

Book Review

Jennifer Regan-LeFebvre, *Imperial Wine: How the British Empire Made Wine's New World*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. xiv + 323. \$29.95 (hardback)

The food and drink people consume play a major role in how people of different social classes, ethnicities, and nationalities define themselves. Meals are social affairs, from lavish Christmas or Eid dinners to families collecting whatever leftovers they can and absent-mindedly eating in front of the television. To paraphrase the food historian Michael Twitty, the food that *we* eat, how we prepare it, and how we eat it set us apart from *they* who prepare and eat food differently.

Alcohol is sometimes excluded from culinary studies since, unlike other beverages, its secondary use lies in directly affecting the nervous system. In *Imperial Wine*, however, Regan-Lefebvre makes a praiseworthy effort to show the social value of the wine itself. The climate in Britain has not allowed for a decent wine industry since the Middle Ages so it became better known for ales and whiskey. Imperial wines, however, are a factor in how Britons and their colonists saw themselves and set themselves apart from lower classes or outgroups such as indigenous peoples.

Imperial Wine rests on two concepts: the relationship of colonial wine to British imperialism; and the idea of Britain's self-imposed "civilizing missions" to its colonies. Most of the work is devoted to Britain's domestic market, although there is some emphasis on domestic colonial markets as well. Wine could make a colony self-sufficient and function as an export. British drinkers could import colonial wine and convince everyone else along with themselves that they were doing their part as members of the British Empire. Unlike France or Spain, Britain's empire lasted longer and it did not have much of a domestic wine industry. Its viticulture was driven by commerce. While British consumers purchased European wines, the colonies provided wine for an imperial market.

The book begins with the origins of the British Empire's wine industry as well as the concept of ecocide. Just as American soldiers and settlers decimated bison herds and

turned over Native American land for cultivation, British settlers requisitioned indigenous land and turned it over to luxury crop cultivation. While Old World wines were characterized by family-owned vineyards with rules and customs reaching back centuries, New World wines became commercial brands and did not have to accommodate so many long-standing conventions. British colonies adopted viticulture partly because white settlers saw the industry as a civilizing influence. Australian growers considered wine to be a staple drink while British officials saw knowledge of wines as the mark of sophistication. New Zealanders saw themselves as connected to Britain through trade, and so exporting wine made their colony part of the empire in their view.

The second part focuses on how colonial wines received faint praise in Britain through the Victorian and Edwardian eras, as well as the tariffs that affected wine consumption. Wine was the beverage of choice for the well-to-do while the lower classes settled for beer and gin. In the colonies, however, fortified wines traveled well and filled a niche. Even low-quality wines became more profitable if they were fortified. Australian growers cultivated an image of autonomy and self-reliance when they were actually dependent on imperial trade networks. In South Africa, winemaking created and reinforced the racial and class structures that would eventually culminate in apartheid. Indeed, South Africans saw wine as a middle-class drink that would elevate poor white settlers over indigenous Africans. Living in an empire that had implemented abolition, South African growers and vintners styled their wines after their European counterparts. That allowed South Africans to distance themselves from slavery and gave their wines more stature in the export market. Another strength of this book is illustrating the racial or class divides in wine production. South African vineyard workers were often Asian or African and were kept in cycles of poverty much as American sharecroppers were. In Australia and New Zealand, workers were often continental European immigrants who were fleeing poverty and political instability.

As for India under East India Company rule and then the Raj, Regan-LeFebvre contends that most Indians eschewed wine for a variety of reasons so the British *nabob* set himself apart from the native population by consuming wine. The transient nature of the British population in India, whether in the Company or the army, meant there was no incentive to expend so much time on cultivating grapes.

The third part brings the work to the world wars and interwar period, and the shifting roles that Britain's colonies played as dominions gained more autonomy while other colonies gained full independence. World War I allowed colonial wines to replace French wines in British cellars as imperial wine consumption became relatively affordable, accessible, and patriotic. British colonies contended with labor shortages and became bolder in addressing their needs as they saw themselves as more integral to the empire. World War II continued the pattern set in the previous war through the tumult that afflicted global wine markets.

The fourth and final part focuses on post-war Britain, as British and Commonwealth markets further realigned themselves in a drastically changed world. This reviewer found this section to be particularly informative and enjoyable. British families rarely went out for meals. Hosting dinner for many guests was a notable luxury. Readers above a certain age might be strongly reminded of “the Bucket woman” harassing her neighbors with invitations to her candlelit suppers. In an age of austerity and supermarkets, imperial wines became affordable and allowed British families to maintain a semblance of class while British cuisine as a whole earned an abysmal reputation. Focus is also given to South Africa during apartheid and the international boycott, with white supremacy and the anti-apartheid movement reflected in how South African grapes were grown and in how other countries advertised for those wines.

This book is a useful tool for culinary historians and British historians. It would be an excellent supplementary text for an undergraduate culinary history or economics class. I would recommend it for anyone who might want to read more books in the vein of Peter Hoffenberg’s *An Empire on Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) or Troy Bickham’s *Eating the Empire* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020). For those seeking more insight into the social value of foodways, *Imperial Wine* is a suitable complement to Michael Twitty’s *The Cooking Gene* (New York: Amistad Press, 2017). This work has many applications for those seeking to know more about wine, cuisine, and the social value attached to them.

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