

[Skip to navigation](#) – [Site map](#)

## [Anthropology of food](#)

- [en](#)
- [fr](#)

[Home](#) > [Special Issues](#) > [S1](#) > **The Quest for Identities: Consump...**

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[Contents](#) - [Previous document](#) - [Next document](#)

[S1 | October 2001 : Regards croisés sur quelques pratiques alimentaires en Europe](#)

# The Quest for Identities: Consumption of Wine in France

**Marion Demossier**

[Outline](#) | [Text](#) | [Bibliography](#) | [References](#) | [About the author](#)

## Outline

[Wine as an anthropological object](#)

[Wine](#)

[Wine Consumption](#)

[Wine Culture](#)

[Production and Consumption of wine in France](#)

[The Quest for Identities](#)

[Top of page](#)

# Full text

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In the study of the Anthropology of Food, Drinking has occupied a marginal and specific position. It is only recently that anthropologists have started to claim that they have a distinctive perspective on Drinking and if 'according to Dwight Heath few anthropologists before the 1970s would set out deliberately to study patterns of thought and action concerning drink, they had nevertheless written a great deal on alcohol'. The publication in the 1980s of 'Constructive Drinking' by Mary Douglas and, more recently, the forthcoming volume edited by Igor de Garine demonstrates how things have moved on. Both volumes have set out to study Drinking in a comparative context and, in this regard, wine has been studied as one of the alcoholic beverages consumed amongst others. For Mary Douglas, the specificity of the anthropological perspective is to examine the consumption of alcohol as a way of life, one element of a given culture. According to her, there are three distinct ways in which drinking is an essential social act, performed in a recognised social context: Drinks construct the world as it is, the manufacture of alcohol is an economic activity of consequence and the ceremonials of drinking construct an ideal world. For Jack Goody who criticizes some of Douglas comments, the importance of culture has to be acknowledged and a study of food and eating (or drinking) must involve political economy both at the micro-level such as the household as well as at the macro level such as the role of the state.

## Wine as an anthropological object

Starting with these hypotheses in mind, I would like to look at the Consumption and Culture of Wine in France, within the context of an anthropology at home. I will argue that wine has to be studied as a total social fact and therefore it has to be analysed as a specifically rooted type of drink in France at a time when French society and culture is increasingly fragmented. In order to set up the main conceptual elements: Wine, Wine Consumption and Wine Culture, I will attempt to define them in a comparative and interdisciplinary way.

## Wine

First, Wine could be defined as an alcoholic beverage consumed mainly in western societies with Judeo Christian religious belief underlying its consumption. Wine is 'a spiritual food, the main element in the communion ritual: bread or wafers for Christ's body, red wine or grape juice for his blood: The wine as a potent, spiritual; substance, the masculine (by opposition to the bread which represents the feminine, the mundane and earthly)'. Historically, the

cultivation of wine has been inextricably linked to the religious uses of wine, and wine, the result of man's labour, cannot just be seen as an ordinary commodity. Its consumption relates to its production, and by consuming wine we are consuming space, time and symbols. Wine could be defined as a sacred and profane food.

4Another characteristic associated with wine is the concept of hierarchy. In his book published in 1987, Georges Guille-Escuret argues that 'wine is a food for hierarchy and consequently it contributes to the hierarchisation of society'. Historians have demonstrated that medieval religious communities were already concerned with the issue of quality which was attached to specific vineyards, their cultivation and the wine produced in these '*terroirs*'. However, it was during the eighteenth century that France that witnessed the emergence of the '*cru*' as a valued and highly commercial beverage encapsulating the idea of a tie to a place. The great variety of wines and the wide range of prices attest to the existence of an intense hierarchy associated with the consumption of wine. In this hierarchy, popular versus elitist, regional versus national characterises different processes which were traditionally attached to the consumption of wine. Wine cannot therefore be analysed sociologically as an alimentary homogeneous category.

5In the French context, Roland Barthes, in his collection of essays analysing French popular culture ('Mythologies' published in 1970), describes wine as a 'boisson-totem' (totem drink), an alimentary sign of Frenchness, a possession which is its very own, and prescriptive in its consumption : 'l'ivresse est conséquence, jamais finalité; la boisson est sentie comme l'étalement d'un plaisir non comme la cause nécessaire d'un effet recherché' (drunkenness is a consequence not the aim; the beverage is used to be appreciated and is not an end in itself). For many observers, drinking wine is therefore a national practice, rooted in French identity and this image still persists in the national imaginary despite the decline and fragmentation of wine consumption. However, today wine has to negotiate its position in the new order and has to resign itself to the fact that only one part of its products will maintain its emblematic power.

6The anthropology of wine in France relates to the religious, hierarchical and deeply political dimension of the product, but it has also to take into account the recent changes affecting wine consumption.

## [Wine Consumption](#)

7Wine Consumption in Europe has been diminishing for several decades in the countries where it was traditionally produced and the world market has regressed since the 1980s. Between 1965 and 1980, wine consumption per inhabitant in Europe rose 6% especially in the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom and Germany, followed by a decrease prior to 1986. Between 1995 and 1998, although consumption of wine was declining, it remains predominant in the countries

where dietary habits are rooted in tradition, such as France or Italy, even if consumption has been steadily declining since 1995.

8If we look at developments in France over the past few years, consumption of alcohol has decreased by 25% between 1970 and 1990. Wine consumption, a traditional part of the culture, still predominates, while beer consumption remains stable and the consumption of spirits has increased slightly. Wine production has always been a protected economic sector, and France still ranks amongst the largest wine producing countries worldwide, which helps to safeguard the economic market. Wine as a product has also seen its quality improving significantly, to the extent that it is impossible today to drink a technically bad wine. Generally speaking, the percentage of regular drinkers has decreased continually since 1981, while the proportion of occasional drinkers continues to increase. The proportion of non-consumers appears to have stabilised following a period of decrease. Again regional and social variations remain a factor of differentiation. Over the last twenty years, there have been a number of major changes affecting wine consumption in France which could be summarised as follows

- There has been a decrease in the consumption of ordinary wines and an increase in the consumption of fine wines.
- Accompanying this trend, the consumption of wine is characterised by a growing social differentiation.
- Consumers buy reduced quantities but spend more money on acquiring wines. There is a growing disparity between ordinary wines and fine wines.
- Consumption of wine today is increasingly defined as occasional.
- Differential drinking takes place between generations with young people consuming less wines in favour of other types of alcoholic drinks.
- There has been a growing concern since the Loi Evin (Evin's Law, in effect since 1993 and modified in 2001) and the adoption of the principles and recommendations of the WHO Alcohol Action Plan (1992) for alcohol consumption and health issues. This has been accompanied by a growing concern for dietetics, good health and lifestyles which have had an impact on the wine consumption.

9These various changes in wine consumption began in the 1970s and have been followed by the emergence of a new culture of wine.

## [Wine Culture](#)

10The new culture of Wine emerged in the 1980s in the context of changing

patterns of wine consumption. This new culture of wine is defined by the large diffusion of journals, magazines, guides, photographs or other types of publications mainly edited or written by wine experts, journalists, historians, professionals or even politicians. This growing literature was accompanied by the explosion of places devoted to wine drinking as a specific social act, of associations, festivals and clubs as wine drinking places. The success of such initiatives illustrates the decline of a traditional and private culture of wine and the emergence of an emblematic and fragmented culture of wine. Its roots could be traced back to 1988 with the La Villette Exhibition in Paris entitled 'Vine and Wine' and the opening of the first library devoted to wines in Europe l'Athéneum (in Burgundy). However, various initiatives and phenomena associated with wine-drinking were already present in the 1970s, as illustrated by the *cave à vins* in Paris or the Nicolas' chain. According to Gilbert Garrier, the new wine culture has enabled the spread of a sound and basic technical culture amongst consumers. The male middle class in their fifties, however, seems to have formed the majority of these consumers. For many observers, wine has become a cultural product and therefore the meanings behind its consumption have altered. For many others, despite these numerous changes, France remains a country symbolically defined by its wines et where everybody knows about wines.

11The examination of these three elements: Wine, Culture and Consumption in the French context echoed wider changes affecting food in contemporary society, but it also argues for a specific and original position of wine -its consumption and its culture- in French Culture and society. Our research project seeks to postulate that wine in France has undergone major changes and is currently negotiating its new position in French society and Identity. To sum up, the anthropology of wine drinking in France, which could be defined as the study of patterns of thought and action, has to take into account a number of major cultural changes:

- A fragmentation of society which is reflected by a fragmentation of drinking, drinkers and drinks.
- A growing competition of drinks which challenges wine as a French national emblem.
- An elitist and empowering culture of wine which separates the amateurs from the drinkers and thus makes it inaccessible for the average French person. Wine connoisseurs are not a modern creature, but their high public visibility is a contemporary phenomenon. The democratisation of wine drinking in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century has been followed at the end of then XXth century by a dictatorial and bourgeois wine culture and consumption.
- The wine consumed has changed and the consumption of quality wines is no longer restricted to festive occasions.

# Production and Consumption of wine in France

12 In her book 'Constructive Drinking', Mary Douglas acknowledged the fact that French anthropologists have taken a great interest in fermentation processes from the point of view of nutrition, biochemistry and economic organisation. An anthropology of wine in France requires us to take into account the two sides of the product, that is to say the production and the consumption. According to Guille-Escuret, one issue defines the relationship between producers and consumers in contemporary France: the producers who have the expertise and the knowledge about quality wines are numerically in decline compared to the visible and powerful group of the amateurs. Therefore the question of power will strike a balance between these two social groups. At the core of the discussion, the social construction of tastes and expertises has to be explored and the social groups constituted by the amateurs and the professionals has to be examined in the light of their production of knowledge.

13 This raises several questions about the role of experts and professionals as mediators in contemporary French society:

- Could the role of the expert be seen as the role of cultural mediator between producers and society? or do the experts themselves participate into the social construction of the product?
- Is there a specific homogeneous knowledge transmitted? or does fragmentation of society imply a fragmentation of knowledge ?
- To what extent have socio-economic changes challenged a unified and national culture of wine?
- In sum; what knowledge? for whom?

14 Our research project will examine the role of the experts, the production of discourses and the social construction of tastes in the process of expertise. The main question lies in the relationship between individual and society, to what extent changes in wine consumption and culture are the reflects or reflects the changes in French society as a whole. The discussion will also integrate the effects of Europeanisation on wine consumption, the influence of the anglo-saxon school of taste (Robert Parker Guide, Hugh Thomas etc...). There are already a number of topics I have identified as possible values/meanings which are contested through consumption:

- **'Terroir' versus grapes** and in relation with them the concept of territories, 'crus', popular and elitist consumption, local and regional products.

- **The social and regional construction of 'quality'** through the various expertises and guides, fairs.
- **The differentiation of time** which affects the cycle of wine production and consumption in the context of a timeless society, in quest of time.

Wine Culture in Contemporary France



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## The Quest for Identities

The anthropology of Food has always focused on the issue of identity – food as a marker of identity and difference and drink as a marker of personal identity and of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. As we have seen, wine drinking in France has experienced various changes. The fragmentation of French society has consequently led to a fragmentation of the drinker, and of the act of drinking itself. Different types of consumption characterise our modern societies and the anthropology of modernity requires the ethnography of this plurality of places where the consumer drinks: when eating out, during family occasions, wine tasting clubs, visits to the producer, local festivals and wine fairs. An ethnography of these drinking places argues for a quest for identities seen as a process of identification in the context of a fragmented and increasingly individualistic French society. What these wine drinkers have in common is the need to express knowledge and pleasures associated with the consumption of wine. Even if the consumption remains individual, the collective framework appears as the key element. Drinking wine is above all a collective sharing, the place for a symbolic exchange. When working with producers and wine-growers, it was very often the case that a collective wine consumption takes place and is presented as compulsory for all the members of the present group. For consumers, in the situation of a wine tasting club, the consumption was individual and non prescriptive in the sense that the anthropologist was very often left to observe rather than participate. In this context, the emphasis was put on the verbal description of sensations, feelings and tastes while in the first situation, the product was not described in an emotional way but rather in a technical manner. The aim of my study is to explore this quest for identities by examining several places where consumption takes place. By focusing on wine tasting clubs (there is a wide range of wine tasting clubs with very specific audiences and aims and objectives) and other places devoted to wine-drinking, I aim to explore the passion for wine as opposed to whiskies or other strong alcoholic beverages and to identify the articulation of social identities by contrast with a strong and traditional national identity which was said to characterise the consumption of wine in the XIXth century.

16 There are a number of hypothesis I would like to examine:

- To what extent has wine been affected by the major changes of food consumption: Homogeneisation? Europeanisation? Individualisation? Complexification?
- Is there a French model of Wine drinking?
- What does the quest for identities tell us about French society?
- Does the alimentary taste in wine provide social ties between generations, gender, social categories, regional/national level, excluded/included?

17 Underlying these hypotheses, there are a number of topics that I would like to explore:

- The emergence of a complex drinker as a modern creature
- The rise of local, regional and national identification in contrast with globalisation
- The gendering of wine-drinking
- The empowering nature of wine expertise and the social differentiation resulting from it.

[Top of page](#)

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[Top of page](#)

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[Top of page](#)

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[Top of page](#)

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[Top of page](#)

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[Top of page](#)

[Contents](#) - [Previous document](#) - [Next document](#)

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## Index

- [Authors](#)
- [Keywords](#)

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