Ithaca 2018 Abstract Submission

Title
A priest and his wine: the curé of Volnay (Burgundy) and the wine business in the 18th century

I want to submit an abstract for:
Conference Presentation

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Keywords
Wine, Burgundy, Volnay, wine business, vintages, religion

Research Question
To analyze the financial and economic aspects of wine production and commerce in 18th-century Burgundy

Methods
Analysis of contemporary, primary documents

Results
The paper sets out the range of challenges 18th-century Burgundy vignerons faced, in terms of weather, the wine market, and the institutions of commerce.

Abstract
For more than half a century, from 1726 to 1777, abbé F. Delachere, the parish priest of the small Burgundy commune of Volnay, near Beaune, kept detailed annual records on the vineyards belonging to his parish. In a dedicated register, he recorded each year's weather, the date the harvest began, the quality and size of the grape harvest in the various vineyards, and the prices that merchants and brokers paid for his wines. In a separate register he kept his accounts, most of which related to wine, and they show that in addition to dealing with the vineyards and wine that belonged to the parish, Delachere was active in the wine business. He often bought wine from vignerons in Volnay and neighboring communes to blend with his own, or partnered with a vigneron to blend their wines and share the returns. In addition, Delachere sometimes simply bought barrels of wine to re-sell at a profit.

Delachere's records over the half-century detail his financial and other transactions with his vigneron share-cropper (who received half the income generated by the wine) and suppliers (including barrels, trellising equipment, manure for fertilizer). There are also records of his dealings with wine brokers and merchants -- some from nearby Beaune and others from places as far off as Paris and Flanders. It is notable that nearly all the debts recorded in these registers, whether they were owed by small-scale vignerons or large-scale merchants, were paid in instalments, often over a number of years.

This paper will discuss the broad contours of Delachere's narrative of growing grapes and selling wine during the middle 50 years of the eighteenth century. It sheds light on the practicalities and economics of viticulture and wine production, which were increasingly important sector of Burgundy's economy.

The basis of everything was the weather during the growing season, and it was poor in many of the years between 1726 and 1777. Almost every year, localized hail destroyed crops (including grapes) in Volnay or nearby villages,
there were heavy rains (often at harvest), while the summers were often too dry. In some years there were hardly any grapes at all, in other years the grapes were bloated with water and lacked color and flavor. Years when the grapes were plentiful and good-quality were rare.

The paper presents the starting dates of the annual harvest and plots the annual yield for various categories of grapes and the number of barrels of wine made. It shows highly volatile annual numbers, suggesting that it was virtually impossible for vignerons to plan ahead, even over the short-term. As priest, Delachere noted the effects of the poor weather and harvests on his parishioners, and commented on the pastoral role of the priest in times of financial and economic hardship.

Like other vignerons, Delachere made a distinction between his ‘good wine’ and his ‘ordinary wine’, and carefully separated the two red grape varieties (Pinot Noir and Gamay) even though he referred to his white grapes and wines generically. It is notable that higher prices were paid for Pinot Noir (now Burgundy’s signature red grape variety) than for Gamay. Even though Gamay was, in principle, banned in Burgundy in the late 14th century, it remained an important source of ordinary wine in the region during the 1700s (and beyond).

Although as a priest Delachere was financially more secure than most of Volnay’s vignerons, he struggled with the same weather as they did and also had to deal with the same merchants. His accounts of commercializing his wine show the unequal relationship between merchants and brokers, on one side, and vignerons on the other. It reveals the strategies that merchants used to minimize the prices they paid for wine and to maximize their prices they sold the wine for.

In some years they put out the word that the quality of the wine was poor, and they paid low prices for it. A few years later, faced with a shortage of wine after a poor harvest, they brought out the earlier ‘poor’ wine and praised its quality so as to maximize their profits from it.

Brokers and merchants visited vignerons and tasted their wines a month or two after fermentation was complete and marked the barrels that they wanted to buy. But although vignerons could not sell these barrels to anyone else, even if they were offered a higher price, merchants were not required to follow through with the purchase. Delachere deplored the unequal relationship between vigneron and merchants, whom he referred to as deceitful usurers.

Overall, this case-study of the priest of Volnay’s wine business provides a rare bottom-up insight into the eighteenth-century wine industry and commerce in what is now one of Burgundy’s most prestigious communal appellations. Some of the vineyards (climats) that Delachere drew his grapes from are now classified Grand Cru.

The research underlying this paper is part of a broader history of wine in Burgundy.