

American Viniculture in the Gibbons Era of the Early 19th Century

Tasting Notes

by Alice Glock

The earliest producing winery in NJ was the Renault Winery (in southern Atlantic County) which opened in 1864 more than a decade after William Gibbons. Maintaining a vineyard of wine-producing grapes for commercial production took nearly 200 years to accomplish, however. Although New Jersey has the distinction of being the first colony recognized for good wines (in 1767 by London's Royal Society of the Arts) these vineyards, like all those attempted in the 17-18th century, could not be sustained for commercial success.

Alcoholic drinks were considered necessary and “healthy” in reducing diseases caused by unclean water. Alcoholic cider, apple-based drinks such as applejack, and other fruit-based alcoholic drinks were the readily available locally made drinks. Meanwhile, Americans such as Gibbons who could afford grape-based wines, drank European imports.

Just when Americans were seeing some success in growing wine-producing grapes, in the 1820s and 1830s, the temperance movement took root. In the small village of Bottle Hill, where Gibbons had decided to build his country home in 1832, the temperance movement gained support and a temperance society was founded. As a result, residents who objected to the name Bottle Hill because it evoked an image of drunkards forced a vote that changed the village name to Madison in 1834, the year Gibbons's new home was rising on a nearby hill.

In Gibbons's day, “temperance” did not exclude wines (as the prohibition movement later did), i.e. the grape-based wines exported from Europe, and the type of alcoholic drink Americans were struggling to produce here. The idea of the time was to produce wines affordable to Americans, to encourage an “art” that would steer people away from hard liquor and “drinking to get drunk.”

Blandy's Madeira

A sweet dessert wine; aged five years

Ward McAllister, a writer and socialite who married William Gibbons' eldest daughter Sarah in 1852, wrote about preparations for a 10-day party he gave in November 1862 when his brother-in-law, William Heyward Gibbons (who inherited Mead Hall) “requested me to make it my home.” Included in the elaborate preparations, Ward wrote that he “...sent up my wines, but no **Madeira**, as I knew there was enough of that wine in

the wine cellars of that old house to float a frigate.” (*Society As I Have Found It, 1890*)

The location of Madeira Island, SW of Portugal in the Atlantic Ocean, made it an ideal port of call for ships traveling from Europe to the New World. Americans of the early 19th century were enthusiastic customers because the new country had not yet reliably established its own production of local wines. Madeira became known for its “fortified” wines (a process that produces a higher alcohol content), which not only withstood long voyages, but also retained its quality longer after being opened.

Blandy’s, founded in 1811, is produced by the only family of all the original founders of the Madeira wine trade to still own and manage their own original wine company.

Italian Lambrusco Riunite

A sparkling soft red wine

This wine is suggested by William Gibbons’s order in 1838 of “10 dozen” bottles of a “sparkling red wine.” The receipt is written in Italian, with a “Custom House, New York” certification stamp on it. The total cost of \$120 or \$1 per bottle is equivalent to about the quality or value of a \$20 bottle today. Imported wines, readily available through New York City where Gibbons shopped, were affordable for a man of his means.

The first American settlers found wild, native grapes that only produced bad-tasting wine. Throughout the 17-18th centuries and until Gibbons’s time in the early 19th century, much effort was expended to produce a “drinkable” American wine, whether it be in the production method, or in the cultivation of grape plants. The many attempts at transplanting and grafting of European grape plants failed. Whole vineyards of transplanted grapes would die because they could not withstand native pests, and likewise, the American grape plants, when cross-bred in Europe, brought with them diseases that ended up destroying European vineyards in the mid-19th century, just when, finally, American vineyards began to see commercial success, from “accidental” hybrids. (The scientific discoveries of Darwin (survival of the fittest theory), Mendel (genetics) and Pasteur (who was able to explain the fermentation process) helped perfect viticulture in America in the second half of the 19th century.)

2006 Chateau Haut Branda

Bordeaux wine

French Bordeaux wine was imported and enjoyed by Americans who could afford such luxuries in the early 19th century, William Gibbons among them. At a time when the search was on to produce a drinkable American wine, the French Bordeaux was a “gold standard” held by Thomas Jefferson who tried to produce a similar wine in Virginia. Thomas Jefferson took a keen interest in developing an American wine with commercial

success because he felt that wine-drinking -- as opposed to hard liquor -- was a refinement and “art,” important to the culture of the new country of his time. He was determined to “democratize” wine-drinking, find a way to produce it here, making it affordable for the middle class. Although there was spotty and short-lived success around the country, he like many others throughout the 18th century, did not realize this dream.



Gibbon's Family crystal, engraved “TG” for Thomas Gibbons. William Gibbons inherited this crystal from his father. It is preserved in Mead Hall, William Gibbons's 1836 country home.

Marquis de la Tour Brut champagne

A sparkling white wine from France

From his household accounts, Champagne was among the wines William Gibbons was known to have enjoyed. In his day, this drink was only imported to America from Champagne, a region in France that was known for its sparkling white wine by the same name.

Nicholas Longworth, a contemporary of William Gibbons, was an Ohio businessman who spent his fortune attempting to figure out the puzzle of producing a drinkable American wine. A batch of wine was accidentally submitted for a second fermentation (which occurred in the bottle) producing a

sparkling wine less “foxy” than anything he had made before with the Catawba grape, an “accidental” hybrid which he managed to grow in Ohio when it became commercially available in 1823. He had the means, through his success in real estate, to import French winemakers from Champagne who were able to show him their methods of producing a sparkling wine. In 1857 Longworth was recognized as “the founder of wine culture in America, author of sparkling

Catawba, the munificent and judicious patron of Art.”

Alcoholic Cider

Woodchuck, amber/dark and dry

The “beer” of the day was a common and everyday drink during Gibbons’s time. It was considered safer than drinking water. Easily produced and readily available locally, it was made by fermenting apples which were plentiful in New Jersey – at a time when “drinkable” grapes were not (until the 1860’s).



Evolution of Laird bottles

Laird's Applejack

Laird & Company's applejack is an apple brandy, produced by distillation by evaporation and blended with neutral spirits; it contains an alcohol content of forty percent. Laird's applejack was first produced by William Laird in Monmouth, New Jersey in 1698. Laird and Company has the distinction of being the oldest family-run distillery in America.

William Gibbons had a special connection with this Laird family. Gibbons hired Samuel Laird to train his national champion racehorse, Fashion, on his farm in Monmouth County throughout the 1840s. His son, Joe Laird, was her jockey throughout her brilliant racing career. Among Gibbons Family Papers there are many letters between Gibbons and Samuel Laird that demonstrate their close partnership. [Copies of some of the letters can be viewed in an exhibit of Fashion, located in the first floor display case in Mead Hall].

Following Fashion’s retirement in 1848, the Laird family focused on the distillery

business. The inn was closed and the present day site in Scobeyville, NJ was opened in 1851, shortly before William Gibbons died (1852) and his stable of race horses was dispersed.

Today, 8th generation Larrie Laird — Samuel Laird's great-great grandson — and his daughter Lisa Laird-Dunn lead the business that produces this unique drink.

Sources:

Paul Lukas, *American Vintage: The Rise of American Wine*. New York, 2000.

Rod Phillips, *A Short History of Wine*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.