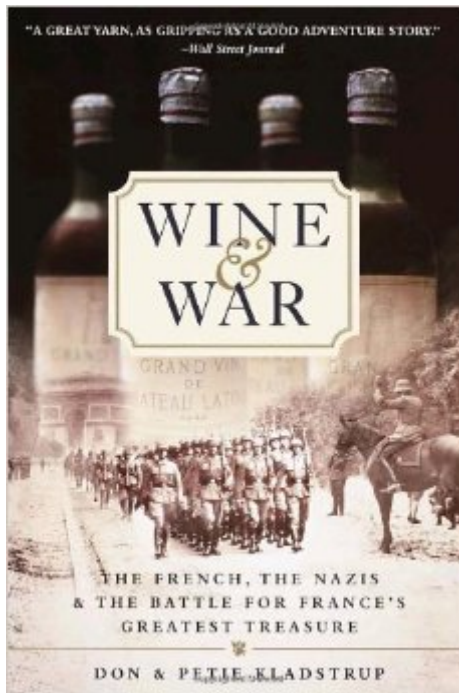


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Wine And War: The French, The Nazis, And The Battle For France's Greatest Treasure



Synopsis

The remarkable untold story of France's courageous, clever vintners who protected and rescued the country's most treasured commodity from German plunder during World War II. "To be a Frenchman means to fight for your country and its wine." — Claude Terrail, owner, Restaurant La Tour d'Argent
In 1940, France fell to the Nazis and almost immediately the German army began a campaign of pillaging one of the assets the French hold most dear: their wine. Like others in the French Resistance, winemakers mobilized to oppose their occupiers, but the tale of their extraordinary efforts has remained largely unknown until now. This is the thrilling and harrowing story of the French wine producers who undertook ingenious, daring measures to save their cherished crops and bottles as the Germans closed in on them. *Wine and War* illuminates a compelling, little-known chapter of history, and stands as a tribute to extraordinary individuals who waged a battle that, in a very real way, saved the spirit of France.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is not a book about wine--it's actually a non-fiction historical thriller with wine as the prize. All you need to know about wine is what most people know: Wine is part of the French soul. It is not merely a drink or a product. It is more important than all the perfumes and fashions and cheeses put together. Even those funny cars the French make that look like vacuum cleaners. Nothing in American cultural life has similar status. At the outset of World War II France suffered the shame and disgrace not of defeat but of total collapse. She had the world's largest army--one that gave the Germans pause, in fact-- and yet somehow was under the Nazi jackboot in about six weeks.

Naturally, the Nazis set about to systematically loot the country. Here I'd like to ask a question I've not seen asked before: the Nazis took it as written that they and their culture were absolutely superior to everyone else in the world. Why then their unbridled need to steal the cultural riches of all the nations they conquered? Some booty was sold to finance the war, but most of the cultural treasures--France's wines and artworks, for example--were stolen merely out of greed and jealousy. When it came to looting France's wines, the Nazis were well-organized. They appointed experts called weinfuhrers to organize the theft, much of which was conducted under a charade of legality: The Nazis overvalued the mark, devalued the franc, closed all other export markets, told the producers what their prices would be and ordered them to sell the wine. Here Don and Petie Kladstrups unveil the amazingly inbred world of wine, in which everybody of importance seems to be related to, married to or employed by someone else of equal importance. As the authors show, this meant the weinfuhrers were sometimes as loyal to France as to Germany. The winemakers resisted as often as they could and perpetrated many frauds on the Nazis. They saved a fair amount of their greatest wines and sold the Wehrmacht as much plonk as they could get away with. The Kladstrups tell how--and in doing so they have rescued a small but important piece of history. The New Europe leans toward institutional forgetfulness today--and so does France herself. Memories of collaboration intrude all too easily, and these are followed by nettlesome ambiguities and doubts. Rattling on your neighbor was collaboration, but so was trading with the Nazis--even when you had no choice. Marshal Petain, head of the Vichy government was condemned at war's end and DeGaulle hailed as a hero--but surely it was easier to be heroic in London? There are a couple of minor factual errors and a couple of anecdotes that aren't credible, but most of this complicated but absorbing tale rings true. Some scenes the Kladstrups re-create are slyly amusing, a few are comic and many--the best of them--are intensely moving. These were proud people, remember, whose faces were ground into the dirt by brutish conquerors every day. For five years they struggled desperately to save their lives and their families, their self-respect and their hope for a future. It's a hell of a story.

This is an engrossing, and distinctive observation on one of the many impacts of World War II on both France and Germany. It is not simply a book about French wine, but a broader study of the impact of the German occupation upon French daily life. What is fascinating is how much the Germans coveted French cuisine, and especially wine, and how gluttony inspired the Nazi government's quest to strip the French larder as part of spoils of war. "Wine and War" does indicate what a highly regarded treasure French wine represents in Western culture. This is a terrific read if

you like wine or enjoy history (and is twice the pleasure for those, like me, who appreciate both). It is not a serious, scholarly history of the war, but instead a compilation of various anecdotes -- oral history being put into print. From a historical perspective, what I found the most interesting was the author's indication of how the legacy of the harsh reparations extracted from Germany by France in World War I came back to haunt the French in terms of the German thirst for revenge in the Second World War. There is an element of suspense throughout the book, in terms of the Germans possibly killing the goose that laid the golden eggs (though the reader already knows the outcome). However, the work manages to represent that beyond the greed and thuggery of some Germans, a number maintained a sense of humanity and long range vision regarding a people who would always remain their neighbors. You won't learn a lot about wine reading this book; you will learn more about history. But what you will learn about French wine is what a coveted treasure this has regarded in any of the German-French conflicts, and what a critical part of French culture it represents.

Having traveled throughout many of the areas covered by the Kladstrups in this remarkable book, I was captured by the not-often told history of the vineyards during World War II. While certainly not expecting a weighty academic tome about the French-German parley over the wine business, I certainly enhanced my appetite to learn more about the actual mechanics of the murky business dealings between the German occupiers (many of whom were pre-war acquaintances of the vintners themselves) and the French vintners. The book is an easy read; and while history has obfuscated the difference between those in the French Resistance, and those who 50 years ex post facto claim to have been part of the Resistance, I believe the Kladstrups made an honest effort to provide a semblance of balance. But for those of us who love French wine, the stories of how precious stores of vintage wines were hidden from the Nazis are truly remarkable. I would have loved to have seen a couple of more chapters towards the end of the book, demonstrating how the vineyards got back on their feet, and more importantly, how the pre-war German-French relationships were reestablished. If you are looking for a good summertime read, this book is for you. A very casual and enjoyable read.

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