

Hold the bubbles

Say what you will about Thomas Jefferson, the man was not stingy with the Champagne. Over a dozen days in December 1802, he poured 50 bottles of the wine at the table. But the polymath sometime-president may have been a bit tiresome — a crank, even — when it came to which Champagne he would serve.

A Champagne devotee, Jefferson was not a fan of the wine we now know as Champagne. Convinced that fizzy wine was for the callow and shallow, he insisted that when it came to Champagne, the still wines of the region were the only choice for a sophisticate.

Not only did Jefferson prefer the nonsparkling (that is, nonmousseux) Champagne, he seemed to be seized by the conviction that sparkling wine was vulgar. Traveling in France, TJ took this note on the wines of the Champagne region: "The sparkling are little drank in France but are alone known and drank in foreign countries." The foreigners drink so much fizz and pay such prices for it that the winemakers in Champagne "endeavor to make all the sparkling if they can."

Jefferson became a bit tiresome in pressing this point with his countrymen, whose tastes he was determined to improve. "The Mousseux or Sparkling Champagne is never brought to a good table in France," Jefferson wrote in a memo to Philadelphia wine merchant Henry Sheaff. "The Mousseux or Sparkling is dearest because most in demand for exportation, but the Non-mousseux is most esteemed and alone drunk by every real connoisseur."

In 1789, Jefferson sent John Jay hampers from Paris "containing samples of the best wines of this country, which I beg leave to present to the President and yourself, in order that you may decide whether you would wish to have any." Jefferson offered to procure the wines for them and listed what he thought they should serve. Jefferson recommended "Champagne non mousseux (i.e. still) much preferred here to the sparkling, which [is over-priced as it] goes all to foreign countries."

On Christmas Eve 1802, a Federalist congressman dined with Jefferson. "The wine was the best I ever drank," he recalled, "particularly the champagne, which was indeed delicious. I wish his French politics were as good as his French wines."

Jefferson would be hard-pressed to find any nonmousseux Champagne these days. The wine, now designated as Coteaux Champenois, still exists, but only small amounts are made.

Jefferson would not have been the only fan of still Champagne who would have wondered what happened. Prolific 19th-century scientist Johann Ludwig Wilhelm Thudichum found time between writing "A Treatise on the Pathology of Urine" and (his signal contribution to medicine) "A Treatise on the Chemical Constitution of the Brain" to write the 1872 "Treatise on the Origin, Nature, and Varieties of Wine; Being a Complete Manual of Viticulture and Oenology." He observed there were four "qualities" of Champagne. There's mousseux, the standard fizzy sort. There's grand mousseux, a supercharged style that "projects the cork with a loud report, and immediately overflows the bottle." There's cremant, so named for its creamy effervescence. And last here, but first in Thudichum's accounting, Champagne nonmousseux, or still Champagne.

Thudichum wrote that the nonbubbly bubbies, “if properly matured, have striking peculiarities of taste and flavour.” A 19th-century dictionary described the peculiar quality of still red wines from the Champagne region as uniting “the color and the aroma of Burgundy to the lightness of Champagne.”

Nearly 200 years later, that description of the wine still rings true. I recently tried one of the most highly regarded of the still red wines of Champagne, La Cote aux Enfants. A pinot noir from Ay, the wine is made by one of my favorite Champagne houses, Bollinger. In the glass, the color of the wine was inky, and opaque in a way that suggested a heavy-bodied fruit bomb, but once on the palate, it was rich without being dense as well as elegantly dry. The finish disappeared with Houdini deftness. Mr. Jefferson would have approved.