the task,

preparatory pruning was assigned to women who cut off large unnecessary canes. The best workers did the real pruning work.

Men on the front, women in the vineyards!

In many villages, the canes were not picked up and burned, they were broken up and left to rot on the ground. In Beaujolais, almost one third of the wine area was not tended, many vines were not pruned and weeds grew in the rows which had been so carefully cultivated.

Necessity knowing no laws, the soldiers' mothers, sisters and wives got down to work in the vineyards. *"Men on the front, women in the vineyards"* became the watchword. They received quick training and as one journalist wrote: *"They must get a good education in viticulture. There are dressmaking and cooking schools, why shouldn't they attend a viticulture course?"* Women were encouraged to go to conferences and register in specialized schools. A journalist realized that *"there are too many schools for boys and none for girls. Why not organize pruning competitions for women? They shouldn't shy away from participating in them."* Pruning could definitely be entrusted to women: *"When you come to think of it, pruning is a task for women, it seldom exacts much effort but just attention and intelligence. Women often have these two qualities."* That task had priority but plowing wasn't to be neglected. Now, workers often refused to hoe unpruned vineyards because they didn't want their hands to be scratched by canes especially when it was cold.

In spite of transport difficulties, the wine sold was conveyed to its addressees. The authorities' watch was not very active and the whole production wasn't declared. *"In short, people drink wine, even a lot of it without always informing the Liquor Control Board,"* the editor of *Le Progrès* wrote.

Children were also asked to contribute. For a time, compulsory education was a little forgotten. The editor of *Le Progrès* commented: *"Too bad if pupils don't go to school as diligently as in times of peace. Fewer pages won't alter much the knowledge acquired in childhood!"* Pupils sprayed the vines with gusto. In a wooden shelter built at the edge of the vineyard, mothers prepared the mixture to be used for the treatment which they poured into the spraying device. Their sons who wore rubber coats loaded them on their backs and sprayed the stocks.

As the available manpower was limited, workers demanded a lot, too much for many estate owners. Some of them recruited prisoners of war: *"staff that wouldn't blackmail them all the time."* Only professional bodies such as coops and growers' unions as well as a few major companies could use them because the war department sent a contingent of at least twenty workers overseen by seven soldiers. The prisoners had a reputation for being *"obedient and amenable, fairly hard-working when they were watched carefully,"* (*Le Progrès*.) René Engel, writer and wine grower in Vosne-Romanée, told that, in his village, one prisoner proved to be a remarkable worker. He supervised the estate in which he was posted and developed it much better than its owner. But in truth, few prisoners were familiar with vineyard work. Most of them had no experience and as they were renewed by one third every month, they had not enough time to be trained. In 1916, *Le Progrès* published a French-German lexicon of useful terms to manage farm workers.

The families fervently hoped leaves would be granted to "their" soldiers. But few young growers benefited from leave, though the war secretary had stated that *"the cultivation of land was as essential to the victory as the organization of defense on the front and the manufacture of munitions."*

Horses and the war

In Auxerrois, where alfalfa and sainfoin had replaced vines after the phylloxera crisis, refugees from the Ardennes engaged in breeding draft horses. Ardennais horses, hardy, brisk, relatively small animals were suitable for vineyard work. As oats were requisitioned, the horses were fed with beets, carrots and bran.

However, even the estate-owners who needed a horse and could afford one often refused to invest in one. Acquiring a spirited 18-month colt was all very well but who would break it in? Aged growers and women hesitated to harness it!

On the front, few horses fell under the enemy's fire but many died because of terrible weather conditions, exhaustion, lack of food and the composition of their rations.

As the war wore on, those who had stayed in the vineyards got organized more efficiently. Planting new vines was exceptional but on the whole, vines were rather well-tended in spite of the scarcity and high cost of manpower.

In 1917, quartermasters sold the horses which had become unfit for armed service but many ended up being slaughtered owing to the shortage of means of moving them. The winegrowers from the South of France, who were further away from the front lines than their Burgundian colleagues, couldn't buy an animal. They complained that they were misunderstood by the Administration.

At the beginning of 1919, demobilized horses were offered for sale. Anxious not to be ripped off, the owners asked the authorities to take account of the number of horses given by each of them at requisition because they didn't want to see them monopolized by horse-dealers.

Sulphur and copper shortage

The country people's relative optimism was nevertheless marred by the fear of running out of sulphur and copper sulfate to fight against powdery and downy mildew. They were also afraid of a rise in indirect wine taxes because the government needed funds to finance the war. Besides, speculation on chemical products was dreaded. Sympathizing with growers, the editor of *Le Progrès* wrote: "*The shortage of sulphur and copper against vine diseases is tantamount to a shortage of ammunitions against the Krauts.*" In the villages, finding these products became harder than spraying them. The growers regretted that the price kept increasing even though the still neutral USA could produce a sufficient amount to meet the French demand. In 1915, the English government finally authorized the export of copper sulfate to France. This product was the monopoly of a small number of British companies which controlled the market. "*Let's hope they won't want to take advantage of the situation to make big profits! And middlemen could also be tempted!*" growers sighed. In 1916, the Saint-Gobain company set an example of disinterestedness by selling its products below their cost price. For their part, growers wholeheartedly hoped for an agreement between producers and consumers in order to stabilize the market and avoid speculation, which had distorted the prices to the detriment of viticulture.

Between 1914 and 1917, the price of sulphur was multiplied by four. This product was imported from Sicily and growers were afraid of running out of it. Because of the fighting in Northern France, the factory of Amiens stopped producing it. For a while, growers thought of importing it from the USA and even Spain. *Le Progrès* advised growers to mix it with lime to reduce consumption. This had no effect on the high pressure needed for the spraying devices. Cheap sulphur dross, the residue from blast furnaces, was also used.

In 1917, sulphur and copper were distributed according to the growers' needs but few wagons were available for their transport. In some places, sulfate and copper were distributed after the attacks of the

diseases. Now, spraying on time really mattered: *blue vines*, those which had been sprayed with copper gave much better harvests. In 1918, at long last, winegrowers received sufficient quantities on time.

Noah: in times of hardship, you have to make the best of things

As winegrowers were not sure to obtain the chemicals required for treatments against fungus diseases on time and at reasonable rates, some of them thought the solution consisted in planting hybrids which, for them was equivalent to taking out insurance against bad harvests. They also saw in hybrids a way to make money. Noah, a white cultivar, triumphed in humid years when vines suffered from powdery and downy mildew. In dry years, its victory was not so striking. Hybrids were pruned long, ripened late and gave poor-quality, low-alcohol wines.

Le Progrès offered its subscribers advice on how to make wine with hybrids. Recipes concerning the removal of the foxy taste typical of hybrid wines were given. The adjunction of cultivated yeast to obtain that result was recommended. Some enthusiastic advocates even found a taste of Burgundy in those yeasted wines! *"After all, man's palate gets used to all savors, which gradually become neutral. The palate becomes insensitive to them,"* people said to reassure themselves.

Wine requisitions

In 1908, wine was included in soldiers' rations when Parliament voted a 2-million Francs allocation to help winegrowers in difficulty. In 1914, the 25 centiliters (8.8 fl oz) per day ration was not enough to save them. The declaration of war put an end to exports and disrupted the home market because trucks and trains were mostly used to transport troops. In 1914, the total production amounted to 60 million hectoliters, 16 million hl more than in 1913. At the end of the first war year, Minister Alexandre Millerand, considering that wine was better than the water distributed in the trenches, decided to supply more wine to soldiers.

In the vineyard, people convinced themselves that soldiers didn't receive enough wine: *"More wine would increase their stamina. How good it would be for these poor guys shivering in the trenches to drink a glass of mulled wine that they would prepare themselves!"* *Le Progrès* reported. It was believed that the soldiers who drank wine showed more courage in the fights and more resistance to typhus. In another issue of the magazine, a chronicler stated that soldiers needed the comfort brought by wine with the exception of any other beverage: *"Let's hope that replacing it with cider, as some ill-advised representatives of Brittany and Normandy suggested, is out of the question! Our soldiers would be exposed to health hazards so as to satisfy some parochial interests. Leave cider to civilians and shirkers!"* Professor Ravaz wrote: *"Every soldier drinks wine from a beaker. If the beaker is washed with water, the wine is a waste! If it's covered with a coating of tartar, wine is excellent!"* As a matter of fact, military authorities purchased more and more wine.

Once the vinification of the 1915 vintage (good quality, small volumes) was over, the war department stressed the patriotic aspect of wine requisitions and expressed its wish to reconcile the interests of the State with those of vintners. Considered to be despoliation, requisitions were received with general hue and cry but the thought of the soldiers' plight in the trenches led producers to accept them. Rural policemen called on estate-owners to inform them that 25% of their harvest would be requisitioned to meet the army's needs if their production was in excess of 10 hectoliters (263 US gallons.)

In every department, the price was set by an evaluation commission which took the alcohol content, the hue and the exposure of wine to air into account. The commission allowed the vintner concerned two weeks' reflection before accepting the offer. If he rejected it, he had to give his reasons and the final

decision was made by the justice of the peace. Payment was made in cash or in treasury bonds. Naturally suspicious, winegrowers were afraid of having to wait until the end of the war before being paid but their fears were unfounded.

Figuring that prices could only rise, some producers turned down the requisition. They declared harvests which were inferior to reality. Offenders ran the risk of paying a heavy fine but actually the patriotic spirit prevailed and few in fact cheated.

The sellers of requisitioned wine were required to tend the barrels with due diligence until their collection, which could take a long time because of the vagaries of transport. Besides, the day of loading depended on the army's needs. Producers who were impatient to see the wine leave their cellar invoked the alibi of the fighters' welfare: *"Soldiers can't afford to wait on the goodwill of suppliers to get their wine. Whatever happens, they must be assured of receiving the daily ration they are entitled to,"* echoed *Le Progrès*. Competent, conscientious producers tended the wine they couldn't dispatch right away. They feared two diseases: *tourney**, which threatened wines low in alcohol, and *acescence**, which affected wines with a higher alcohol content. Cleaning tanks and barrels carefully, topping up*barrels regularly usually sufficed to prevent those diseases.

On the front, good and not so good wines

When the requisition was aggressive, winegrowers found it hard to put up with the bad manners of noncommissioned officers. In 1917-1918, one third of the harvest was requisitioned! In 1918, the farmers' union of Mâconnais protested against the price offered which was *"an extremely high war tax"* for growers. Wine was requisitioned until 1919 but by then, only those vintners who produced more than 100 hectoliters (2630 US gallons) were asked to supply wine at a price 10 to 20% inferior to the market price.

As a matter of fact, requisition had the predictable effect of causing price increases. When growers complained that the compensation was less than the market price, the Administration replied that, if that were the case, the amount paid by requisition would be representative, not of the transaction but of a price distorted by speculation.

Soldiers drank on the front lines but also behind the front, so that some wives bought kegs and sold wine to take away. A license cost them 10 centimes and a declaration made at city hall. That's all there was to it! Café owners didn't appreciate such competition, which they thought unfair (they were only allowed to open their establishments from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and 5:00 to 7:00 p.m! American soldiers staying in the country hospital of Verdun-sur-le Doubs were not allowed to go to cafés and hotels. They bought wine from growers in the nearby villages to the great displeasure of café and hotel owners, whose turnover went down.

Burgundians were scandalized to hear that, on the Yser front, wine was sold at 7 Francs a liter whereas it cost 1 Franc at the estate. Middlemen were blamed. Soldiers on leave complained that wine froze in their beakers, evidence that a lot of water was added: *"Everybody knows that alcohol doesn't freeze!"* they protested. The producers from the South of France were blamed.

In the trenches, soldiers had every reason to complain: often the wine wasn't good. Sometimes, it stayed several weeks in tankers immobilized on the tracks in the summer heat. What's more, war gave free rein to all kinds of deceit on the origin of wine. Burgundian soldiers, who were often the victims of such fraud could often measure the extent of the harm caused by the unfair competition of very mediocre wines bearing Burgundy labels.

A favorable impact on trade

Requisition only concerned a certain volume of wines produced in Burgundy. The war had a positive impact on trade. Hardly had growers finished making 1914 wine when their plentiful production flooded the market. In 1915, business brightened up in Beaujolais. At the end of 1915, a high price was offered for the 1913 and 1914 stocks. As for the 1915 harvest, it was almost entirely sold at the beginning of 1916. Vintners became more demanding as prices kept rising.

As the home production and the wine from Algeria, then a French colony, were not enough to quench the country's thirst, the commercialization of *piquette** was allowed. *Piquette* was made by pouring water on pomace* without adding alcohol or sugar. In fact, it hardly competed with wine. At the same time, Argentinians got rid of two million hectoliters of wine by pouring it in the irrigation canals of their vineyards! Soon, it became well-nigh impossible to find white wine on the market. In Beaujolais, noah reached record prices. Wine merchants protested against what they considered outrageous claims. Suspected of being profiteers of public misfortune, growers saw in high prices the sign of restorative justice. The war offered them revenge against the inequitable terms middlemen imposed on them when they drew their profits from the growers' destitution and toil. In Mercurey, growers demanded to sell the content of barrels because they were afraid they would not have enough casks for the next harvest: the village cooper was fighting and no oak was available! The fine wines of Burgundy which weren't requisitioned were still served in Swiss restaurants, Switzerland remaining Burgundy's only export market during the war. Demand on the home market plummeted owing to transport difficulties. The yearly auction of the wines of the Hospices de Beaune was cancelled in 1914 but one was held in May 1916 and the tradition continued in 1917 and 1918.

Victory at long last!

When the bells rang to announce the victory of the Allied Forces, the armistice seemed to signal the prelude of a glorious peace and to present viticulture with bright prospects. Winegrowers asked to be represented in the commissions of the peace conference on matters concerning viticulture. The question of Appellations of Origin had been debated for 9 years. It was supposed to lead to a law that should have been voted in July 1914. Because of the imminence of the war, the vote was adjourned. During the conflict, a mixt commission that brought together growers and wine merchants met to codify the *local, loyal and steady* uses guaranteeing the protection of appellations of origin. The law was finally passed in May 1919 before the signature of the peace treaty.

Many grower families had lost one son during the war. The survivors, who were demobilized ten months after the armistice, could participate in the 1919 grape harvest. Many husbands and sons came back ill, disabled, gassed, weakened. Many estates were left in the hands of widows. Rather than going back to the vineyards, many workers sought jobs in factories, trade or the Administration. When the prisoners-of-war returned to Germany, Beaujolais estates were desperately short of manpower. In its desire to "*offer effective and advantageous material help to reconstitute an estate, set up a wine company, start a family to put the country back on its feet,*" Crédit Agricole granted 1% loans to the war victims for a duration of 25 years.

Thanks to the presence of Allied Forces in France, the wine trade was quite profitable until 1919. Never had so many fine Burgundy wines been sold at prices consumers found outrageous. British, Canadian and U.S. soldiers provided producers with the opportunity to export *on-the-spot*, when France had lost the German and Austrian markets because of the war and the Russian market because of the 1917 Revolution. England imposed import quotas, Sweden and Denmark heavily taxed wine, Finland, Canada with the exception of Québec and the USA banned the imports of wine but contrary to a widespread opinion, France had never exported big volumes of wine.