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RESEARCH REPORT: Chateau Lafite 1787, with initials "Th. J."

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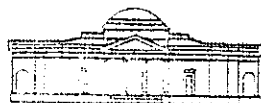
News of the discovery of a cache of initialled bottles of Bordeaux wine belonging to Thomas Jefferson evoked initial skepticism among the Monticello staff. When we learned that the German owner of the bottles (German music publisher Hardy Rodenstock) as well as his agent (Christie's wine department head, Michael Broadbent) were men of unquestioned knowledge and integrity, we began to reassess the possibilities of authenticity.

Because Mr. Rodenstock's and Mr. Broadbent's claims deserved serious consideration, an attempt was made to build up the best possible case for Jefferson's connection with the bottles, which included Chateau d'Yquem of 1784 and 1787, Chateau Margaux 1787, Chateau Lafite 1787, and Chateau Brane-Mouton (Mouton-Rothschild) 1787.

The natural first place to look for a direct connection is Jefferson's monumental archive. A thorough search of available records was made, but no solid connecting evidence could be found.

The following main points should be made:

1. Jefferson's surviving records for the period are virtually in tact. He made copies of all his letters and saved those written to him. He made a list of all the letters he wrote and received. He kept as well whole parcels of miscellaneous accounts, including the internal customs documents accompanying his wine shipments from Bordeaux to Paris. And, most importantly, he kept a daily financial memorandum book recording all his receipts and expenditures. He himself put so much faith in this document that said he would vouch for its accuracy and completeness "on the bed of death," adding that he had omitted only a single payment in fifteen years of recordkeeping.
2. Most of Jefferson's wine orders make an appearance in all four documentary areas (letters, letter record, memorandum book, or miscellaneous accounts, including customs records and bank statements). But Chateau Lafite 1787 does not appear in a single one.
3. Nor do any of the other vintages found make their appearance in the records, with the exception of Chateau d'Yquem 1784, which we know Jefferson ordered and received in 1788. In



Jefferson Library

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fact, I have found no mention by Jefferson of ever desiring to have a Bordeaux wine of the 1787 vintage.

4. If the bottles in question were part of a gift or trade we could not expect them to turn up in the records. But such a transaction would have had to occur while Jefferson was still in Paris. He left for America in September 1789, too early for the 1787 vintage to be bottled and shipped.

5. A number of wine bottles and a good deal of wine bottle glass have been found in archaeological excavations at Monticello. None bear any sort of engraving, and no references to Jefferson's asking for engraved bottles has been found.

After his tour of southern France in 1787, during which he spent a great deal of time inspecting the vineyards and cellars of Burgundy and Bordeaux, Jefferson determined never more to order his wine from merchants. He began dealing directly with the vineyard proprietors, and his letters soon after, ordering Yquem, Margaux, and Lafite survive: he ordered and received Chateau d'Yquem 1784 in 1788; he ordered and received Chateau Margaux 1784 in 1787 (sending most of it to a friend in Virginia); and he ordered Chateau Lafite 1784 in 1788, but its proprietor reported that there was no more available (Chateau Haut-Brion substituted by consul John Bondfield was by accident shipped out of the country, and Jefferson told Bondfield not to bother to try again).

Jefferson ordered no further Bordeaux while in France. His next order was made on 6 Sep. 1790¹, in conjunction with one for President Washington. Again he wrote directly to the proprietors, and asked for vintages ready to drink. For himself Jefferson ordered Chateau d'Yquem (vintage sent unspecified) and Rausan-Margaux; Madame Rausan wrote that she had sent mainly the vintage 1785, with 25 bottles of 1786, all in bottles with the glass seal of the vineyard on them². For Washington he ordered Segur (Latour), which was unavailable, so that Bordeaux merchant Joseph Fenwick substituted Chateau Lafite, vintage 1786³. All the wine ordered was shipped directly from Bordeaux to America, and Jefferson later reported receiving his shipment, and Washington's, in tact⁴.

A year later Jefferson again wrote to Bordeaux for what he called his year's supply of wine. He asked specifically, on 1 Sep. 1791, for 250 bottles of Chateau Rausan-Margaux, vintage 1785, and the equivalent of 250 bottles in casks of the 1790 vintage⁵. His Memorandum Book reveals that this was the only Bordeaux wine he ordered at this time.

In the fall of 1792, anticipating retirement to the country society of Monticello, Jefferson asked in his annual wine order for red vin ordinaire. Joseph Fenwick sent him 500 bottles of Medoc 1788⁶.

After that, he did not import wine directly from Europe until his presidency. And thus we see that Chateau Lafite 1787 makes no appearance among Jefferson's orders of the proper period. Since Jefferson's papers have not yet been fully published after 1791 and access to his unpublished papers is a somewhat precarious enterprise, we must allow for the possibility that something has escaped detection. But easy access to his letter record and memorandum book, plus Jefferson's own reference to orders that were "annual," make the likelihood that all relevant records have been found a very strong one.

On the subject of the initials on the bottles, Mr. Broadbent has connected them with Jefferson's Bordeaux order of 1790. These letters specified that the shipment be labelled ("etiquette") at the vineyard "G.W." and "T.I.", to avoid a mixup of Washington's and Jefferson's wine on the sea voyage.

Throughout his life Jefferson used a number of different initial forms for different purposes. For utilitarian needs such as shipping goods or sending clothing to the laundry he specified "T.I." -- his tobacco hogsheads and his stockings were marked "T.I.", as well as the 1790 wine shipment. He used a decorative cursive "TJ" to identify less utilitarian personal possessions such as his seal, silver harness buckles, silverware, and his lap desk. The form "Th:J," with a colon between the two parts, was the shortened form of his signature in correspondence. Thus the "Th. J." on the bottles does not quite fit any of the forms used or specified by Jefferson⁷.

So far, then, I have been unable to make a direct connection between Jefferson and the wine bottles through the records. But we at Monticello know how many truly genuine Jefferson objects have not a scrap of paper to authenticate them. These are mainly well-loved Jefferson relics that have passed to us from Jefferson's descendants, cases in which provenance is so strong that authenticity is unquestioned.

But the wine bottles as yet have no provenance, beyond the fact that they were found in a cellar somewhere in Paris⁸. Precisely where has not yet been revealed, and Mr. Rodenstock apparently feels that their location is irrelevant. He seems to have made the connection between the bottles and Jefferson by a study of the records, but it is precisely those records which

make such a connection less and less likely⁹.

Were there not Thomases, Theodores, or Theophiles, and Jacksons, Joneses and Juliens who also had a taste for fine Bordeaux wine, and who would have been resident in Paris in 1790 or after, when the 1787 vintage would have been in bottles? I think it is a question of someone other than Jefferson, and perhaps there is an equally fascinating story there. There are fine historical records of the residents of Paris on a house by house basis, and if the location were revealed a proper connection might be made.

So, as of today, my own doubts remain. While I fully recognize the honorable characters of Mr. Rodenstock and Mr. Broadbent and their convictions, I am unable to make the same leap of faith they have, by connecting the bottles to Jefferson because they bear his initials.

FOOTNOTES

1. TJ to Joseph Fenwick, to Madame de Rausan, to Comte de Lur-Saluces, to M. de Miromenil, 6 Sep. 1790, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., Papers of Thomas Jefferson, XVII, 493-94.
2. Mme. de Rausan to TJ, 30 Jan. 1791, Papers, XIX, 119-20.
3. Fenwick to TJ, 29 Mch. 1791, Papers, XIX, 630. Note that the Chateau Lafite was substituted for George Washington's order, so that any Lafite connected with TJ's 1790 order would have been marked "GW" not "Th. J." and was of the 1786 not the 1787 vintage.
4. TJ to Fenwick, 30 Aug. 1791, Library of Congress: Jefferson Papers; TJ to Madame de Rausan, 1 Sep. 1791, Massachusetts Historical Society: Jefferson Papers.
5. TJ to William Short and to Mme. de Rausan, 1 Sep. 1791, Massachusetts Historical Society.
6. TJ to Fenwick, 10 Oct. 1792, Library of Congress, and Fenwick to TJ, 16 May 1793, Massachusetts Historical Society.
7. Since the engraving on the whole parcel of Mr. Rodenstock's bottles is so similar, apparently done by the same person or as part of the same operation, Mr. Broadbent has surmised that Joseph Fenwick commissioned the engraving. It seems improbable that Fenwick would have removed 1,020 bottles from their cases (TJ specified that all the wine be "ready packed" as well as labeled at the vineyards) and had each engraved. An engraving enterprise of such magnitude would also have been costly, yet no charges other than the cost of the wine and its shipment appear in Fenwick's accounts.
8. The perplexing question of how twelve bottles from a Jefferson 1790 order ended up in a cellar in Paris does not well resolve itself. TJ, of course, was in Philadelphia and from there he reported, as noted above, that his and Washington's wine order was received in tact. The records, therefore, do not allow for a stray dozen.
9. This is particularly so, since the bottles must stand or fall together in their connection to TJ, because of the engraving similarity. TJ may have received some Chateau d'Yquem of vintage 1787 (neither the letters nor the cellar record specifies the year), but because the other vintages in the collection do not fit the records at all, the Yquem too must be someone else's.