'Dry enough to wash your hands ini': the English Taste for Champagne, 1860-1914

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, the English market dominated the French champagne trade. First, more was sold in the United Kingdom than in other markets with sales almost doubling in 15 years from 1860. Second, the English taste for drier, preferably vintage-dated champagnes that could be drunk right through the meal (rather than just as a sweet accompaniment to dessert) established the template for the champagne that we drink today – despite resistance from many of the French champagne houses.

What drove this explosive growth? Why and how did these changes in taste occur? Who led them and how was this new taste spread through both existing elite consumers and the ‘new men and women’ of late Victorian and early Edwardian England? What made champagne the perfect wine for the Victorian era?

This paper, based both on English and French records, examines largely unexplored history of Victorian and Edwardian champagne.