

## Book Reviews

### Author, Title

### Reviewer

James M. Gabler

*Passions: The Wines and Travels of Thomas Jefferson*

Robert N. Stavins



JAMES M. GABLER: *Passions: The Wines and Travels of Thomas Jefferson*. Bacchus Press, Palm Beach, 2016, 348 pp., ISBN 978-1533034700 (paperback), \$25.00

Having only recently read Ron Chernow's excellent biographies of Alexander Hamilton (Chernow, 2004), George Washington (Chernow, 2010), and Ulysses S. Grant (Chernow, 2017), I was eager to read a biography of Hamilton's great political opponent, George Washington's talented Secretary of State, and—of course—the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Instead, I “changed it up,” as my son would say, by reading this work by James Gabler that promised from its title to combine my armchair fascination with American history and my abiding interest and love of fine wine.

The book lives up to its title, as it provides what may be a nearly exhaustive (but sometimes exhausting) encyclopedic compilation of Jefferson's travels and wines. Apparently, seven years were required for Gabler's research and the writing, and it shows. The book draws on what I assume to be abundant original research and offers what must be the most complete and authoritative cataloguing of the wines Jefferson enjoyed (or not) from before the Revolutionary War, through Jefferson's

time in Paris as ambassador, including extended travels to vineyards in France, Italy, and Germany, in the White House as President, and—of course—at his beloved Monticello.

Thus, the book can function as an excellent reference—presumably for someone who wants to check on Jefferson’s travels in this year or that, the wines he was trying at the time, and the details of his transport, accommodations, conversations, and meals. Hmm, I wonder, in April of 1787, where did Jefferson visit, how long did he stay there, where did he sleep, and what wine did he drink? OK, on page 97—we learn that Jefferson spent two days in Turin at the Hotel d’Angleterre, and drank for the first time Nebbiule, made from the precursor of today’s Nebbiolo grape.

So, this is a remarkable reference, and the book’s reasonable cost may be justified by just two (of the five) appendices: one being a compilation of Jefferson’s favorite wines that are “available today,” that is, in their modern incarnations; and the other an inventory of Jefferson’s White House wine cellar with detailed annotations. But even a great reference work is not necessarily a book I can recommend trying to read from start to finish (unless you have committed to write a review, of course). In too many of the book’s 16 chapters, I felt like I was reading notes prepared for me by a very careful research assistant—from which I would then have to prepare a first draft of a chapter or article. Indeed, what I would love to read would be a long *New Yorker* article by Mr. Gabler summarizing some highlights of these 300+ pages.

For me, such highlights would include descriptions of dinners, dinner companions, cuisine, wine, and conversations at Jefferson’s Paris residence on the Champs-Élysées, at the White House, and at Monticello. Likewise, it was fun to read excerpts from letters in which Jefferson gave advice about which wines to buy to three Presidents: Washington, Madison, and Monroe.

Yes, Jefferson’s favorites from Bordeaux included Château Margaux, Haut-Brion, Lafite, and Latour, which I was surprised to learn were called “First Growths” even in 1784, fully 70 years before Napoleon III’s 1855 classification. But Jefferson was not the ultimate wine snob, and purchased and drank a range of slightly lesser Bordeaux, including Gruard-Larose, Leoville-Las-Cases, Leoville-Poyferre, Leoville-Barton, Calon-Segur, Pontet-Canet, and—of course—from Sauternes, Château Yquem, which I learned was a very different wine in Jefferson’s day, 60 years before infection with *botrytis cinerea* made d’Yquem the remarkable Sauternes it is today. Beyond Bordeaux, wines of roughly similar pedigree were Jefferson’s favorites in Burgundy, the northern and southern Rhone, and elsewhere on the Continent.

Jefferson enjoyed a long retirement from the Presidency at his beloved Monticello from age 66 until his passing at 83 years of age. Those years included some marginal involvement in the political world, but mainly via letters to his successors pressing for some favored policy. Just two years into his retirement, in 1811, Jefferson abandoned his previous view of international trade policy, which was essentially based on the

theory of absolute advantage of Smith (1776), and came to favor instead a somewhat isolationist policy, even more distant from Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage (Ricardo, 1817), which had not yet appeared, let alone diffused. At a time of European wars, this meant—remarkably—that for a time, Jefferson favored wines from Maryland, which he claimed to be “of the quality of the best Burgundy” (p. 215).

Not long after Jefferson sent a long letter to President Monroe, shortly after his inauguration, advising the new President of the wines he should add to the White House wine cellar, Jefferson became an advocate for public policies that would be favorable to wine drinkers like himself. Interestingly, he did so in ways that would be perfectly familiar to today's lobbyists. He argued in a letter to the new Secretary of the Treasury against a luxury tax on wine then being considered by Congress: “I think it is a great error to consider a heavy tax on wines as a tax on luxury. On the contrary, it is a tax on the health of our citizens” because it would reduce wine consumption and would be “in effect a condemnation of all the middling and lower conditions of society to the poison of whiskey ...” (p. 224).

To the end, Thomas Jefferson was a remarkable man—statesman, diplomat, architect, inventor, farmer, viticulturalist, and passionate oenophile. In regard to Jefferson's reputation as a “Renaissance man,” my favorite quote in the book is not from Jefferson's many letters but rather is a quote from another President some 150 years after Jefferson left office. At a White House dinner on April 29, 1962, honoring Nobel laureates, President John F. Kennedy told the group, “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone” (Kennedy, 1962).

Robert N. Stavins  
*Harvard University*  
 robert\_stavins@harvard.edu  
 doi:10.1017/jwe.2021.2

## References

- Chernow, R. (2004). *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Chernow, R. (2010). *Washington: A Life*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Chernow, R. (2017). *Grant*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Kennedy, J. F. (1962). “Remarks at a Dinner Honoring Nobel Prize Winners of the Western Hemisphere,” 29 April. Published by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, eds., *American Presidency Project*. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California Press.
- Ricardo, D. (1817). *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street.
- Smith, A. (1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell.