

In Vinum [Verum] Veritas

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The Laki eruptions in Iceland in 1783 and 1784 were among the largest volcanic eruptions in recorded history, and they had profound impacts on the climate and people living in the northern hemisphere for years afterwards. Huge clouds of dust and sulfur particles from the eruptions covered much of northern Europe. Weather patterns changed for the next 2-3 years with unusually cold winters and cooler than normal summers. Environmental historians point to disruptions to the economy of northern France, caused by the after-effects of the eruptions, as factors in the build-up to the French Revolution.

Paris winters are notorious for their cold, gray and damp days, and with the lingering effect of the Icelandic volcano, the weather was particularly miserable early in the morning of February 28, 1787. The rain turning to sleet and snow chilled to the bone anyone who ventured out.

One of those who had decided to take to the road that morning heading south out of Paris was the American Ambassador to France and the Court of King Louis XVI, Thomas Jefferson.

Although Jefferson had become a well-known figure in Paris, and was in fact a celebrity, he preferred to travel incognito, and for the next 3 months of his journey referred to himself simply as "a foreign gentleman from Virginia." His coach made its way to Dijon in Burgundy where he hired a servant named Petitjean who would accompany him throughout his journey.

Jefferson had been suffering from a painful injury to his left wrist since a fall in September and had been fighting a lingering cold for several weeks. Based on recommendations from Parisian

friends “in the know,” he had decided to slip away to the warmer climate and restorative waters of Aix-en-Provence where he could combine, as he said, “some public service with some private gratification.”

Officially the “public service” purpose of his trip was to include visits to several seaports on the south and west coasts of the county in order to explore opportunities for the export of American goods – especially tobacco and whale oil – to France. He was also interested in learning more about and collecting samples of crops such as wine-grape plants and local rice from the south of France and Italy for possible cultivation in the United States.

The “private gratification” portion of the journey had to do with two of his life’s passions: architecture and wine. **Architecture** because he wanted to visit and collect drawings of grand public buildings in France that might serve as models for future American public buildings. **Wine** because he dreamed of building an important American wine industry based on French and other European models. He had already developed a reputation as a serious oenophile, and he wanted to visit many of the great French vineyards and meet with the wine makers.

To justify the long trip and associated expenses, Jefferson explained the important purposes of this official journey in some detail to a somewhat skeptical John Jay back in Philadelphia, to whom he reported. His 15 year old daughter, Martha, boarding in a French convent school, knew her father well and wrote to him that “the whole thing sounds like a pleasure trip to me.”

Whatever the true mix of motives, the trip Jefferson began that February morning was truly remarkable. It lasted over 3 months and covered 1200 miles through most of the wine regions of southern France and across the Alps into wine regions of Italy. Less than a year later, in

March 1788, he embarked on another wine tour through Germany and then back through northern France to Strasbourg and the Champagne region and finally back to Paris again. This was a slightly less ambitious trip than the one a year earlier but still covered almost a thousand miles over nearly 2 months.

During these trips Jefferson visited countless vineyards, meeting with and learning from the winemakers. As always he was a keen observer, learning about proper planting and trimming of the vines and the influence of terrior on their wines. He heard the tales of 12th century Cistercian monks who had worked these vineyards in Burgundy and how they had mixed the sandy soil of different fields with water and sipped and tasted the concoction to understand the flavor of the distinctive soils, or terrior and the effect on their wines. As he did all his life, Jefferson kept meticulously detailed notes about all this that still survive in the archives at Colonial Williamsburg. His excursions through such large areas of the European wine regions vastly expanded his knowledge and vinous horizons. Jefferson the worldly traveler, the wine drinker and connoisseur would never be the same again. All he learned on these trips would help establish his reputation as the foremost wine expert of his time in America.

Back in Paris he resumed his diplomatic role as American Ambassador in a quickly unraveling French nation. In addition to keeping George Washington, John Adams, James Madison and James Monroe advised of the rapidly deteriorating political situation, he was also responding to their requests for recommendations and for assistance in ordering wines for their own use. Meanwhile, anticipating that he would be remaining in Paris for some time, Jefferson went about adding to his wine cellar at his official residence on the Champs Elysees. His inventory in

March, 1789, showed 2400 bottles, predominantly French but also selections from Germany, Portugal and Spain.

On July 14, 1789, however, mobs stormed the Bastille, and the French revolution finally erupted. Jefferson packed for what he thought would be a temporary return to the United States with his daughters Martha and Mary. Their luggage also included 39 cases of wine from his Paris cellar. When he arrived home, he found that President Washington had appointed him Secretary of State and that he would not be returning to Paris. After 5 years in France, Jefferson was a confirmed Francophile and for the rest of his life spoke of warm memories of his time there, and he always hoped to return someday.

An iconic figure like Jefferson has become a sort of secular saint, now unfortunately remote, and seemingly austere. Formal portraits and marble busts do nothing to humanize his image, but learning a few details of his personal life before he became a precious icon help to breathe some life and color into this most human of men.

Thomas Jefferson was born in 1743 at Shadwell, his father's Virginia plantation at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Charlottesville. His father Peter was a frontiersman with a rustic background who had little formal education but great respect for education and a love of books. His mother, Jane Randolph, was from one of the most powerful and socially prominent families of Virginia's coastal aristocracy. As refined as they may have been, the Jeffersons were surely people of their times, and colonial era Americans with English heritage ate a heavy meat and potatoes diet. In addition, based on European custom, they had an ingrained belief that water was not a healthy drink because so many sources of drinking water were polluted. As a

result, beer and hard cider would have been the everyday beverages at every meal in most homes, including the Jeffersons'. Rum was by far the most popular spirit at the time, and what wine was drunk would have been heavy and sweet with high alcohol content, like port and fortified Madeira.

Although Jefferson was born into a somewhat privileged life, he certainly did not squander the advantages that good fortune had given him. From an early age he showed himself to be a serious, studious and gifted young man. In 1760 at the age of 17, he was enrolled at the college of William & Mary in the colonial capitol of Williamsburg. There he boarded with the family of his law professor, the well-known and respected lawyer, George Wythe, who lived in one of the finest residences in the city, a Georgian mansion. Wythe was a sophisticated man who appreciated and collected fine European wines and maintained a large cellar.

Through Wythe, Jefferson met Francis Farquier, the Royal Governor who also maintained an extensive wine cellar at the Governor's palace. Farquier was descended from French Huguenots and was known to have a large collection of fine French and other European wines. In his role as governor, Farquier entertained frequently, and Jefferson who was seen as a bright and talented young man from a good Virginia family, was often a guest. Jefferson recalled later in life that his appreciation for fine wines that became a lifelong passion dated from the experiences and exposure he gained from his association with George Wythe and Francis Farquier during his college days.

By 1767 Jefferson had graduated from William & Mary and was back at his birthplace, Shadwell, near Charlottesville, beginning his law practice and his public life in the Virginia House of

Burgesses. Full of dreams and energy he had designed and begun to build his home, Monticello at Charlottesville in 1768. He had taken no formal architectural studies, because there were no schools then to teach the profession of architecture. In true Jeffersonian manner, however, he immersed himself in architectural books and drawings and taught himself to be an architect. As with almost everything he put his mind to, he excelled at this and actually became a skilled, self-taught architect, and Thomas Jefferson is certainly now recognized as one of America's enduring "starchitects." The plans and elevations he prepared showed appreciation of classical aesthetics, and his detail drawings demonstrated knowledge of practical constructability issues. Monticello was a labor of love which Jefferson designed, built, redesigned, remodeled and expanded almost continuously until it was finally finished, 40 years after he began. It would be his home for 58 years.

On New Year's Day in 1772, with two feet of fresh snow on the ground, twenty-eight year old Jefferson married the twenty-three year old widow, Martha Wales Skelton and moved into the partially completed Monticello. Martha came from a wealthy, socially prominent family and was said to be strikingly beautiful. Jefferson himself was described as a bit reserved but with a natural ability to charm those he met. He was a bit over 6'-2" tall with a ruddy freckled face, blue eyes, a strong patrician nose and reddish hair worn at collar length. His characteristic pose was said to be with arms crossed in front of him that seemed to some to imply a certain guardedness, but contemporaries say he was good-natured, frank and friendly.

Jefferson's wedding to Martha was described as a festive one with much feasting and drinking, fiddling, dancing and singing. The young couple loved music, and both were accomplished musicians: she on the keyboard and he on the violin. Both performed during the wedding

reception, and no doubt, Jefferson sang during the party. His friends and those who worked for him said he had a “fine clear voice and was always singing and humming when he was walking or riding” around his home and property. During their married life the Jeffersons would have six children, but sadly only 2 would survive to adulthood, and tragically Martha herself would die in 1782, only 10 years after their marriage.

Although Monticello was essentially “out in the country,” the Jeffersons were frequent and generous hosts. There were no theaters or operas or other diversions near Charlottesville in the 1770’s so fine dinners customarily served with beer and cider, followed by fine wines and lively conversation were the heart of the Jeffersons’ social life. Following Jefferson’s example, Martha was a meticulous record-keeper, and her household records show extraordinary amounts of food and alcohol were consumed for a household consisting of two adults – indicating the regularity and generosity of their hosting and entertaining. Frugality was never the rule at the Jefferson table.

Jefferson always enjoyed the company of interesting people and their somewhat remote location meant that guests often stayed for days at a time. One such interesting house guest who appeared serendipitously at Monticello in 1773 was Phillip Mazzei who had recently arrived in America from Italy. Mazzei’s plan was to find land where he could establish a vineyard and wine-making enterprise in Virginia. Mazzei had grown up in Tuscany where his family had been making Chianti for over 300 years, and where, remarkably, the Mazzei family is still making wine today. Jefferson and Mazzei spent days wandering the countryside near Monticello looking for appropriate land and discussing the wines of Italy that Mazzei knew so well. They became partners in a Virginia vineyard, the first commercial vineyard project in the

United States. Unfortunately Jefferson and Mazzei's efforts at Monticello were not successful in producing good wines, but they did become lifelong friends. Mazzei's many contacts in the wine business in both Italy and France would also prove helpful to Jefferson during his time in Europe 14 years later and really for the rest of his life.

Some other unlikely people Jefferson would meet and entertain at Monticello in 1775 were a group of Hessian army officers. These were German mercenaries, hired by the English to fight the Americans in the Revolutionary War. They had been captured and then interned near Charlottesville. These were well educated young officers, many of whom spoke English and French. Most were from the Rhinehesse wine country of Germany. According to military custom and etiquette of the time, mixing socially with captured officers was not considered improper, and so Jefferson would invite the Hessians to Monticello for meals and musical evenings with his family. He developed a good friendship with several of the officers, and one was Major Geismer who invited Jefferson to visit him in Germany after the war. Years later while he was serving as Ambassador in France, Jefferson and Geismer did meet again and took a wine tasting trip down the Rhine. Within a year of his trip to Germany the French Revolution began, and Jefferson would be called back to the United States.

Jefferson's name has rightfully been associated with the movement for American independence from Great Britain since he had authored "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" in 1774, and in 1776, it was Jefferson who was selected to author the Declaration of Independence. For a period of 35 years – until he retired to Monticello – Jefferson played a crucial and defining role in the birth of this new nation. After serving as Governor of Virginia, he became a U.S. Congressman and then Ambassador to France. After returning to America

and serving as Secretary of State, he became Vice President in 1797, followed by two terms as President from 1801 until 1809. Jefferson's 35 years of service to the United States of America during its defining years, especially his years as President can be seen as the culmination of this extraordinarily gifted man's life. His many official accomplishments are well covered in history books. The focus of this paper is more narrowly limited to his perhaps less known but well-deserved reputation as the most knowledgeable wine connoisseur ever to hold the office of President.

In addition, then, to his many well-known and rightly famous accomplishments as President, the Jefferson years may have also set standards for food and wines in the White House not matched since he retired in 1809. The tastes Jefferson acquired for French cooking and fine wines while Ambassador in Paris were brought to Washington during his presidency. Elegant dinners that he considered an essential part of his role as president were prepared by chefs from Paris and served almost nightly to congressmen, diplomats and friends. The food and wine bills were astronomical. It was said that Jefferson made champagne fashionable in Washington, and he went through rivers of it at the White House. He truly believed in "champagne diplomacy" using the convivial atmosphere fostered by the bubbly beverage as a lubricant to create better political and diplomatic relationships with his domestic friends and foes as well as with foreign powers. Jefferson himself was always moderate in his own consumption, saying he never had more than 3 glasses of wine in an evening, but he truly loved wine and was frequently quoted as saying, "Wine is a necessity of my life." In addition he never scrimped on quality, telling his agent in France, "Choose the best quality wines and let the price be what it should be. Consider quality rather than price."

As President, Jefferson was paid \$25,000 per year for salary and all expenses, but the recorded costs of food and beverages for these politically useful and enjoyable dinners were staggering, and in fact probably exceeded his government pay. As his presidency wound down, Jefferson expressed fears that he would not be able to enjoy his retirement because he would be too poor to take advantage of it. He had good reason to be concerned, because despite his genius in so many matters, one of his flaws seems to have been his inability to manage well his own personal financial affairs. He spent many years living beyond his means and was essentially bankrupt when he died.

Even with these financial pressures and concerns, however, his 17 years in retirement at his beloved Monticello were happy in many ways. He was surrounded by his grandchildren and found comfort in old friendships and old wines. He reconciled with John Adams after many years, and they carried on a warm and lively correspondence until they both died, coincidentally on the same day. He was able to mentor his two successors as presidents: James Madison and James Monroe. He founded the University of Virginia and designed its campus and several of its iconic buildings, and he continued to take keen interest in his wine cellar. The last letter he ever wrote, dated June 25, 1826, eight days before he died, was to his agent in New York, directing him to pay \$18. for duties to the port where his 1826 wine order was due to arrive shortly. When he passed away at age 83 on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, his wine cellar was filled with nearly 50 cases of good wine, with a new shipment en-route.

If Jefferson were to return to the United States today, he would undoubtedly be pleasantly surprised to see how many of his wine dreams have come true. American wineries are

producing respected wines and are thriving, including many good Virginia vineyards. Some of the best Virginia wines are actually coming from the areas around Monticello, aided now by modern technology and viticultural techniques. In addition, the best wines from around the world are now readily available in specialty stores and even supermarkets, in large cities and small towns all over America. Of all his areas of interest, perhaps wines have changed the least over the 200+ years since he was President; and of all the places he could visit in modern America, he might find himself more at home in a wine shop than anywhere else!

Postscript

During his grand tour of the French wine country in 1787, Jefferson passed through the lovely little Mediterranean port town of Sete in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. There he learned about “Quack Vintners,” also called “midnight chemists” many of whom practiced their craft in Sete. These were 18th century con-men who specialized in fabricating famous wines for export to unsuspecting buyers. It turns out that counterfeit European wines were common in Jefferson’s time. One popular recipe for Bordeaux was: “mix one quart of hard cider with a quart of port – shake well and then let it stand. After a month the best judge will not be able to distinguish it from a good Bordeaux.” The bulk of their concoctions were sent to England. It was said that “there were hardly any pure Bordeaux wines in England in 1775 and that far more sherry and port wines were sold there than were produced in all of Spain and Portugal.”

Jefferson warned those who sought his advice not to order wine from intermediaries, because of the prevalence of doctored or fraudulent wines. Wine critics of the time wrote that many

Englishmen became so used to fabricated Bordeaux that they did not like the genuine product when they tasted it. Jefferson's advice was simple: "All Bordeaux are not created equal, so buyer beware." Wine advice is often forgotten but seldom has an expiration date.

Fast forward approximately 200 years from when Jefferson issued this dictum. The date was December 5, 1985, when the most expensive bottle of wine ever offered at auction was sold at Christie's in London. The bottle was hand blown dark green glass, capped with a distressed cork and a seal of thick black wax. The bottle had no label but etched into the glass was the year 1787, the word Lafitte and the letters "Th.J."

According to the Christie's catalog the bottle came from a collection of wine that had been discovered behind a bricked-up wall in an old building in Paris. The Christie's catalog went on to state that evidence suggested that the wine had belonged to Thomas Jefferson and that the bottle could "rightly be considered one of the world's greatest rarities." Christie's in-house glass experts confirmed that both the bottle and the engraving were consistent with 18th century French style. Historic records also contain a letter written by Jefferson ordering cases of Bordeaux for himself and George Washington with the stipulation that their respective shipments be marked with their initials, though the instructions said nothing about engraving the bottles.

The bidding at Christie's opened at 2:30pm that December afternoon, and less than two minutes later, the gavel fell. The final price was \$157,000. The winning bidder was Christopher Forbes, son of Malcolm Forbes, publisher of Forbes Magazine. After this auction, serious collectors sought out other Jefferson bottles, and in 1988, American tycoon Bill Koch, one of the

famous Koch brothers, purchased four Jefferson bottles from several sources, spending half a million dollars. He installed them in his secure, climate controlled wine cellar at his home, never intending to drink them. Koch, who calls himself a compulsive collector, has one of the world's finest wine cellars and wanted the Jefferson bottles for the pure pleasure of owning some of "the world's greatest rarities."

Koch's collection of wine, art and antiques is valued at several hundred million dollars, and in 2005, the Boston Museum of Art prepared to exhibit part of his collection. Koch's staff began documenting the provenance of the Jefferson bottles and found that apart from the Christie's catalogue description of the Forbes bottle, they had nothing more on file. As they sought historical corroboration, they contacted the Jefferson Foundation at Monticello. The reply they received from Monticello's chief curator, Susan Stein was blunt. "Based on our detailed records of his wine purchases," she replied, "we do not believe these bottles ever belonged to Thomas Jefferson." Bill Koch was obviously not pleased and was quoted as saying, "If someone's out to cheat me, I want the son-of-a-bitch to pay for it!"

Koch hired former FBI agent, Jim Elroy, to investigate the fraud, and he traced Koch's four bottles and others sold by Christie's back to a flamboyant German dealer named Hardy Rodenstock. Rodenstock had become famous for his allegedly uncanny ability to track down old and very rare wines from unnamed sources around the world. He courted celebrities and well known wine critics by throwing lavish tasting parties at his own expense where supposedly rare wines were consumed in such quantities that one attendee said, "People were getting so shit-faced that any objective assessment of the wines was impossible."

Koch funded authentication efforts at labs in the U.S. and Europe on alleged Jefferson bottles in his collection that could be traced back to Rodenstock, trying to carbon date their contents, but tests were inconclusive. One lab reported: “The tests can only say with absolute confidence that the wine is from somewhere between 1673 and 1945.” Not much help! Prominent wine consultants also advised Koch that no one can really taste for authenticity and that even the best critics are fallible so the purchase of rare wines, especially very old ones, depend on trust in the seller.

Koch filed a civil law suit against Rodenstock in 2006, claiming he was a victim of fraud.

Rodenstock denied any and all wrong doing. He also maintained that as a German citizen, living in Germany, the court had no jurisdiction over him and that moreover the statute of limitations now made the case against him mute. He therefore refused to take part in the proceedings, and the case was ultimately thrown out on the basis of the court’s lacking jurisdiction over the defendant. As many can surely attest, what really happened and what can be proved in court happened is not always the same.

As a result of the evidence presented in the Koch case, it is generally accepted that the so called Jefferson bottles were counterfeits, and Rodenstock, now considered a modern-day “quack vintner” has become the most notorious name in modern wine lore. No one knows how many bottles of fraudulent rare wines Rodenstock has sold, but Koch’s investigator estimated that he was selling 10 bottles/month at an average price of \$10,000/bottle, netting him over a million dollars a year over many years.

Bill Koch has declared that the business of selling rare wines is basically over because the market has been flooded with fakes. The extraordinary inflation in rare wine prices together with the passion for the rarest of old wines has blinded collectors, critics, auctioneers and dealers. Since so much of the rare wine business is in off-the-books, “gray market” exchanges between buyers and resellers with no direct link to the chateau, knowing exactly who puts a particular bottle of wine in circulation and what exactly is in the bottle can be impossible to ascertain.

Quite remarkably this tale of intrigue and deceit from the 20th century brings us back to what Thomas Jefferson had discovered in France in 1787, and his advice seems as fresh as ever: “Don’t go to middlemen. Go directly to the producer. He will always give you the right product. The middleman will take advantage of you.” Or as I would like to paraphrase Jefferson: In vinum **verum**, veritas, which I loosely translate: “Truth is only to be found in a **genuine** wine.”