

‘The Party Intended to Be Benefited’:  
The Perception of the Wine Consumer in the Nineteenth Century – Active or Passive?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the perception of the ‘consumer’ in the nineteenth century. Despite the important work of Frank Trentmann in particular, this question remains under-explored. Typically, the ‘consumer’ has been presented as a passive subject of the culture industries and advertising (to quote Trentmann’s 2006 introduction to *The Making of the Consumer*). Only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did the consumer switch from passive to active. Trentmann’s 2006 chapter in *Consuming Cultures* located the newly ‘active’ consumer in the early agitations against the municipal utilities, arguing that the ‘contestation of water left behind an enriched sense and symbolism of the consumer as representing the public interest’. The idea of the consumer, he further argues, was only firmly established by the Edwardian free trade campaigns between 1903-10.

My focus is on the private rather than public consumer, using the British wine trade as the lens through which to reconsider both the perception and the practices of the nineteenth century consumer. Wine in general and champagne in particular present a valuable field of inquiry since this industry was the locus of some of the earliest successful attempts to build powerful brands which were supported not only by intensive press advertising in both national and provincial papers but also by highly pervasive and effective public relations campaigns in the national press and the popular magazines of the period.

***The Idea of the Consumer***

The term ‘consumer’ was used very frequently in nineteenth-century advertising and press comment. Many adverts were headed ‘To the Consumer of...’. The frequent distinction drawn between ‘consumers’ and ‘large consumers’ indicates that the term was not reserved for private individuals only. Very occasionally, advertisements would be addressed not just to ‘consumers’ but to ‘consumers and connoisseurs’ (see, for example, the *Suffolk Chronicle*, 11 December 1858, p. 1) but the rarity of such implicit gradations of levels of interest and knowledge suggests that merchants saw no value in such an approach.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, press commentary frequently portrayed consumers as victims of ‘abominable drones’, that is the middlemen between producer and end user whose manipulations pushed up the price of necessary foodstuffs.<sup>1</sup> In a court case in 1799, the judge, whilst regretting the statute outlawing the practice of ‘regrating’ (that is selling the same product twice in the same day at the same market), nevertheless invoked common law in condemning a corn jobber whose intervention in the market raised the price of a ‘necessary of life’ by 5%.<sup>2</sup> Whilst wine was another natural product, its foreign production demanded long and often complex supply chains with multiple intermediaries and politicians, as Sir Robert Peel argued in 1831, had to be aware that the benefit of reduced duties on wine might go to the retailer rather than the ‘party intended to be benefitted’.<sup>3</sup>

**Consumers and the Nineteenth-Century Wine Trade**

In the wine trade as a whole, the rhetoric centred on the need to protect consumers against adulterated wine whilst focusing on the gullibility of individual consumers in the face of ‘brands’ which were believed to distort the market by preying on consumers’ lack of knowledge of wine, the widespread lack of trust in traditional merchants and consumers’ vulnerability to price-gouging at worst and distorted price / value ratios at best. Sporadic state intervention was directed at adulterated wine – particularly after a series of scandals in the port trade in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>4</sup> Whilst scandals and scares such as that over ‘benzene champagne’ in the 1870s continued throughout the nineteenth century, this problem was increasingly addressed by legislation and the actions of powerful producers and distributors such as W & A Gilbey, whose ‘business system’ made uniform bottle size and protection against any form of adulteration a keystone of their marketing.<sup>5</sup>

The response to consumers’ supposed gullibility over brands was both less certain and more nuanced. The fundamental accusation made by wine writers and the press was that ‘confiding’ consumers were

taken in by brands – particularly in the champagne market – and seduced into buying wines bearing a ‘celebrated brand’. Were they prepared to educate their own palate or trust that of their wine merchant, they could obtain wines at a far better price / value ratio. So went the trade’s argument. The brand premium of 20-30% that obtained by the end of the 1860s was, in the view of many wine trade commentators, nothing but the ‘magic of brand’.<sup>6</sup> In the words of Ridley’s *Wine and Spirit Circular* (the premier wine trade journal throughout the century) in an 1893 survey of the trade, the consuming public ‘must be able to call their Wine a crack brand of a crack vintage, and to this, quality is a secondary consideration’. In Ridley’s eyes, and those of many other contemporaries, the consumers would have done better to have trusted their wine merchant, ‘who would perhaps give them the extra quality of a comparatively unknown shipper’.<sup>7</sup>

#### The confiding consumer and the problem of provenance

So far, so confiding. But this story of the passive and gullible consumer at the mercy of greedy brand owners and adulterating ‘advertising merchants’ was not the whole truth. Consumers were right to be suspicious of much advertising and many merchants. The Gladstonian reforms of 1860 and 1861 brought many new entrants into the trade. Ridley’s noted in an early twentieth-century retrospective on the trade that ‘the demand was so considerable that all sorts and conditions of shopkeepers rushed into the Trade almost as impetuously as, ten years before, inexperienced youths had flocked to the goldfields of Ballarat. Grocers, Confectioners, Florists, Druggists, most of them knowing no more about Wine than they knew of the enchorial inscription on the Rosetta Stone, procured cheap licenses and filled their shop-windows with cheap Wines’.<sup>8</sup> Many such merchants adopted the practice of using branded wines as ‘decoy ducks’.<sup>9</sup> Famous name champagnes would be advertised in the press at or below cost price for mail order sale but, consumer interest secured, the branded wine would ‘out of stock’ and a lesser wine substituted that delivered a profit to the retailer.<sup>10</sup>

The rhetoric of greedy brand owners and untrustworthy new entrants to the trade suited that sector of the merchant trade which saw itself as ‘reputable’ but it created an atmosphere of suspicion. Not even supposedly reputable merchants could be wholly trusted. As Anthony Trollope’s 1880 article on ‘The Wine Merchant’ makes clear, good judges of wine such as Trollope was could also be deceived or duped by their wine merchants.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the period, commentators noted that buying a branded wine whose provenance could be guaranteed by the name on the cork was a sensible strategy on the part of consumers. Out of home, buying a known brand avoided the risks attached to unfamiliar and potentially adulterated wines sold in hotels and restaurants; in home, the visible presence of a known brand on the table impressed guests and performed its significant social work of demonstrating the social status and cultural resources of the host. The high(er) price of a premium brand was, in this case, justified by its social impact and by its role as a proxy of quality, well-proven by subsequent academic studies.<sup>12</sup>

Contemporaries were increasingly convinced that consumers bought premium brands on name value rather than product quality. An 1880 article in the *Morning Post* boosting the brand of Deutz & Geldermann claimed that ‘there is a fashion in champagne as there is in hats’.<sup>13</sup> The *Times* in 1881 noted the complaint that the ‘public run after a few brands in an irrational manner’ but went on to say that ‘contemptible as [this] may seem to a person who is versed in the mysteries of the trade, the public cannot be indifferent to the brand’. Champagnes, the newspaper said, varied hugely in quality and the ‘person who dines at his club or a hotel must go very much by the brand, and he would be greatly disconcerted if all the names with which he was familiar were struck out of the lists, and were replaced by a multitude of others of which he know [sic] little’.<sup>14</sup> Whilst this judgment is not conclusive, it is entirely in line with what has become known of consumer behaviour over the last fifty years. André Simon, writing the history of the champagne trade in 1905, concurred:

The public which had hailed the advent of a genuine low-priced Champagne, was very soon disgusted with the beverage sold as Champagne under a name or fancy label, and the result was the introduction and growing popularity of known ‘brands,’ in which the public felt some confidence might be placed.<sup>15</sup>

The authenticity of the wine was guaranteed by the name and, from the 1890s onwards, the vintage date on the cork. It was not that corks were impossible to forge but specialist equipment was needed to recork and re-foil bottles. Labels were easier to forge as a court case in 1882 demonstrated; whilst as late as 1892 there were concerns about how easily the label could be ‘washed off’ since the wine was ‘immerse[d] in ice and water to cool’.<sup>16</sup> The champagne trade were pioneers in using the cork to

guarantee provenance and other sectors of the trade followed. An 1886 circular from the noted British wholesalers, Southard & Co, reported on the 'positive confidence' afforded by claret corks branded with chateau name. *Ridley's* objected to the extension of this practice on the grounds that it disadvantaged the British merchants.

### ***Could the consumer go direct?***

The *Ridley's* comment reflected their long-standing conviction that merchants too were deceived by the power of manufacturer brands. In 1874, *Ridley's* argued that the 'exorbitant ruling quotations for leading brands afford a good opportunity to our Merchants of pushing the sale of Champagne, bearing their own names on the corks'.<sup>17</sup> In 1879 they repeated their view that wine merchants 'original short-sightedness' had led them to promote producer brands and fail to develop their own brands. They claimed that they knew of a 'good many firms who have, by the exercise of patience and perseverance, carried it out with satisfactory pecuniary results'.<sup>18</sup> But there is no evidence that British merchants were successful in so doing. The highest profile attempt was that of William Hudson, entrepreneur, self-publicist and eventual bankrupt. Hudson coined the term 'brandolatry', or the 'blind worship of brands' and in the publicity material for his own 'O.N.P' brand of champagne – standing for 'Opinion, not Prejudice', insisted on the 'value, indeed, upon the necessity, of tasting without prejudice, and buying, almost irrespective of Mark or Brand'.<sup>19</sup> But brands such as Hudson's could offer little beyond a 15-20% price benefit and lacked the resources to advertise consistently. All the nineteenth-century attempts by merchants to successfully sell own brand champagnes were failures.

At the centre of *Ridley's* concern was the fear that extension of the 'brand system' would tend to disintermediate the English merchants. As a correspondent to the journal put it in 1883, "[t]his Chateau bottling is the thin end of a wedge, to enable growers or their Agents to force the hands of legitimate Wine Merchants, and failing that to open a direct trade with the consumer".<sup>20</sup> The journal was scornful of consumer attempts to bring consumer and producer into closer contact. The fledgling International Wine Society (still flourishing nearly 150 years later), which was founded in 1874 and had a membership of over 2100 by 1900 was dismissed on the grounds that 'we are inclined to doubt whether the majority of our readers have heard much of the Company'.<sup>21</sup>

Even before *Ridley's* was founded in 1848, there had been attempts to cut out the intermediaries in the trade. In 1829, the *Globe*, in the course of an attack on the 'price of provisions in the Metropolis', quoted an article from the *Spectator* magazine detailing the 50-140% profit margins on champagne and arguing for the formation of a co-operative society for the purchase of wine which would communicate 'directly' with producers and manufacturers and pass the benefits on to members who would pay £10 per annum to join.<sup>22</sup> Attempts were made in 1840 to float a similar company – but apparently without success.<sup>23</sup> More overtly commercial ventures such as Thomas Stapleton's 'Foreign Vineyard Association' which bought direct in France and sold at a discount to other merchants were very successful. The firm was still in existence and advertising heavily in the mid-1870s.<sup>24,25</sup>

There were other attempts to bring consumers and producers into closer contact. In 1883, a 'Vine Club' was launched to that end. The publicity claimed that because 'members of the club drink at table the same Wines they may be supplied with for their own cellars' they could ensure that there was no question of the 'judgement of quality being biased by the question of profit'.<sup>26</sup> The wines were supposedly supplied cost price by the managers, which presumably contributed to their – but not the Club's – failure. Under the name of the York Club it moved to larger premises in St James's Square in 1885 by when it had close to a thousand members.<sup>27</sup> This is not to argue that consumer-movements of the kind described by Trentmann had a major impact on the nineteenth-century wine trade. The numbers involved were small; their success limited. The larger 'Stores' established on co-operative principles in London in the 1860s (Civil Service Supply Association) and 1870s (Army and Navy Co-operative Stores) had far more impact across a broader range of goods. Nonetheless such stores were major suppliers of wine, affecting competition for a radius of fifty miles or more.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The consumers' Impact on Taste***

The most significant consumer impact on wine was that they drove changes in taste – particularly in champagne. At the beginning of the century, champagne drunk in England was sweet, mostly still and drunk with desserts or on its own.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the century, it was entirely sparkling, very dry (drier than we drink it today) and, amongst elite consumers, the 'dinner wine' of choice. Several factors drove these changes but from the letters of the French agents in London, it is clear that the shift to dry wine in particular was opposed by many producers. 'A dry wine must be a perfect wine' wrote the Bristol wine

merchant and champagne expert, Charles Tovey.<sup>30</sup> It was, he said, in the producers' 'pecuniary interest [...] that a taste for sweet wine should predominate' because sugar covered up defects. The Pommery principals resisted their agent's demands for drier wine since they feared that in poor vintages they could not supply the quality required. Nonetheless the market shifted inexorably to dry wines and by launching the Pommery Brut of 1874 (the first champagne marketed as an entirely unsweetened wine), the firm and, ultimately, its competitors accepted the shift in consumer taste.<sup>31</sup> The shift to dry wine was driven by its steadily increasing use in England as a dinner wine to be drunk with roast meat and savoury dishes and by the Victorian discourse that insisted that to like, even to tolerate very dry wine, the drinker must start early and drink often. Champagne thus became a marker of cultural and financial capital.

### *Conclusions*

There were no consumer movements of the type studied by Trentmann in the wine trade. But that it is not to say that the consumers entirely lacked agency. They were neither puppets of the wine trade nor entirely passive in their behaviour. Their choices shaped taste; even if those choices were driven as much by social aspiration as pure sensory preference. In a market where producers could not guarantee consistency and where there were significant risks of adulteration or faulty wine, they joined clubs and societies designed to diminish the risks of wine purchasing and bring consumers closer to producers. From the consumers' perspective, brands were a rational choice. If there was 'worship of brands', as Hudson had alleged, it was not entirely blind.

In the champagne market, Pommery, under the direction of their London agent Adolphe Hubinet, took significant steps from the 1860s onwards to create a standardised house style that was expressed through large-scale bottlings. Hubinet was driven by the realisation that, as he put it in a letter of 1871, 'our admirers can't count on drinking the same wine twice in a row'. Without this consistency sales would be harmed.<sup>32</sup> Champagne flourished so dramatically during the nineteenth century because it could be produced to a consistent quality and taste profile, because it could, therefore, be strongly branded and because it could be blended to match the evolving taste of consumers by varying the level of added sugar (known as *dosage*) to the wine.<sup>33</sup>

Other sectors of the wine trade, with possible exception of port, were unable or unwilling to follow a similar trajectory. The sherry trade was bedevilled by wide variations in style and nomenclature whilst the sherry producers consistently failed to agree on a branding strategy. Even *Ridley's*, the consistent campaigner for merchant brands, felt compelled to agree with the verdict on sherry producers expressed in the *Morning Post* of November 1883, that 'we cannot help thinking that its adoption [that is, branded corks] would be of service both to the producers of pure wine and to the public'.<sup>34</sup> Even at the top level of quality, the wines of Bordeaux suffered badly from weather-related vintage variations from year to year which made it impossible to create consistent wines of acceptable quality. As *Ridley's* wrote in 1908, 'the disappointment of a generation of drinkers at the poor quality of indifferent Wines with real Chateau Brands has worked as much ill to the drinking of Claret as adulteration and the selling of other poor unbranded stuff can be credited with'.<sup>35</sup> The port shippers were more effective than any but the champagne houses in imposing their brands on the market but port itself suffered from adulteration scandals and quality variation throughout the second half of the century.<sup>36</sup> Had producers of wines other than champagne been able to take a similar route, it is arguable that Britain might have become the wine-drinking nation that Gladstone had hoped for when he lowered the duties on light, or unfortified, wine in 1860.<sup>37</sup>

But they could not and did not. The result was continuing uncertainty over quality and provenance. In the face of such issues, nineteenth-century wine consumers acted rationally and took such co-operative action as they could to express agency in the face of uncertainty and aggressive marketing.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Kentish Gazette*, 31 October 1800, p. 3 for 'abominable drones'. For court cases indicting 'regraters and forestallers' see *Kentish Gazette*, 5 August 1800, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Chester Chronicle*, 11 July 1800, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Durham Chronicle*, 19 February 1831, p. 2 reporting Sir Robert Peel's speech in a House of Commons debate.

<sup>4</sup> The scandals over adulterated port first came to public notice in 1844. See Joseph James Forrester, *A word or two on port-wine! addressed to the British publick generally, but particularly to private gentlemen : showing how and why it is adulterated, and affording some means of detecting its adulterations*, (London, P. Richardson, 1848). William Gladstone's budget of 1860 was in part a response to fears over the deleterious impact on consumers' health of adulterated and highly alcoholic wine.

<sup>5</sup> For Gilbey's business system, see G. Harding, "'Competition Is Useless': How Gilbey's Retail and Marketing Innovation Dominated the British Wine and Spirits Market, 1857-1922," *History of Retailing and Consumption* 2, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 3 April 1891, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ridley's Wine and Spirit Circular*, 1893, p. 217.

<sup>8</sup> *Ridley's Wine and Spirit Circular*, 9 January 1908, p. 52; for a *Punch* cartoon of a failed lawyer who turns to the wine trade see 26 May 1883, p. 249.

<sup>9</sup> E.L. Beckwith, *Practical Notes on Wine* (London, 1868), p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> For an example of such advertising, see *Tamworth Herald*, 18 July 1880, p. 7. [tbc]

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Trollope, 'The Wine Merchant', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 August 1880, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> F. Vigneron and L.W. Johnson, "Measuring Perceptions of Brand Luxury," *Journal of Brand Management* 11, no. 6 (2004), p. 289.

<sup>13</sup> *Morning Post*, 13 April 1880, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 15 June 1882, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> A.L. Simon, *History of the Champagne Trade in England* (London, 1905), p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> *Ridley's*, 12 May 1882, p. 143-4 ('such excellent imitations of the genuine [Heidsieck] brands as to deceive the most experienced eye, and it is difficult to estimate the extent to which the fraud has been carried'); *ibid*, 12 October 1892, p. 534.

<sup>17</sup> *Ridley's*, 12 January 1874, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ridley's*, 12 July 1879, p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> See *London Daily News*, 2 October 1880, p. 4 for his 'Tasting Rooms' at the second 'National Exhibition and Market' at the Agricultural Hall in London. For Hudson's fuller manifesto on 'the present condition of the wine and spirit trade', see Diageo, 100433/80, 'General observations on the [...] Wine and Spirit Trade', dated October 1882.

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- <sup>20</sup> *Ridley's*, 12 April 1883, p. 124.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ridley's*, 12 July 1901, p. 466; 11 July 1891, p. 404.
- <sup>22</sup> *Globe*, 23 November 1829, p. 3.
- <sup>23</sup> See *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 12 September 1840, p. tbc.
- <sup>24</sup> See *London Evening Standard*, 8 October 1875, p. tbc.
- <sup>25</sup> See *Hampshire Telegraph*, 11 June 1859, p. 2 for a general overview of the Stapleton proposition.
- <sup>26</sup> For the Vine Club, see *Morning Post*, 17 January 1883, p. 4; *Western Morning News*, 27 March 1884, p. 4.
- <sup>27</sup> *London Daily News*, 23 May 1885, p. 2; *Sporting Times*, 28 May 1885, p. 4.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Hood and B.S. Yamey, "The Middle-Class Co-Operative Retailing Societies in London, 1864-1900," *Oxford Economic Papers* 9, no. 3 (1957), pp. 316-7.
- <sup>29</sup> For the composition of Jean-Remy Moët's shipments to the British Isles between 1790 and 1817 and the preponderance of still wines, see B. Musset, *Vignobles De Champagne Et Vins Mousseux, 1650-1830: Histoire D'un Mariage De Raison* (Paris, 2008), p. 602.
- <sup>30</sup> C. Tovey, *Champagne: Its History, Properties, and Manufacture* (London, 1870), p. 80.
- <sup>31</sup> Both Veuve Clicquot and Louis Roederer resisted the shift but eventually had to capitulate.
- <sup>32</sup> A. Flocquet, *Compilation De La Correspondance De Hubinet* (n.d. [1950s]), letter of 12 March 1871 from Hubinet to Vasnier, his principal in Reims.
- <sup>33</sup> For the customisation of champagne and the development of differentiated 'house styles' see, G. Harding, "The Establishment of Champagne in Britain, 1860-1914" (University of Oxford, 2018), chapter 3.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ridley's* 12 December 1883, p. 366.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ridley's*, 10 November 1908, pp. 985-6.
- <sup>36</sup> For the success of the port shippers, see P. Duguid, "Developing the Brand, 1800-1880," *Enterprise and Society* 4, no. 3 (2003).
- <sup>37</sup> J. Simpson, *Creating Wine: The Emergence of a World Industry, 1840-1914* (Princeton, 2011), pp. 81-110 confirms this verdict.