

# The aesthetics and ephemerality of luxury wine

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We don't tend to use the word "luxury" in our communications because it has lost much of its historical meaning through overuse. People may associate it with perfection and prestige, or simply high price-tag, whereas it is a much deeper and richer notion than those rather external, outer-directed ideas imply.

People have been debating the nature and value of luxury for many centuries, indeed millennia. Plato in the Republic argued that indulgence in luxury leads to unbounded acquisition of wealth, the coveting of neighbors' lands and eventually war. Aristotle on the other hand was much more lenient toward enjoyment of the good things in life, though always in moderation and not in excess. Plato's arguments in favor of the simple life were taken up again by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the mid-eighteenth century.

Rousseau's position in the First Discourse, written in 1750, is very close to Plato's, but even more extreme. Rousseau was responding to the question "Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts tended to purify or corrupt Morals?" He comes to the fairly astonishing and worrying conclusion that the flourishing of the sciences and the arts, which we might think was a triumph of civilization, is actually bad for us. Quite early on, he says:

[...] the misuse of time is a great evil. Other evils that are even greater accompany Letters and Arts. Luxury, born like them from the idleness and vanity of men, is such an evil.

Then he says, even more categorically, that "Luxury is diametrically opposed to good morals".

Rousseau's First Discourse is part of a highly entertaining debate between him and the great *philosophe* Voltaire which went on for decades. It's worth noting, in today's atmosphere of intolerant vituperation on social media, that the debate was conducted in civil and witty fashion. The discourse is partly Rousseau's response to two poems written 15 or so years earlier in which Voltaire makes a robust defense of luxury.

In the first, Voltaire makes his position clear: "I love luxury, and even softness;/ All the pleasures, the arts of every kind,/ Cleanliness, taste and ornaments." Among these arts and pleasures, Voltaire gives a special place to wine: there's a lovely passage in which he imagines being served a wine from Ay – obviously a champagne – "whose mousse, released/ From the bottle with darting force,/ Makes the cork fly like lightning". In the second poem, *La Défense du Mondain ou L'Apologie du Luxe*, Voltaire's defense of luxury goes beyond mere personal enjoyment to civic well-being: "Know above all that luxury enriches/ A great state, though it may ruin a small one./ This splendor, this worldly pomp,/ Is the sure mark of a happy reign."

Our position is very close to Voltaire's. We are on the side of luxury, not as empty excess, but as a celebration of life. Luxury, in the right sense, including the wines we



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devote our lives to making, can be life-enhancing and joyful – it can add not just to the gaiety of nations but to their well-being. We hope that the wines we make with so much love, attention and care will be enjoyed in something like the spirit in which they were made. There's clearly the world of difference between a wine made in large quantities as a standard beverage and a hand-made wine which can focus and hone our senses and replenish our souls, as a work of art does. There's also nothing particularly life-enhancing about simplicity and poverty for their own sake, which seems to be Rousseau's preference.

This leads us to the realm of aesthetics and art. Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy which deals with art and beauty. That might seem quite lofty for wine, but Voltaire obviously had no difficulty in including wine among the arts. One way of thinking about aesthetics starts with defining the artistic urge as something fundamentally human. The British philosopher [Scruton \(2007\)](#) defines “the core of the artistic urge” as “the creation of an object of interest, whose meaning lies in its appearance, and whose appearance is enjoyed for its meaning”.

Does wine have a meaning? Well, it depends what we mean by meaning, and also what kind of wine we are dealing with. A wine doesn't have a meaning in the way that a great play or novel has a meaning, especially not a mass-produced wine which doesn't have enough specificity and focus to engage the senses, the intellect or the emotions. On the other hand, a truly fine wine has layers and layers of complexity and depth, rather as a painting or a symphony has. Perhaps, we can't say that it conveys a philosophy, but it may embody one. It is a worthy object of aesthetic contemplation and discussion, as we know from the extraordinary amount of discussion of wine that can be found in books, articles, blogs and so on. There's much to talk about, and that's worth talking about, with wine.

Beauty may be an easier way of approaching this subject than meaning. We probably don't have any difficulty in thinking of wine, or the finest wine, as beautiful. There are different levels of beauty, just as there are different levels of wine, from the straightforwardly sensual to the intellectual and even the moral.

Of course, one thing that distinguishes wine from other cultural phenomena is that it relies largely – though not exclusively – on the humble senses of taste and smell. Most people, in any case, probably regard wine mainly as a straightforward beverage. We have limited vocabulary and not even very clear agreements on definitions, and certainly no notation, when it comes to taste and smell. Music can be notated, and when it comes to the visual arts, we are generally very eye-centered and expert at commenting on images. Undoubtedly, the impoverished vocabulary has held back the full embrace of the finest wine – the kind of wine which aims in the direction of art – into the realm of the aesthetic.

We don't think that this reliance on taste and smell makes wine inferior – in fact, quite the reverse. Taste and smell are just as much part of us as the supposedly higher senses of seeing and hearing. Actually, taste and smell may be the most intimately human senses of all, but that is the subject of another discussion.

There's another thing which makes wine seem rather different from other cultural phenomena and especially artforms. That could be called ephemerality. Ephemerality comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “for the day”. Once a bottle is opened, it probably won't last more than a day; it will be consumed in a matter of hours. The bottle in the cellar – if it is a well-made bottle and a good cellar – may last decades, but not

centuries. This is very strikingly different from most artforms down the centuries which have aimed at long-lastingness.

In our view, this doesn't make wine inferior to other artforms, just different. Its ephemerality makes the sharing of wine especially intimate and poignant. Because we know it's not going to last, we may put special thought into how we're going to share this bottle. And the thought about it, in terms of anticipation and memory, may last a long time before and after the actual sharing. We may treasure the moment more because it's time-limited. Of course, we may have more than one bottle of this particular vintage, but we know that no two bottles taste exactly the same. That's a peculiar thing about wine; even though two bottles come from exactly the same lot or cuvée by the time they have been bottled, labeled and matured, each will taste very slightly different.

Also, of course, the occasion and the company will be different; it will be a different day – going back to the origin of ephemerality – and a different mood. This certainly distinguishes wine from the kind of luxury product where two examples are exactly the same. Wine always has this aspect of the unexpected, almost the uncontrolled, which comes from the dimension of time. It is a part of nature as well being influenced and guided by man.

We strive to produce what could be considered luxury wines if the word luxury is understood in the full, rich, life-enhancing sense we've tried to hint at here. We also believe that our wines, even though they are in a sense products of nature, the most faithful and pure expression of a particular piece of land and a particular growing season, may deserve to be included and considered within the domain of art. Even though wine is a very ancient product, the aesthetics of wine seems to be quite a young and exciting subject. There is much work to be done in this field.

#### Reference

Scruton, R. (2007), "In search of the aesthetic", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 232-250. doi: [10.1093/aesthj/aym004](https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/aym004).