Bottling, Corking and Wiring Sparkling Wine

from Longworth's Wine House
The recent revitalization of Mount Adams has brought forth stories of the time when it was covered with vineyards and known as the “Garden of Eden.” Today it is easy to imagine the beauty of such a hill covered with green vineyards, but this was only a small part of the thousands of acres devoted to grape-growing in Cincinnati.

Recently the State of Ohio began studies under the House Public Works Committee to investigate the possibilities of helping Ohio increase her wine production. Most of the studies concentrated on Cincinnati during the period 1840–1860. The Cincinnati area, according to more than one expert pomologist, is still a perfect area for grape-growing. “Climate and soil are conducive to viticulture, on both sides of the river in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, and it only awaits one with Nicholas Longworth’s initiative to start a grape and wine industry in these regions.”

The vine culture and wine industry of Cincinnati were the culmination of the ideas of John James Dufour. In his youth he had studied vine culture in the major vineyard area of Switzerland, the Vevay Canton. Encouraged by reports from America during the Revolutionary War of the possibilities for viticulture in that new country, he emigrated to Lexington, Kentucky, and set up a vineyard there in 1798. A multitude of problems beset this venture and so in 1801 a second vineyard was established at the Swiss settlement of Vevay in Indiana, on the Ohio River. Here, Dufour and other vintners achieved moderate success; they produced 3,200 gallons of wine in 1812. The wine-makers at Vevay were eager to encourage other communities in the Ohio Valley to begin vine culture and offered

to send “slips gratis to whoever will plant them with directions and instructions as to their cultivation.”

Dufour wrote an interesting and informative book on the culture called *The American Vine-Dressers Guide*, published at Cincinnati. In it he described in detail a disease which troubled his crop. The description is exactly like that of the disease which later plagued the vineyards of Cincinnati and ultimately hastened their decline.

The history of most native American varieties of grapes is obscure for many reasons. When the first explorers and settlers came to America, they were interested neither in grapes nor grape culture. The wild grapes that grew here were small and almost beneath notice. Thus, few of the descriptions of this region contain any mention of grapes. When the wild grape is cultivated or grown from seed, however, the result is virtually a new grape.

Major John Adlum, of Washington, D.C., is generally credited with the introduction of the Catawba grape. Adlum was eager to promote the development of an American wine industry. In 1823 he wrote to Thomas Jefferson and sent him samples of Catawba wine. Jefferson replied, calling it a good wine, equal to the finest imported. In 1825 Adlum sent Catawba vines, with a quantity of the wine, to Nicholas Longworth in Cincinnati.

Longworth was keenly interested in horticulture and had started his first vineyard in 1823. He initially attempted to acclimate the grapes of Europe to American soil but was discouraged with the results because of the differences in soil and climate. Then, in 1825, Longworth received the Catawba vines from Major Adlum and his efforts with this grape proved successful. It seemed perfectly suited to the Cincinnati area. Soon, like Dufour and Adlum, he began to extol viticulture and wine-making.

An interesting dispute arose between John Dufour and Longworth as to the relative merits of their wines. Dufour held strongly to his

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faith in the Cape as the superior wine grape, while Longworth advanced the Catawba as the finest in this area. Dufour gradually came to agree with Longworth that the bouquet and flavor of the Catawba were superior to those of the Cape, but insisted that the Catawba would not keep and would sour in a year or two. To settle this argument, Longworth gave Dufour three bottles of Catawba wine. Dufour drank one after six months, another at the end of a year, and the third he buried in his vineyard. As Dufour lay on his deathbed in 1827, he made a last request of his doctor: might he be allowed to settle the question of the Catawba and depart in peace? The bottle was found, the cork drawn, and a glass of the wine presented to the old gentleman. He examined it in the light and tasted it two or three times. "Ah, doctor," said he, his countenance brightening, "Longworth was right, Catawba will keep. It is a good wine — a very good wine."

Cincinnati, like many frontier and river towns in the Ohio Valley, was rapidly gaining fame as a whisky capital in the early nineteenth century, both for its production and its prodigious consumption of distilled spirits. Many citizens feared that increased consumption of liquor could bring an eventual loss of morality. Temperance societies were soon formed to stem or halt the flow. One of the early promoters of temperance, Dr. Daniel Drake, inveighed heavily against the use of "ardent spirits" with many examples and scientific terms. (Ardent spirits were generally understood at the time to be any beverage made from distilled alcohols.) To offset the popularity of potent spirits, he proposed substitution of other less stimulating beverages:

Very great advantage to the cause of temperance would result from substituting several different beverages, of a stimulating quality, for ardent spirits. The inhabitants of wine countries are generally

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4Dufour preferred European varieties and believed the Cape to be exactly that. However, the Cape was most likely an American variety, often referred to as the Alexander or Schuykill Muscatel.
5Major Adlum probably sent Nicholas Longworth a case of Catawba wine. From this Longworth was able to send three bottles to his friend John Dufour, who generally deprecated native varieties of grapes.
temperate; and the same remark will apply to those which abound
in cider.\(^7\)

The importance of these remarks was not their truth or falsity but that
they were stated by a learned medical man and were, accordingly,
believed and accepted by many influential Cincinnatians.

Nicholas Longworth was a strong advocate of temperance, espe-
cially in regard to substituting wine for whiskey. Years later he was to
refer to the cause of temperance as the prime reason for his interest in
the cultivation of the grape and wine-making. Longworth was a
wealthy man with a shrewd sense of business acumen, and he looked
to the day when his vineyards would yield a profit. Commercial
viticulture took large capital investment and required many years
before realizing a return. That it eventually became a profitable
business was due to Longworth’s drive and energy. One should not
assume that he engaged in it merely for quick financial success.

Following his early successful experiences with viticulture in the
1820’s, Longworth was prepared to move to a grander scale of produc-
tion. As soil required for grape cultivation was usually unfit for other
purposes, it could be purchased cheaply. The culture of grapes re-
quired close attention and care, so a single vineyardist could tend but
a few acres. Four or five acres were sufficient to support a whole
family.

Poor, industrious, frugal immigrants from the wine countries of
Germany, who from their youth had been instructed in the cultivation
of the vine, were plentiful in Cincinnati at that time. Longworth saw
them as a ready source of cheap labor for the hillside vineyards of
Mount Ida, now Mount Adams. “All they know,” he said, “is hard
labor and coarse diet, having in Germany supported themselves from
a vineyard, often not exceeding an acre in extent.”\(^8\) Many early pro-
motors concluded that immigrants from the wine countries of Europe,
who successfully cultivated the vine here, could also make wine.
Longworth found this to be untrue.

\(^7\)Daniel Drake, “A Discourse on Intemperance,” delivered in Cincinnati March 1,
1828, before the Agricultural Society of Hamilton County. (Cincinnati, 1828).
\(^8\)The Farmer’s Guide (Cincinnati, 1832), 309.
Each year as Longworth’s skill increased and his vineyards grew, he pressed more wine. His attention also turned to the kind of wine he would make. Commenting on this he wrote, “The manufacture of wines is an art that requires many years practice, since wines, sweet or dry, red or white, may proceed from the same grape.”

Longworth felt that the attempt of most American vintners to imitate foreign wines was a mistake. He believed American wine could be made to simulate most foreign varieties, but thought these “imitation” wines should not be admired or used here. Most of the grapes with which Longworth experimented were better suited for making dry wines, but the public, he discovered, was not prepared for them. Undaunted, Longworth refused to imitate French wines, hoping that customs and taste would change if people were exposed to a really fine American product.

Actual statistics of wine production for the 1830’s are nonexistent, but many records attest to the excellence of Longworth’s wine. One writer referred to Longworth as “A public spirited gentleman at Cincinnati . . . [whose] wine is highly approved by connoisseurs.”

According to Harriet Martineau, who visited Cincinnati in 1833, Longworth had the finest gardens in the city. She said, “He employs four gardeners, and toils in his grounds with his own hands . . . he had succeeded in making twelve kinds of wine, some of which are highly praised by good judges.”

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10A number of years were to pass before Longworth achieved his aim.

[i]Except with the German population the [dry catawba] wine made was far from being a popular beverage. Those recognized in it a close likeness to the drinks of their native Rhine valley, and were glad to obtain it at prices much below what imported wines could be got for, and the demand from this quarter became a foundation to build something further upon. Our own people, however, did not take to it very kindly. To their palates, it seemed a trifle too much like sour cider to realize their ideas of pleasant drink. Any large extension of the demand for it seemed still remote, until Mr. [Longworth] devised the plan of making of the catawba a sparkling wine. He obtained from Champaign an experienced “fab­ricante,” built a suitable cellar, and commenced the business. It was entirely successful. From the first, the demand has far outrun the possibility of supplying it. The sparkling catawba is known all over the country, and commands the same price as Moet and Heidsick champagne.

Newton’s Express, edited and published by R. S. Newton, M. D., Vol. 4, No. 8, August 1857.
11James Hall, Statistics of the West (Cincinnati, 1837), 133.
12Harriet Martineau, Retrospect of Western Travel (London, 1838), II, 51.
One of Longworth’s
Vineyards on the Ohio River
Longworth’s efforts were not in vain. Each year more farmers turned to the growing of grapes. Likewise, Robert Buchanan and Thomas D. Carneal, Cincinnati merchants, began small experimental vineyards as part of their overall interest in horticulture. With this increasing interest came the realization that viticulture had to be scientific to be successful. The expense and extensive time involved in developing a vineyard, plus the recurrent attacks of blight, discouraged many of the new vigneron. Thus, while many small farmers began growing grapes on a modest scale, it was the large landowners around Cincinnati who made the culture successful.

In 1845, 23,219 gallons of wine were made from the 114-acre harvest. That had been a bad year for viticulture, as more than half the crop was destroyed by frost and rot. In 1846 Hamilton County contained eighty-three vineyards covering 250 acres. While most of these vineyards were cultivated by Germans and Swiss, several of the older and larger ones belonged to Nicholas Longworth.

By 1850 the number of vineyards within a twenty-mile radius of Cincinnati had increased to 300 and covered 900 acres, half of which were bearing. From these, 120,000 gallons of wine were pressed. The increase in those four years illustrates the tremendous interest shown in viticulture and its growth during the 1840’s. Longworth had about 115 acres of vineyards by 1850 and still bought all the must he could purchase. Buchanan calculated the yield to be 300 to 400 gallons of wine an acre. Thus, the Cincinnati area was beginning large-scale production of wine. Already, some writers, such as Robert Buchanan and Charles Cist, were beginning to allude to the area as the “Rhine of America.” Over five hundred persons were employed in the wine industry, and the value of the product was approximately $150,000 a year.

In 1850, Robert Buchanan wrote a book entitled *The Culture of the Grape and Wine Making*. The author, already known to news and magazine editors through earlier articles and correspondence on grape culture, sent advance copies to selected editors around the
country. Their favorable reviews attracted new attention to the Cincinnati wine industry and increased the demand for its product. The book itself went through several editions.\(^\text{14}\)

Cincinnati was the only area really prepared to fill the growing demand for domestic wine. Other areas engaged in grape culture were able to furnish only enough wine for local markets. New York, Missouri, Georgia, and California viticulturists had progressed only to a degree equal to the Cincinnati culture of a decade earlier. Cincinnati was rapidly gaining fame as the vineyard of America. Individuals in many other states purchased grape cuttings and roots from the vigneron and nurseries in Cincinnati and sought advice on their culture.

Throughout the 1840's, many Cincinnati vintners still tried to imitate imported wines, the public preferring strong, European vari-

\(^{14}\text{See: The American (Pittsburgh), May 16, 1850; Brooklyn Evening Star, April 30, 1853; Maysville Eagle, May 25, 1852; Cincinnati Gazette, June 2, 1852.}\)
etries such as Maderia, Manzanilla, Malaga, and Port. In attempting to fill the demand, the local vintners produced an inferior product, reinforcing the public's distaste for domestic wine.

To solve the problem of educating or improving the public taste, the American Wine Growers Association was formed by Cincinnati vintners in February of 1851. The Association had two aims which took precedence over all other objectives: first, the members wanted to improve the taste of the consumer by bringing nothing but pure Catawba wine into the market. (This goal was soon expanded, as the membership of the Association grew, to include all pure domestic wines.) The second aim was to improve the wine through the soil, not in the cask; that is, the members wished to encourage better practices in viticulture in order to obtain superior wine, rather than adulteration of the wine after it was produced.

The market for wine in the eastern United States was very good, especially for imported wines. As they became aware of the Sparkling Catawba wine of Cincinnati, however, many people switched to the domestic product. Nicholas Longworth had sent gifts of his wine to friends in the East, hoping they would distribute the wine or encourage friends to drink it. This did happen, but with the change in demand came a disheartening side-effect for the Cincinnati vintners: in order to fill the new demands, many of the eastern wine merchants began to use counterfeit labels on inferior wines. Longworth was especially disturbed, of course, for it was his wine which was being misrepresented. To halt these practices, Longworth offered a money-back guarantee if his wine were not satisfactory, but only if it were his own product as certified by specially printed labels and marked corks.15

Most of the wine from the Cincinnati area was made and bottled by the major wine dealers and vintners. These men purchased all the must available within a fifty-mile radius of Cincinnati and added this to the must from their own extensive vineyards. Nicholas Longworth had 130 acres of productive vineyards in 1851. In one of his cellars

15Horticulturist, II (Jan. 1848), 318.
that year, he had $65,000 worth of Sparkling Catawba; 25,000 gallons of wine in vats, worth $30,000; and a stock of bottles and corks worth $11,000. At another of Longworth’s cellars that year, he had enough wine in vats to fill 100,000 bottles; at his price of $8 for a twelve-bottle case, this would equal $64,000.16

Cincinnati enjoyed its finest and largest vintage in 1853 from 800 acres of vineyards. The aggregate yield pressed out to 320,000 gallons of wine, an average of 400 gallons an acre. Some of the best vineyards, including those of Buchanan, Hodge and Duhme, actually produced 600 to 800 gallons of wine an acre. One vineyard, that of Sebastian Rentz, produced 1,260 gallons an acre! Even in that vintage year, however, many vineyards suffered from rot and failed to average even 150 gallons of wine an acre.

That year, the leading vintners put up 450,000 bottles of wine. New wine sold for $1.00 to $1.10 a gallon for the best, 75 cents to 90 cents a gallon for second quality, and 40 cents to 50 cents a gallon for inferior. Sparkling wines sold for $1.25 to $1.50 a bottle.17

Many visitors to Cincinnati during the 1850’s wanted to visit Longworth’s wine cellars and sample the product. Longworth rarely failed to accommodate such requests, realizing that these visitors would spread the word upon returning to their homes. Charles Mackay found Longworth’s champagne equal to the finest from France. Before leaving the city, Mackay wrote a poem in praise of Longworth’s Catawba wines. He included a phrase obviously directed at the eastern vintners who were attempting to sell cheap imitations of the Sparkling Catawba:

Champagne is too often
A trickster malign,
That flows from the apple
And not from the vine.18

(Champagne could be made from cider with plenty of additives to

16Nicholas Longworth to Mr. Lytle, March 4, 1852, The Cincinnati Historical Society.
17Cincinnati Gazette, Jan. 18, 1854.
provide the sparkle and taste; the eastern vintners were often guilty of this.)

Many of Longworth’s friends who went East, such as William Fosdick, usually took a few bottles of his wine along to give to prominent people.\(^{19}\) Longworth sent cases of his wine to painters and sculptors who had gone to Italy to study. He asked that the wine be served at parties and distributed among prominent Americans and Italians. The results of this soft-sell technique were seen in a letter from the noted sculptor Hiram Powers to Mr. Longworth in 1857. Powers remarked how greatly his family had enjoyed the wine, adding that the Marquis Ponciattica wished a barrel of the dry Catawba sent to him along with the bill.\(^{20}\)

Longworth sent a case of Sparkling Catawba to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who acknowledged the gift by dedicating a poem to Catawba wine. Longfellow did not miss the importance of establishing favor for domestic wine, as he wrote:

Drugged is their juice  
For foreign use,  
When shipped o’er the reeling Atlantic,  
To rack our brains  
With the fever pains  
That have driven the Old World frantic.  

To the sewers and sinks  
With all such drinks,  
And after them tumble the mixer!  
For a poison malign  
Is such Borgia wine,  
Or at best but a Devil’s Elixir.\(^{21}\)

With promotion from all parts of America through Longworth’s friends, the demand for Catawba wines soon outstripped the supply. The greatest problem was the disease which attacked the vines each year, frustrating all attempts to maintain stable production.

By 1859, there were 2,000 acres of productive vineyards within a twenty-mile radius of Cincinnati. However, the yield had remained

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\(^{19}\)In remembrance of wine sent to him during his stay in New York City (1852-1857), Fosdick dedicated a poem to Nicholas Longworth entitled “Catawba.” Cincinnati Daily Commercial, December 11, 1855.


\(^{21}\)Robert Buchanan’s Scrapbook, CHS, 19.
low from 1853 on, and many of the vigneron were becoming discouraged. The vintners found that in low-yield years the grapes had more sugar and made a finer wine, but the slight increase in price was not enough to offset the losses in quantity. The owners of the large vineyards and those engaged in full-time viticulture continued to realize good profits of from $125 to $175 an acre. Over 800 persons were employed in the production of grapes and wine. These people were necessary for the maintenance of good vineyards which, even when healthy, often produced low yields. Thus, though viticulture had become a large industry by 1859, it was suffering from severe problems.

Blight and rot were certainly familiar terms to vigneron of the Cincinnati area. John Dufour had suffered through years of bad crops and low yields from 1800 until his death in 1827. Those who followed Dufour ascribed his failure to his reliance on foreign varieties and his choice of vineyard site — on rich, fertile, bottom land. Longworth himself had spent years in search of native grapes that would make good wine and produce well. The Catawba was a successful grape, but from the very beginning of its culture it, too, suffered from disease.

Robert Buchanan referred to the Civil War and its effect on the wine industry for the first time in 1861. “Like most other branches of business,” he wrote, “wine farming was injured by the war. But few new vineyards have been planted since the commencement of the War, and many of those now in bearing will suffer in cultivation, from the scarcity of labor, until the return of peace.” From 1860 to 1865, the vineyards were left with little or no care. They fell to the ravages of disease which lowered production seriously during the war.

Prices of wine rose rapidly during the war and brought large profits despite low yields. In 1864, wine sold for approximately $2 a bottle and Cincinnati exported $1,182,912 worth of wine. This was a benchmark for the wine industry, for the vigneron never again realized the profits or the yields of that year. In 1865, the grape crop was almost a total failure in the Cincinnati area.

22Ibid., n.p.
Following the war, the vigneron were unable to restore the vineyards; five years of disease had weakened the vines and permanently established disease in the vineyard. After a few years of disappointing yields, many began to leave viticulture.

Premiers offered "for the best Grape for Wine and Table purposes. Competition desired from all parts of North America. Fruit to be shown and premiums awarded at the Consolidated Exhibition of the American Wine Growers Association of Ohio and Cincinnati Horticultural Society, to take place at Cincinnati, Sept. 25, 1868."

Perhaps the greatest blow to viticulture in Cincinnati was the death of the "Father of the American wine industry" on February 14, 1863. Nicholas Longworth had begun the industry in Cincinnati and had, at the same time, shown that it could be profitable as well as enjoyable. His life from 1830 on had been devoted to horticulture, a

23Many of the eulogies of Longworth on his death referred to him as such. Many writers of the twentieth century in books on wine also refer to him in this way. U. P. Hedrick also refers to Longworth as the "Father of American Horticulture" in A History of Horticulture in America to 1860 (New York, 1950), 311.
field in which he excelled. He had three great accomplishments in horticulture to his credit: 1) the establishment of commercial viticulture, with its accompaniment of wine-making; 2) proof that many varieties of strawberries are infertile among themselves and must have pollenizers; and 3) the introduction of the first variety of the black raspberry, *rubus occidentalis*. Any one of these was a great feat in itself, but the first is surely the most important to America and the wine-makers who followed Longworth. Certainly he had supplied the initiative; other leaders like Buchanan had added much drive. Their deaths removed much of the force behind the industry. But other industries had suffered similar fates and managed to survive after a temporary setback. Why, then, did viticulture completely disappear from the banks of the Ohio River around Cincinnati?

A large part of the answer lay in rising industrialism and increased land values. The land could be more profitably used in other ventures, such as living space for an increasing suburban population. But disease played a major part in defeat. Without modern methods of control, the vines withstood mild attacks at first, only to succumb, in their weakened state, to increasing attacks of blight and rot. The vigneron surprised up the fight and turned their lands to more profitable uses.

Thus the fateful combination of three factors was responsible for the end of viticulture in Cincinnati: the uncontrollable ravages of disease; the Civil War's absorption of workers when they were greatly needed in the vineyards; and the loss of initiative and driving force with the death of Longworth. Perhaps no single factor would have ended the industry, but the combined impact was too powerful to withstand.

However, viticulture in the Lake Erie area of Ohio continued through the years and is today a sizeable Ohio industry. Zimmer's Wine Company of Cincinnati pressed about 30,000 gallons of wine from grapes purchased from the Lake Erie islands before the death of August Zimmer in 1964. Meier's Wine Cellars, located in Silverton, just outside Cincinnati, still presses about 650,000 gallons of
wine each year from its vineyards in the Lake Erie region. So the wine industry of Cincinnati retains a vestigial trace of its former glory . . . but viticulture in Cincinnati, as a major industry, is a thing of the past.