

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison
of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I. Beer and Wine

Some Social Commentary



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I MUST COME CLEAN BY ADMITTING TO HAVE WORKED IN OR around the brewing industry for nearly thirty years. It will come as no surprise to you, then, that I drink beer. I like beer. I admire brewers. I think they are some of the most skilled, devoted, and ingenious people on the planet. Charming, too.

However, I do not dislike wine, nor the viticulturalists and enologists who bring that amazing product to the market. I drink wine, though I prefer beer. I believe that the brewer has much to learn from the winemaker with regard to re-establishing their product as an integral component of a wholesome and elongated lifestyle. Equally, the winemaker must doff his or her cap to the brewer insofar as technical matters go. There is no question that brewing leads the way in matters technological and scientific. Indeed, throughout the industrial ages, brewing has been a pioneering process that has informed all other fermentation industries, even to the production of pharmaceuticals and the latter-day *biotechnologicals*, with their diversity of high-value products.

In this book, I compare beer and wine. I do not seek to decry wine. Rather, I aim to demonstrate why brewers can hold their heads high in the knowledge that their liquid is every ounce the equal of wine,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Beer and Wine • 3

by any yardstick you choose to nominate. At the same time, I will highlight the frustrations I have that many brewers do so little to truly champion beer for its inherent qualities, but rather seek the popularity low ground with their outrageous (if hilarious) advertising regimes and product innovation strategies that spawn drinks (notably the Malternatives) that are alarmingly variant to the beers that we have enjoyed for generations. Compare, if you will, the imagery associated with beer as opposed to that of wine.

The word “wine” conjures images for me of chateaux on hillsides in leafy France. Or I picture the mission-style façade of Robert Mondavi’s vineyard, as well as wineries of other notable names in Napa. I see the ritual of the wine sommelier rejoicing in the ceremony of the bottle presentation, ritualistic decorking, and offering for approval. I applaud row upon row of books on wine at any bookstore, rich volumes held in biblical reverence. I see family picnics with wicker baskets containing canapés and smoked salmon, with ladies in gossamer gowns.

As the reader will deduce from this book, I have no doubt in my own mind that beer could just as readily occupy rarefied scenarios, but much more besides. Frankly, though, a word association game with the word beer will generate for many images of steaming factories in dark mill towns, bottles with torn labels plunked on Formica tables to accompany burgers and fries and perhaps a cigarette. Likely as not, your waiter will not spontaneously give you a glass to drink from and, even when you get one, it is likely not the appropriate receptacle for the beer concerned and will be badly washed, leading to instant killing of the foam or at best some dreadful bladdery bubbles. And that is if you get to see the bubbles, for the waitress is likely to go to extreme lengths to pour real gently down the side of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 • Grape vs. Grain

the glass so as to *avoid* bubble formation. When will they learn that they should splash the beer down into the center of the base of the glass, so as to give the carbon dioxide every opportunity to convert to bubbles, and so that a large head of foam will be produced? *Then* they can leave you with the bottle for you to top up your glass to your heart's (and eye's and mouth's) content.

I struggle to find books on beer, and when I do they inevitably turn out to be treatises on how to brew your own in a bucket or a thousand-and-one ways to describe the state of drunkenness. Words like suds that have crept into common parlance are better suited to bowls of washing, not beer. I see gangs of loud immature men, belching, farting, and falling over. I see drinking games and ritualistic bad behavior.

I am not naïve. I know which segment of society drinks the most beer: young males. Not in a million years would I presume to suggest that brewers should turn their backs on this sector. But I trust that they will preach moderation to them. My wish is that all brewers will realize (as some do already) that they too can appeal to those who presently savor their wines and who perhaps do not realize the pedigree and potential of the grain-based beverage.

Travel the world, though, and you will find cultures where beer is very much romanced and regarded as more than an equal for wine; indeed, it is an inherent cultural feature. Nowhere is this truer than Belgium. The diversity of beers is immense: There is not an occasion unsuited to the consumption of beer, with the exception of the communion chalice. Not only that, the beer must be presented with a theater and reverence no less essential than for the pouring of a fine wine.

I recall a visit to the home of a good friend in Antwerp. He invited me to choose a pre-prandial beer from his collection and I dutifully

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Beer and Wine • 5

selected something after hearing the seemingly unending list of what he had to offer. The drink did not appear for twenty minutes as he hunted for exactly the correct glass, the one with the appropriate shape and dimensions for the beer, the one with the relevant brand logo in place. I told him that it really didn't matter which glass he provided, but I might as well have told him that it was immaterial whether the subsequent excellent meal was served on paper plates and eaten with plastic knives and forks.

Thus, Belgium falls fair and square in the list of "beer countries." Alongside them we might also list the likes of the Czech Republic (home to comfortably the most formidable drinkers of beer), Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom and, yes, the United States (Table 1-1). "Wine countries" include France and Italy. Perhaps it will come as a surprise to some, though, that in Spain and Portugal, they consume more liters of beer than they do of wine. Of course, we must factor in the strength of the beverages if we are to consider any country in terms of the amount of alcohol derived from the two sources.

Perusal of Table 1-1, however, reveals the magnitude of the difference between beer and wine for their importance to the American customer. There is a slight decline in beer and increase in wine over the five-year period displayed, but beer is still the premier beverage in a nation that represents the second largest beer market (after China – where there is not much consumption per head, but an awful lot of people). The sheer population of the United States itself means that, despite the low per capita consumption of wine, it is the third largest wine market in the world (after France and Italy).

There are not many countries where beer volumes are growing. China has been a phenomenal story: From 1970 to 2003, the annual production of beer increased from 1.2 to 251 million hectoliters. To

6 • Grape vs. Grain

TABLE 1-1. BEER AND WINE IN MAJOR MARKETS

Country	Beer consumed (liters per head)		Wine consumed (liters per head)	
	1998	2003	1998	2003
Australia	95.0	87.3	19.7	20.7
Belgium	99.0	96.6	21.7	24.8
Brazil	50.2	45.9	1.4	2.0
Canada	67.0	68.4	8.9	11.0
China	15.6	19.4	0.9	0.9
Czech Republic	160.8	161.0	15.4	16.9
Denmark	107.7	96.2	29.1	30.1
France	38.6	35.5	58.1	49.0
Germany	127.4	117.5	22.8	23.6
Ireland	124.2	118.0	8.8	13.3
Italy	26.9	30.1	52.0	50.5
Japan	57.2	50.9	3.3	2.2
Mexico	49.0	51.7	—	—
Netherlands	84.3	78.7	18.4	19.6
Portugal	65.3	60.0	58.0	50.0
Russia	22.5	51.4	6.0	8.2
Spain	66.4	78.3	35.0	28.2
United Kingdom	100.6	101.3	15.7	20.0
United States	83.7	81.6	7.3	8.0

Data courtesy of the British Beer and Pub Association.

put that in context, consider that the U.S. production went from 158 to 230.8 million hectoliters. Per capita consumption in China, while increasing, remains low, for disposal income is still limited. Countries where beer consumption per head is growing include Russia (and other countries from what was once the USSR – vodka is losing its compulsion), Spain, and South Korea. Several countries are showing steady growth in wine consumption per head, as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Beer and Wine • 7

a glance at Table 1-1 shows. The decline in wine consumption is notable for being located in the great wine countries of France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal. Beer in decline and wine on the increase in Germany, beer on the rise and wine in decline in Spain: a case of seeing how the other half lives?

The factors impacting the overall consumption of alcoholic beverages in any community are diverse and complex. They include lifestyle and consumer demographics, notably age, disposable income, and, of course, image. In many societies, the populace is becoming better educated, wealthier, and choosier. They expect choice and diversity. They make decisions based on perceived quality. Balance judgments are made and, in this, surely the wine industry in countries such as the United States has stolen the moral high ground. Where there is growth in the beer market in this country, it reflects the consumer's interest in matters of health and well-being, ergo the march of light beer, or an interest in products different from the mainstream lighter flavored lager-style beers that still comprise the bedrock of the industry. Thus, the emergence of the craft brewing industry spoke to the interest of consumers in regional, fully flavored (I would say in many instances grossly *over-hopped*) products. The search for new types of beer also fueled the demand for imported products that capture the imagination and assume a provenance of traditional British, Germanic, Irish, or Dutch brewing excellence. The fact remains that the majority of beers imported into the United States display a profoundly aged character, and assume an aroma described by the beer taste expert as wet paper or cardboard. To the cognoscenti, this is as reprehensible as corked taint in wine. But the consumer still buys these beers, purchasing a bit of Burton, a dash of Dublin, or a schloss of Stuttgart.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 • Grape vs. Grain

I am quite convinced that customers purchasing imports and regional brews have in their mind's eye an image of a rustic brewery handcrafting beer in time-honored vessels according to ancient recipes. In reality, many of the imports are from huge modern breweries employing the latest technologies and practices. Some of the micro-brews in the United States emerge from dubious equipment, badly configured and begging for investment. As such, the quality of some of these beers as judged from within the expert brewing community is, frankly, deplorable. By contrast, the domestic brands produced in huge volumes and flashed across our television screens between baseball innings and at basketball time-outs are outstanding for their consistency, cleanness, and purity. Yet it is the micro-brews that have captured the consumer's imagination by touting a perceived sophistication that belongs in the same class as that engendered by wines.

There are major global beer brands – not least Guinness – that have assumed an aura of romance. I recall some while ago receiving an e-mail from a woman who asked whether it was true that the difference between Guinness brewed in London and that in the mother brewery of Dublin was that they marinate a dead cow in the brew from Ireland. They don't.

The major breweries of the United States and elsewhere in the world are places of sophistication and excellence. They are hygienic, airy, busy, and highly productive. They are working 24 hours a day, 365 days in the year, striving towards products of consistent excellence. They may be packaging bottles at rates exceeding 1,200 bottles every minute or cans more than twice as quickly as that. And most often, they are located in less than beautiful surroundings, historically matched to centers of high urban population. To the consumer, these are factories, but you will never hear a brewer using

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Beer and Wine • 9

that word. They are breweries, sophisticated, often highly automated, but always using time-honored brewing techniques. The only differences from a pub-based brewery are that the brewer spends more time looking at a computer screen, the facility is almost always rather cleaner, and the product is invariably more consistently excellent.

Occasionally, one encounters a brewery of genuine esthetic appeal. For example, you should head to the Sierra Nevada brewery in Chico, California, to see a facility that is the equal of any winery for style and sophistication, while at the same time having a technological and environmental conscience unmatched by the vast majority of winemakers.

There are some wineries that aspire to the sophistication of the mega breweries. And in just the same way that the major brewers are too often decried for producing somehow inferior products (when the reality is that their beers are actually vastly superior in terms of consistency of quality), the big “factory” wineries are pilloried as churning out down-market hooch. Nothing could be further from the truth, yet it is even more the case for wine than for beer that the customer associates quality and excellence with the products of smaller rural wineries of charm and elegance. It is almost as if the quality of the wine derives more from the art of the architect rather than the wit of the winemaker.

Winemakers speak of vintage. The plethora of wine literature grinds the dust fine on nuances of year, varietal, and winery. Brewers don't: A brand is a brand, and the expectation is that the beer should taste as expected every time, year on year. No need, then, for the bartender to offer the customer a sniff of the beer first to garner agreement that the rest is fit for consumption. No sniffing of crown cork closures. What is the ritual of wine pouring: a charming,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84937-1 - Grape vs. Grain: A Historical, Technological, and Social Comparison of Wine and Beer

Charles Bamforth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 • Grape vs. Grain

time-honored component of the overall wine drinking experience, or living testimony to the inability of a winemaker to achieve quality control? Or both?

Another e-mail I received recently was from a man who decried my insistence on preaching the gospel of consistency for beer. Why, he wanted to know, was it so important for every batch of beer to be so consistent. He liked surprises. My retort was that he would not be happy if a batch of anesthetic was out of specification and didn't quell the pain if he was having a surgical procedure. He would equally think it distinctly unacceptable if on opening the can he found his tomato soup to be blue. He would also be a tad miffed to find that gallons of gasoline varied in their ability to support the smooth running of his automobile. To me, the same principle should apply to wine as it most certainly does to beer: have your expectations fulfilled.

A fundamental difference between the production of beer and wine concerns the juxtaposition of raw materials and production process. It is customary for a winery to be built adjacent to the vineyard. Thus, there is a far closer connection between ground and glass for wine, the wine company being at once viticulturalist and winemaker. By contrast, it is very unusual for the brewery to be located adjacent to the barley crop. Rather, it is the malt house that tends to be located close to agriculture, remembering that barley needs sufficient pre-processing before it is in fit condition to be made into beer. While some brewing companies own their own malt houses and produce some or all of their malt (Anheuser-Busch and Coors are notable examples), by far, the majority of brewers buy their malted grain (and adjuncts) from suppliers.

These differences do not mean that the winemaker somehow has a greater control over the character of their products. The brewer is