

Quiet Revolutionaries: Irish Merchants and the Creation of Bordeaux Grands Crus Wines

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This paper begins by asking the question: When and how did red wine from Bordeaux (claret) become a luxury wine when for centuries it had been a *vin ordinaire*? In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Bordeaux wine producers tried to naturalise the excellence of Bordeaux wines by saying they have been this way since time immemorial because of the superior *terroir* and ancient skill of Bordeaux winemakers. However, in a controversial article published in *Annales* in 1953, historian Henri Enjalbert argued that it was the London market that transformed Bordeaux wines from ordinary to luxury in the eighteenth century, by capitalising production. I argue, however, that while both of these answers contain some degree of truth, the real story is the middlemen, the ones who purchased the wine from the chateaux within weeks or months of production, and then aged, blended, and ‘prepared’ the wines for their respective markets. The very finest wines were almost always purchased by Irish merchants, who prepared the wine for the English market in particular, but also for the Irish and Scottish markets. It was these Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant alike, who ‘created’ luxury Bordeaux.

Irishmen were especially prominent in the Bordeaux wine trade for a variety of reasons. Penal laws against Catholics and economic restrictions placed on Ireland by the British Parliament that affected Protestants as well, meant that there were few economic opportunities in Ireland for those who were not born into land. One opportunity for social and economic advancement that was available, however, was

becoming a wine merchant. This was in part because Ireland’s landed elite drank a great deal of wine, but there were other important factors. For instance, there were many existing connections between Ireland and Bordeaux: there had been an Irish Catholic seminary in Bordeaux since 1603 so Irish Catholics felt welcome; many Huguenot refugees in Ireland came from the Bordeaux region and kept contacts in France; Irish Protestants were not persecuted for their religion when they were in Bordeaux; indeed the Irish, whatever their religion, were the acceptable face of Britain in the eyes of the French. Most importantly, however, Irish merchants of both faiths had easy access to the most lucrative market for Bordeaux wines in all of Europe: London. Irish merchants spoke English and had pre-established trading networks in England. As such, they knew the English market inside and out. Specifically, they knew what the wealthiest English customers wanted, and that was deep, rich, claret. Irish merchants also had something that French merchants wanted, and that was salt beef, which was shipped from Ireland to Bordeaux and then to the French West Indies, where it was the primary source of protein for slaves in France’s sugar-producing island.

Flush with cash, Irish merchants in Bordeaux purchased the best wines when young over the course of the eighteenth century, aged and blended them to their clients specifications, and in the process created what we know as top-growth Bordeaux. Indeed, it was from the sales books of a Franco-Irish wine brokerage, Tastet et Lawton, that the 1855 classification of Bordeaux wines was derived.
