

The Wine List

A Théan guide for the connoisseur by Andrew Peregrine

(This article was published on the AEG 7th Sea site, which has since been closed. So I thought it might be worth making it available here.)

Since man discovered the wonders of fermentation, wine, beer and spirits have been part of Théan life. Indeed for some the brewed beverage is often akin to a religion. So each nation is justly proud of their own particular style of wine or ale. In this missive I dare to offer my (no doubt controversial) opinion on the produce of the nations. Please remember that taste is often highly subjective. So I ask humbly for the reader to grant me leave and take no offence if their national wines don't suit my palate. I say this having once caused an incident with a young Castilian, and I have no desire to be challenged to a duel for such a remark again.

Avalon

I begin here only for alphabetical reasons. Indeed to put one country above another is foolish, as each country has its own specialties and wonders. It is the duty of any true connoisseur to travel and taste everything a country has to offer. In fact there are many brews that I cannot for want of space and time describe to you. Each nation ferments beverages of every type and description, too many indeed to name here. But many of these are very unworthy of a mention compared to each nation's specialities.

The Avalon are comparatively new to wine making. Their occupation by the Montaigne was responsible for improving their skills in this area. Before then their wines were very sub standard. Today their techniques are much improved, but often lesser than the Montaigne originals they copy. To make their own wines more palatable, the Avalon have become extremely good at mulling their wine. It keeps them warm on the cold winter nights and improves the taste. They have recently begun to sell this mulled wine to the Vendel, and experiment with mulling wines other than their own.

Avalon are primarily beer and ale drinkers, and it is to the Inish and the Highlanders that they look for these brews. That being said, the Avalon have long been brewing a drink they call Cider from the extensive variety of apples that grow in the kingdom. Cider is an Avalon tradition, making it very popular with followers of the old Avalon way and earning it the nickname 'the Druid fluid'. This sweet and occasionally heady brew is favoured by women and children when found in other lands. However, the inexperienced cider drinker in Avalon should beware. The range of Cider in the triple kingdoms is far more extensive and contains some extremely potent variations. This is especially true in northern Avalon, which I know to my cost. One evening I drank only cider, intending not to become uncivilised. Unfortunately I awoke on a ship bound for Montaigne with a ladies garter in one hand, a glamour filled feather in my hat and a strange Surneth object that took the form of an orange cone (the use of which my explorer friends have yet to divine).

Highland ale is a heady brew, very full and yeasty, but very watery. It also has a high alcohol content despite its apparent weakness. This brew has fooled many a visitor, who often collapses in drunken stupor. This causes much delight to the assembled

Highlanders. The Highlands are also renowned as the masters of whisky blending. Each clan has its own blend, and the firm opinion that theirs is the best. These spirits are exported to all of Théah, but make very sure you know what you are drinking when discussing whiskey with a Highlander. Anywhere but the Highlands, whiskey is just labelled as whiskey, so plenty of foreign visitors fail to make a distinction. Mixing such a potent drink with clan pride and rivalry makes a careless tongue a sure way to ensure a brutal end to the festivities.

The Inish are best known for their odd brew called Gull-Ness. This is a thick black beer with a pure white head. It is renowned for containing many minerals and even vitamins. In fact it is said that two pints can make a meal due to its thickness and nourishment. To see the Inish drink it, one cannot but begin to believe this tale. Interestingly it is best drunk in Inish land. It does not travel well, and rumour has it the Inish don't let the best brew leave. Although some taverns run by expatriate Inish often acquire a mix far better than the common foreign Gull-Ness.

While I have cast aside the notion of Avalon wine, a recent vintage is worth mentioning. The return of the Graal has brought a new style of beverage to Avalon, Glamour wine. This wine is brewed by Druids and glamour mages, and is highly sought after. Again it is best drunk on Avalon soil, and its taste is not up to Montaigne standard. However each draught somehow makes the imbiber remember happier times. This doesn't make the drinker actually remember the incident, just the feeling and emotion of the moment. A wave of nostalgic euphoria, rather than drunkenness is the usual result. So there is little pain in the morning after a heavy drinking session. No one has been able to duplicate the effects (even glamour mages) on foreign soil. The special joy of this vintage is that it produces no hangover, only a pleasant nostalgic feeling in the morning. Recently a few new vintages have appeared that produce different emotions. Some bring memories of childhood, battle victories and even (so it is whispered) sexual intimacy.

Castille

The fierce sun and passion of the Castillian brewers has brought Théah some of the best red wines. The Castillians also produce a variant of red wine called sherry. Since the occupation this sweet liquid has become very popular in Montaigne. As noted in Mr Kapara's guide to Castille (p56) a new drink called Sangre de Sangre (Sangria) has also caught on. This is still only really available in Castille, but some is making its way to Eisen and Montaigne. Castille's white wines are also well known, but are not quite up to the Montaigne standard, although some people prefer their more fruity flavour. However, when one thinks of Castillian wine it is still their red wines that come to mind. The Castillian palate prefers a fruitier flavour, but there is more than enough variety for any drinker's taste. Each Rancho tends to produce a particular style of wine, but every vintage is found commonly throughout Castille

Of special note in any description of Castillian drinking is the 'Fiesta de Los Borrachos'. This festival celebrates the patron saint of drunkards – Don Juan Kerenyi de Torres del Ussura. Most of the detail about the fiesta can also be found in the excellent aforementioned Castille guidebook. However, I have noticed a few other traditions around this festival. Strangely it is preceded by a day of total abstinence, where taverns close their doors. This is more to allow the owners to prepare for the

revelry later. It lends an almost holy feel to a city ready to become roaring drunk. Often the sight of fireworks from the local Don's rancho signifies the beginning of the festival. So the streets fill with silent townsfolk, all looking in that direction, and waiting. As soon as the fireworks begin the town bursts into life with revels and dancing throughout the streets. It is almost a sin to be without a glass. Nearly as sinful is holding an empty glass, so no one drinks the last of his or her cup as a sign of plenty. It is also a tradition to buy a stranger a drink (to share the spirit of the evening where everyone is your drinking partner), but in towns where everyone knows each other this usually defaults to anyone you haven't spoken to recently. The Don holds a nobler (but no less raucous) affair at his Hacienda, to which those who helped with setting up the entertainment are always invited.

The festival has another tradition that young men should be aware of. On the first festival after his sixteenth birthday, the young man's father will bring his son to drink with his friends. They will do everything they can to see the boy get as drunk as possible. If he passes out that is all for the best, although every father hopes his son will out drink any other boys. This tradition serves a double purpose. Firstly it gives the men of the town a good laugh, but also the young man wakes up feeling so awful the next day that in future he will be careful with his drinking. The party tends to go on until everyone can drink no more, which in Castille is a very long time. Needless to say this festival lasts a couple of days, the last two of which are used by everyone to find a hangover cure.

Eisen

The Eisen are best known as a country of beer drinkers. While it is debatable which country produces the best ales, there is no doubt that Eisen has the most variety. Eisen did once produce a fine selection of dry white wines, but the land crushed by the war has failed to produce any worthwhile grapes. It is possible we may never see Eisen wines return. The poor harvest has driven most if not all wine makers out of business. The only ones still around are those who can afford to sit idle until the land heals. Some old vintages of Eisen wine are still in circulation, few however are ever drunk as they command higher and higher prices from collectors and connoisseurs.

All this is academic to the Eisen drinker. They are not a country of wine dandies, preferring to drink their produce than talk about it or collect it. Consequently Eisen brewers rarely brew their beers to last. Longevity is the first sacrifice in a new brew, so very few Eisen beers travel well. This makes the annual Beer Festival a popular event. The festival moves each year to a different Konigreichen. The Iron princes each look forward to their turn. Despite the fact it fills the capital with drunks from every part of Théah, it brings in a lot of money. Happy drinkers are always ready to empty their purses among the various merchants and hawkers. So the princes relax many taxes on alcohol during the festival. This brings in more brewers and merchants wanting to take advantage of this trading window. The festival has been going on since 1174, and only stopped for the War of the Cross. Even then the Eisen held the festival twice, in the third and fourth years of the war. They were all tired of fighting in dire need of a break and a good drink. The only difference to that festival was that no one other than the Eisen were allowed to attend. Both Vaticine and Objectivist Eisen were sick of everyone else interfering by then.

To name every Eisen beer would take a lifetime, but a few deserve a special mention. 'Drachenbrau' is said to use Drachen bones in its fermentation process. It is a heady rather than potent brew popular in Freiburg. Some say that after too much of this beer they dream of the old days when Drachen flew the skies of Eisen. 'Sonderbrau' is the most popular brew. It is a goodly beer with a light head produced in Posen. Originally it was brewed as a drink for the army as a reward after battle, so it is very simple to make, and (in case the soldiers were needed to fight again) quite watery and low in alcohol. It has a reputation as cheap and cheerful low alcohol ale. Even so, it has become the 'standard ale' as it is available in every tavern in Eisen, and a few beyond. While the brew has gradually become better and better, and worthy of its place as the benchmark of Eisen beer, its reputation has stuck. The brewery has huge premises; they can make rather a lot and sell it to almost everyone.

The most potent brew is made in Fischler. It is called 'Donnerkraftschaum' and is made by Objectivist monks. They have found ways to increase the alcohol content to extreme levels for a beer. It can be expensive outside Fischler but is much sought after by the hardy drinker eager to prove his mettle. The most expensive (and considered the best in terms of flavour and texture) is 'Freundschaftbier' from Heilgrund. It has average alcohol content, but a perfect head and smooth flavour. Also of note is the only beer Wische has managed to produce since the war. Called 'Blutkerze' it is only popular in its native land. No one who drinks it gets drunk in the conventional sense, they simply shift into a maudlin state of melancholy. However, it does make it difficult to remember anything, a relief welcome to the poor residents of Wische.

Montaigne

There is only one religion to the brewers of Montaigne, and that is wine. The land of the sun has the finest selection of wines in all Théah, not even the revolution has changed this. It is a mixture of good climate, good soil and a healthy obsession on the part of the Montaigne. That is not to say their wines are always the best, but there is always something to suit the most discerning wine drinker. No country produces a greater variety of vintages from the vine than the Montaigne. While the greatest Montaigne wines are superb, Castille bests their red. So Montaigne white is considered their glory. In counterpoint to the sweeter vintages of Castille, the Montaigne generally has a dryer palette. However, it is important to note that, to them, the art is in finding the right wine to complement food. In Montaigne, wine is always drunk as part of a meal, and an essential part of preparing a meal is the choice of wine served with it. To consider a meal without any wine is unthinkable, unless you are simply admiring it with a wine tasting. Ales are almost ignored in Montaigne; they are a recreational drink, and better left to the common folk - with the common vintages.

There are many interesting vintages of Montaigne wine, too many to list here. You will find a few vintages noted in the excellent 'Travellers guide to Montaigne' by Mr K Wilson (page 40). Each wine is usually labelled according to its chateau and region. The Chateau is the vineyard that produced the grape and made the wine from it. This is also usually the name of the family that owns the vineyard. The chateau is always followed by the name of the area it was grown, as well as, most importantly,

the date it was bottled. As most of the noble families own their own vineyards, this often leads to some double-barrelled wine names.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention one particular Montaigne vintage. One I have never tasted myself, Chateau Soleil du Montaigne. It is so named as it is produced from L'Empereur's vineyard in the palace at Charouse. The only wine from Charouse (too many buildings for any vineyards) is the only one allowed to be called 'du Montaigne'. Whether it is the best I cannot say. Only L'Empereur himself was allowed to drink this wine. Anyone caught tasting it or stealing a bottle was executed. This has made it the most valuable wine in Théah. Collectors all over the world dream of owning a bottle, one they will have to keep in a very secret place. Rumour has it that L'Empereur himself didn't actually drink this special vintage. Either due to its taste or to prove his decadence, it is said he feeds it to his dogs. Since the revolution, no one knows if this wine is still being produced. Some say the vineyard was torched as a symbol of decadence, others that the new council save the vintage for themselves. It is most likely though that the vineyard is simply left untended in the palace and its previous custodians are either executed or fled.

An interesting fashion developed by the Montaigne is that of the connoisseur. No other nationality has such a selection of tests and standards to measure wine quality. To anyone who does no more than drink wine, these tests of smell and colour (and even spitting it out!) are strange indeed. While the Montaigne started the traditions of wine tasting, every other nation has adopted its principles. The strange hobby of wine collecting also finds its origins with the Montaigne. Again, it is not exclusive to the sun lands, but their idle and decadent nobility excel at it, even after the revolution. It seems that the joy of collecting wine is simply to own a rare and valuable vintage that you will never drink, simply to best your own elitist circle of friends. Although to be fair, many wine collectors do open their rare bottles on very special occasions. The other joy of a wine collection is that it improves (and becomes more valuable) with age.

Ussura

Not surprisingly, the Ussurans have a very different selection of fermented drinks. Rarely do they drink anything but their own clear vodkas. Wine is a rarity served to nobles at dinner. Even then it is only seen on special occasions. It is certainly not for the lower classes to import such delicacies. Vodka is cheaper and easier to produce, so everyone drinks it, from the peasants to the Boyers. It is a symbol of the solidarity of the nation, that everyone drinks the same, especially this liquid, as clear and strong as the Ussurians themselves.

Most people, especially the Montaigne sneer at Ussurian drink, thinking a lack of wine is proof of their primitive nature, but here they make a gross mistake. Anyone who gets to know the Ussurian drinker can be introduced to a wide range of vodkas, of various strengths and flavours. Here the colour of the bottle denotes the potency of the drink, and adding different fruits creates the range of flavours. This selection of vodkas serves as a further metaphor for the country. While they all appear to be no more interesting or complex than water (to the outsider), each has a very distinct taste and kick. Sadly very few of these reach past the mountainous borders into Eisen.

Vendel / Vestenmannavnjar

Brewing is the preserve of the Vesten. Their ales are so thick with foam and head they must be served in huge mugs (or drinking horns) to get a worthwhile drink. There is very little variety to Vesten beer. They have a traditional method of making one type that they like. So to them, that is beer, and anything else is not. They see variety as just 'getting it wrong'. This has often led to argument with visiting Eisen brewers. However, this seeking of an exact model does make their brewing process a very detailed affair, with many prayers and rituals to the gods. I was party to it once, and I can compare it only to what I hear of the Nibelungen forging Dracheneisen.

The important thing to the Vesten is not the drink, but the company it is drunk in. To drink alone is the saddest thing for a Vesten. It signifies a man who has no friends. Hence in the halls of the nobles, court affairs are always done with a mug in the hand. Each time an agreement is reached all present will raise a tankard. An easy way to show displeasure in a mandate is to refuse to drink to it. Drinking with the lord is an important part of diplomacy. After all, everyone wants to be seen to be the noble's friend. Consequently, a visiting diplomat who refuses a mug of ale (or worse, asks for something else) has made a grave mistake. It is the same as saying 'I stand in your house, but I am not your friend'. A similar insult is often made if a host refuses or just fails to offer ale to a guest in his house.

Apart from their Ale, the Vesten excel as another drink called mead. This honeyed beverage, somewhere between ale and wine is saved for the nobility and special occasions. It is a sweet and heady brew, very akin to Vesten or Highland ale. It is also very warming, and can easily make one forget a harsh Vesten winter. Rarely is it ever allowed out of the Vesten isles, and a bottle is often given as a gift for great service. The Vesten have developed advanced methods in the art of bee keeping, purely to provide the honey to produce mead. So even if you knew the way to make mead, it would be a pale shadow without using fine Vesten honey. Interestingly, the Vesten could easily produce mead in vast quantities. They are the finest producers of honey in Théah which brings in more money than most of their other activities. So we can only assume that they choose to keep the supply of mead limited, making it rare and special.

The Vendel only really drink wine, which even then they import from Montaigne or (mulled) from Avalon.

Vodacce

While all Vodacce enjoy every style of alcoholic beverage, it is the Falisci family that enjoy producing it as well as trading in it. It is a little strange that as the Falisci make so much money from wine, the other Princes have never taken to the same trade. This is mainly due to Vodacce pragmatism. Every Prince knows he cannot outdo the grapes of the Falisci lands, so he doesn't try. To do so and fail would make him look a fool. So the Falisci alone submit Vodacce's part in the catalogue of Théan wines.

It is well documented that the Falisci grapes are the best in Théah, even the Montaigne must grudgingly accede to that fact. The argument begins when you ask if they use these grapes in the best way. Here many duels have been fought between Montaigne

and Vodacce drinkers. Falisci tend to make a fuller and fruitier blend than the Montaigne prefer although the grapes can make excellent dry wine as well. In an effort to prove their point, some Montaigne buy the grapes themselves from the Falisci. They use their own techniques to produce a wine more to their liking. Jokingly referred to as Mondacce or Vondaigne wine, it has yet to catch on. It has no backing of a Chateau to please the Montaigne, and does not suit the Vodacce palate (on principle if nothing else). It is also rumoured that the Falisci only sell the lowest quality of grapes to the Montaigne in the first place.

As the Falisci have only one 'Chateau' (themselves) they refer to all their wine by the year and add 'de Falisci'. Rather than using a number to denote the year (like the Montaigne) they give each year a name. So only a true student of Falisci wine can tell the actual date. Also certain years only produced certain types of wine (red, white or rose etc). While each bottle is labelled with the type of wine within, it remains unclear to the amateur what other wines were produced in that year. For instance, some years produced red and rose, but no white. So again only a connoisseur can tell if there even was a Falisci red or rose (etc) for any given year. The names of the years are very subjective. For instance, Pioggia (Rain) de Falisci (1546) was a very damp year. Festa (Holiday) de Falisci (1638) was the year Donello Falisci was born to very proud parents. Sangue (Blood) de Falisci (1012) was the year of the Heiros wars. The best vintage (at least generally thought so) is the 1407 Amore (Love) de Falisci. It is up to the head vintner to record and decide the names of the years, but the head of the Falisci family has the final say. There are two other vintages of particular note. Ninnananna (Lullaby) de Falisci (1499) was poisoned at source by enemies of the Falisci. Most (but to the daring drinker – not all) of the bottles contain deadly poison. The year 1625 produced a terrible harvest, which ruined the grapes. The wine produced is undrinkable filth. However it was still bottled as 'Montaigne de Falisci'. As the Montaigne passionately tried to track and destroy every bottle, it is the most rare and most valuable Falisci wine to date.

I hope this introduction will inspire you to diversify your taste as you travel across Théah. Remember that it serves only as an introduction to the wonderful variety awaiting the adventurous drinker. For reasons of space I have been unable to mention a great many vintages and brews. There are myriad concoctions awaiting you in the Crescent Empire, and I hear fascinating legends of the mythical brews of Cathay. Even the primitive Midnight Archipelago has a few strange and arcane beverages. Indeed, you may have a favourite I have been unable to mention. So in closing I can only say that if you do, you bring it to my attention, and stay to share a glass.