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WINE DIPLOMACY AT THE BRUSSELS ROYAL COURT PRIOR TO 1914[1]

La diplomazia del vino alla corte reale di Bruxelles prima del 1914

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Abstract

Using documents from the archives of the royal palace in Brussels, this paper assesses for the first time the importance of wine consumption at a royal court in the nineteenth century. It addresses the overall attitude towards wine consumption in Belgium, the royal wine cellar and its reputation and, more comprehensively, the daily wine drinking and the drinking at gala dinners. The paper concludes that wine drinking at the royal palace was very significant in material and immaterial terms, which was particularly the case at diplomatic events. This, of course, contrasted highly with the broad temperance movement of those days.

Utilizzando i documenti degli archivi del palazzo reale di Bruxelles, questo articolo valuta per la prima volta l'importanza del consumo di vino in una corte reale nell'Ottocento. Discute l'atteggiamento generale nei confronti del consumo di vino in Belgio, la cantina reale e la sua reputazione e, più approfondito, il consumo quotidiano di vino e il consumo durante le cene di gala. L'articolo conclude che il consumo di vino al palazzo reale era molto significativo in termini materiali e immateriali, il che era particolarmente vero negli eventi diplomatici. Questo, naturalmente, era in grande contrasto con il vasto movimento per la temperanza di quei giorni.

Keywords: gastrodiplomacy, power relations, toasting, Brussels Royal Court, gala dinners.
Gastrodiplomazia, relazioni di potere, brindare, Corte reale di Bruxelles, cene di gala.

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Rulers use cuisine to demonstrate power and to honour, soothe or persuade people. This practice, referred to as culinary diplomacy, is of all times but developed particularly with the arrival of the modern nation-state in the early nineteenth century (Chapple-Sokol 2013, 163-165). In Europe, wine was inextricably part of it, to which «Le Journal de Bruxelles» testified in 1872 when it commented on the banquet offered to the king of the Belgians during his formal visit to the city of Ghent. This event welcomed hundreds of prominent people from Belgium and abroad, including parliamentarians, diplomats, members of government, bankers, aristocrats and high civil servants. The newspaper wrote: "One toasted in a friendly way. The bottles of Champagne were uncorked with ardour. The guests fraternized ever more, glasses touched, handshakes were exchanged" («Journal de Bruxelles», 18 September 1872, 2). The "warmth of wine" smoothed the contacts, which, according to eighteenth-century diplomat François de Caillères, "often revealed important secrets" (de Caillères 1757, 67 and 149). The role of wine is effectively caught by the following quote: "It is no longer wine but diplomacy that is poured in the crystal glasses", which concluded a reasoning about wine as a very earnest topic of conversations among diplomats, which may become a "source of grave embarrassment and diminishing influence for the uninitiated" (Constantinou 1996, 139).

If historians do not doubt the role of food in diplomatic relations, the role of alcohol remains in the dark. A recent, in-depth survey of the scientific literature about culinary diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy and food diplomacy – yes, there is a difference – did not mention alcohol at all (Cabral, Lavrador, Orduna, Moreira 2024). Two reasons may explain this. One is that the contemporaries paid little attention to the drinking of wealthy people and, consequently, historians have but few documents available (Kneale 2023, 48). The second reason is that the historical research about drinking in high circles very rarely focused on diplomatic events (see, for example, Conca Messina, Le Bras, Tedeschi, Pineiro 2019-2020), even when royal or presidential courts are studied (Fedyukin, Colis, Zitser 2022; Lair 2011; Ludington 2011). Definitely, wine consumption at diplomatic dinners in the nineteenth century deserves to be properly investigated, which concurs with the recently coined *enodiplomacy* of today's international relations (Negrín, Lacoste 2022).

Many questions arise, among which the central one about the actual importance of wine drinking at gala dinners in the modern period, which can be tackled, for example, by examining the ratio between the spending on food and that on drinks. Other relevant questions: did wine consumption change over time; did the nature of the guests determine the choice of wines; did the host impose his/her preference; did women toast; did wine fads occur; was Champagne inevitable? These questions exceed the interest in culinary diplomacy and address general issues of alcohol consumption. *Diplomatic drinking* could not exist, and cannot be explained, without the approval of drinking alcohol by these circles: "Alcohol was part of the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie and not only at parties and social occasions" (Vleugels 2013, 72). The widely accepted alcohol consumption of the rich gets more weight in view of the sweeping temperance movement that particularly was aimed at the working classes as part of *la question sociale* (Blocker, Fahey, Tyrrell 2003, 259)[2].

The Brussels royal court, as a locus of political power and cultural influence, offers an excellent milieu for studying the function of wine in diplomatic relations. The kings of the Belgians aspired at playing an international role, which was facilitated by close contacts with rulers all over Europe (Delcorde 2010, 24-45). Hence, numerous gala dinners, special luncheons and magnificent balls were organized where the elites from Belgium and abroad convened: between 1835 and 1914 over 44,000 guests dined at the palace (Scholliers 2024, 65). The royal archives preserve information to disclose these activities, which have been studied earlier without, however, addressing systematically the consumption of alcoholic beverages (De Vooght 2012). Documents of the *Liste civile* (the annual allowance from parliament for spending related to the king's functions), the *Grand maréchal de la cour* (who managed the staff and the special expenditures), and secretaries to the king (keeping notes, letters and reports) contain data on the expenses incurred for wine (1894 to 1914), an inventory of the wine cellar (1913), and detailed records of the dinners and the wine consumption (1869 to 1895)[3]. I supplement these documents with writings on wine, trade, diplomatic relations and traveling, and with newspapers and magazines.

The paper has three sections that move from the general to the specific. The first section surveys the wine consumption in Belgium to provide an overall background. This is followed by a section about the royal wine

cellar and its reputation. The third section starts by briefly assessing the daily wine consumption at the royal table but focuses primarily on the role of wine at gala dinners.

1. Wine Culture in Belgium

In his 1852 book on wine consumption in Belgium, agronomist Auguste Royer applauded the many *bonnes caves*, quoting provocatively a French author, unnamed, who wrote "that there are more true connoisseurs in the smallest hamlet in Belgium than in Paris" (Royer 1873, 9). Royer explained this phenomenon by the fact that Belgium welcomed wines from all over France, which would differ from the narrow preferences of the Parisians. More than a decade later, this view was endorsed by a traveller's guide, adding that "The wine in Brussels may be expensive, but it is very good and far better than in Paris" (de Conty 1865, 11). Three decades later, a report on the trade between Belgium and France reiterated this view: "The wines are treated with great care, the cellars are excellent and the French are surprised to find in Belgium better wines of the same cru and year than in France", which was explained by the fact that "every well-to-do Belgian family holds on to the honour of having a well-stocked cellar of wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne" (Hartmann 1897, 129). Of relevance: two of the three statements were made by Frenchmen.

Royer meticulously commented on prices and characteristics of renowned and ordinary wines and concluded that many Belgians were well-informed about German and Spanish wines but above all about French wines which they bought ever more. Rising prices in the 1850s and early 1860s did not prevent this. In fact, only the disastrous blight of grapevines in France between 1875 and 1885 – due to phylloxera – slowed down the increasing wine drinking (Van den Eeckhout, Scholliers 1983, 293-296). Neither the excise tax nor the influential temperance movement stopped the expansion: the tax did not change between 1865 and 1913 (Van de Perre 2008, 65), while the latter ignored wine and beer, accepting the idea of some medical benefits of both drinks, if consumed in moderation (Seebohm Rowntree 1911, 417; Vleugels 2013, 139-140).

The rich wine culture of the Belgians becomes manifest thanks to the recurrent advertisements of *ventes de vin* in newspapers[4], the press's panic about the phylloxera-calamity, the publication of wine guidebooks and specialized magazines (e.g. Royer 1873; Vade mecum 1886; *Le vin et la cave* 1895; *Le guide vinicole* 1895-1900), the fast expanding wine assortment of the nationwide chain-store Delhaize after 1885 (Van den Eeckhout, Scholliers 2011, 51), the copious wine stocks of well-off families (Segers 2024; Van de Perre 2008, 75-77), the rich *carte des vins* in restaurants, the latter's appreciation by travellers' guides (e.g., de Conty 1865, 11), and the wine's importance in cookbooks (e.g., Cauderlier 1861; de Gouy 1896). Above all, the enthusiasm for wine materialized in the rising per capita wine consumption, which contrasted to the declining one in the Netherlands, Great-Britain, Germany and Scandinavian countries (Blijleven 2022, 34; Harding 2022, 19 and 27). The Belgian average reached 4.7 litres of wine per capita in 1905 (rising from 2.2 in 1831), which came close to the German consumption (6.6 litres) and was above that of Great-Britain (1.6), the Netherlands (1.5) or Sweden (0.6), but far below France (139), Italy (114) or Switzerland (74) (Van de Perre 2008, 62 and 64).

In 1858, a *Bruxellois* drank 7 litres of wine per capita per year, or 2.7 times more than the Belgian average (Abolition 1867, 78-80). Local data after 1860 are lacking, but very likely, by 1914 the Brussels wine consumption grew to a maximum of 29 litres per capita per year (8 cl per day). This estimate accepts an increase of 2.7 percent per year, which is based on the city's booming number of wine wholesalers and retailers from 235 in 1860 to 948 in 1912 (Liste 1860-1912). The multiple and expanding functions of Brussels accounted for the high wine consumption. The city was an important industrial hub (textiles, metal works, luxury goods, transport), but primarily an administrative, financial, political, legal, cultural, scientific and diplomatic place that housed a growing number of wealthy aristocrats, bankers, industrialists, lawyers, politicians and foreigners. They were the wine drinkers, as observed by the British sociologist Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1911, 603). The Brussels royal court played a crucial role in the capital's social life by organizing luncheons, dinners, balls and receptions with dozens of guests from Belgium and abroad, as well as more intimate meals with a handful of diners.

2. The King's Wine

Wine was taken seriously at the Brussels palace, just as at most other European courts (Harding 2022; Lair 2011; Ludington 2011, Samanci 2012, 343 and 350). In the 1830s, a sommelier oversaw the buying of the wine[5], but later the *maître-d'hôtel* performed this task, supervised by the *Grand maréchal de la cour*. The *maître-d'hôtel* was responsible for both the *cave* (wine cellar) and the *bouche* (meals). He was very well paid. In 1859, for example, Frédéric Reiße (born in 1817 in Sonderhausen, Thüringen, Germany) started work at the Brussels royal palace in 1835, became *maître d'hôtel* in 1847, and earned 4,000 francs per year in 1859, which was more than twice the salary of the *chef de cuisine*[6]. For his fifty years of loyal service, the king offered him "abundant gifts, as well as the gold medal of merit" (*La Trique,* 11 August 1889, 3). A *chef cavier* appeared in the documents around 1890, but the function must have been created much earlier. He oversaw the handling, bottling and inventorying of the wine.

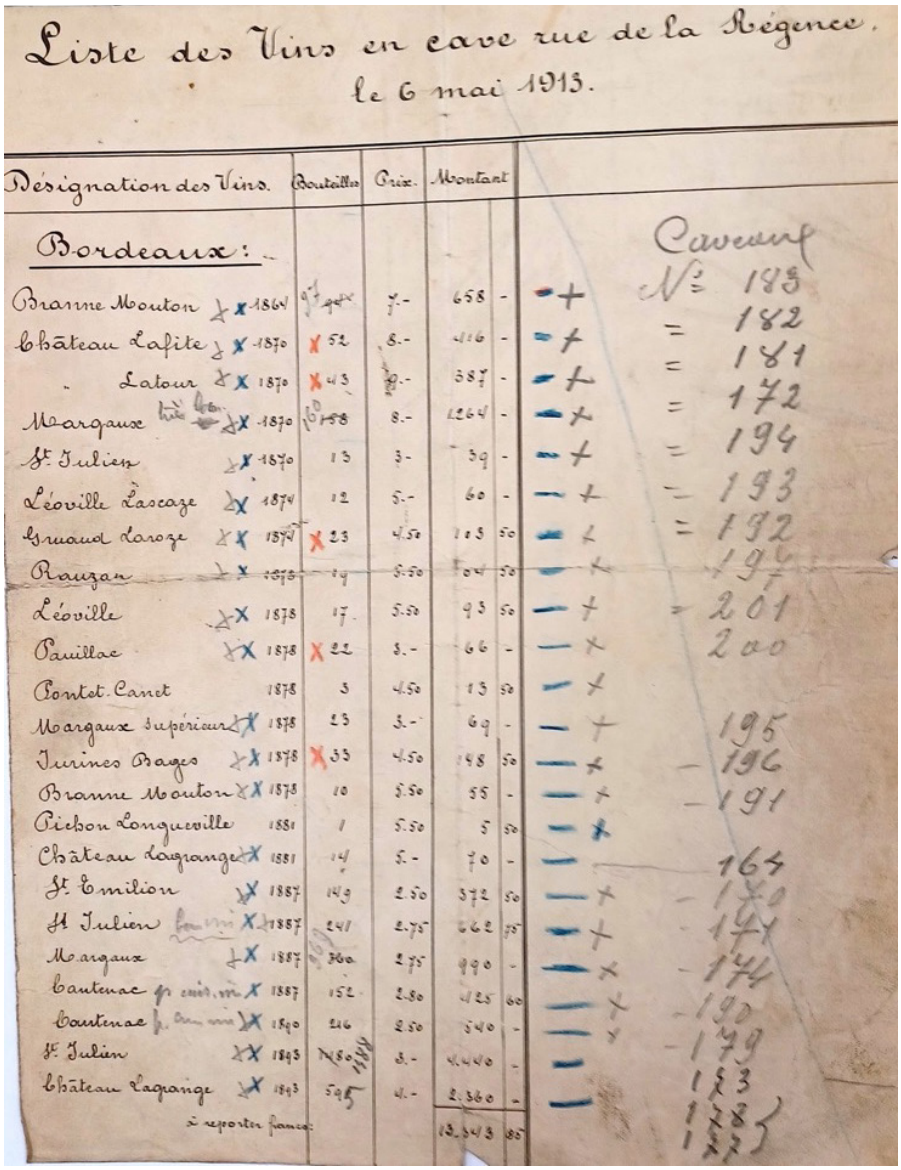
Wine storage was taken good care of. The wine cellars of the gracious mansions that were rebuilt to become the royal palace in the late 1820s, were gradually modernized. By 1900, five cellars were available, with a total surface of 230 square meters that could contain thousands of bottles to be laid in brick boxes that were numbered. The cellars were right beneath the dining rooms and accessible by stairs and an electric elevator. Beer and mineral water were stocked in distinct spaces[7].

In 1827, the wine cellar of the Brussels palace of Willem I, king of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, contained 7,251 bottles (Blijleven 2022, 46-48). 1,634 were white wines (Chablis, Tenerife, Jerez, ...), 528 were of undefined colour (Languedoc, Cape, ...), and 5,089 were red of which Bordeaux wines represented the majority. Of the total, 47 percent were Bordeaux wines like Margaux, La Tour, Lafitte or Saint-Julien. In the aftermath of the Belgian Revolution of 1830, some newspapers suggested to sell king Willem's wine, which was done as late as 1849 («Journal de la Belgique», 11 September 1849, 4). In 1913, an inventory of the wine cellar of king Albert I mentioned 7,992 bottles, meticulously noted with specificities about the year of production[8]. Bordeaux wines still made the majority (45 percent were Saint-Julien, Lagrange or Margaux). White wines from Bourgogne, Champagne and, somewhat less, the Rhine region totalled 1,200 bottles. Sweet wines and liquors accounted for 1,610 bottles. The 1913 inventory added hand-written qualifications as "très bon" or "bon" next to specific wines (figure 1). The total value of the wine in 1913 amounted to 29,725 francs, or on average 3.71 francs per bottle. Château d'Yquem 1865 was the most expensive (15 francs), an undefined *vin des côtes* the cheapest (0.75 francs, used for cooking).

The *Grand maréchal de la cour* bought the wine from local merchants as well as directly from producers. The *chef cavier* controlled and certified each delivery. Some merchants were allowed to be called *fournisseur de la Cour* (i.e., "by appointment to the court"), a title that the palace awarded from 1833 onwards, and which was proudly mentioned in the traders' advertisements. The palace bought wine in large amounts, whether in bottles or barrels. For example, in April 1900 the Bordeaux producer Cuzol & fils sent to the palace four barriques (of 225 litres each) of premier cru Saint-Emilion 1899 (at 350 francs a barrique) and one of Château Lafitte 1899 (at 650 francs)[9]. The price per litre was low (2.90 francs for the Lafitte), but taxes, insurance, transport cost and bottling inflated it.

Most likely, the big purchases allowed a price reduction. The 1903 price list of the fancy restaurant La Rose d'Or (Antwerp) allows to compare the value of the king's wine. Eight top wines (Romanée, Léoville, Yquem, Hochheimer...) cost together 63 francs in the restaurant, whereas the value of the same wine in the king's cellar was set at 57 francs, or 10 percent less[10]. No doubt, in 1827 and 1913 the king's wine cellar contained the *right* wines that concurred entirely with the posh preference of the day (compare to Segers 2024, 77 and 83-86; Van de Perre 2008, 79-80).

The mention of the palace's wine in the press in 1831 occurred exceptionally because of the general discretion about the royals in those days. As a rule, newspapers just mentioned, "A gala dinner took place at the Brussels palace". Now and then the guests were named, especially when they were prominent. In the 1890s, this reticence weakened, which could be linked to the changing position of the nobility in a democratizing society, as well as to the growing negative image of Leopold II due to sex scandals and his Congo policy (Bombeek 2009, 98-99, 164 and 167). But when the king and queen attended a gala dinner outside the palace, the press often gauged the food and drinks.



Liste des Vins en cave rue de la Régence.
le 6 mai 1913.

Désignation des Vins.	Bouteilles	Prix.	Montant		Caveau
Bordeaux:					
Branne Mouton 1864		7.-	658	-	N° 183
Château Lafite 1870	52	8.-	416	-	= 182
Latour 1870	43	9.-	387	-	= 181
Margaux 1870	158	8.-	1264	-	= 172
St. Julien 1870	13	3.-	39	-	= 194
Léoville Lascaze 1874	12	5.-	60	-	= 193
Gruaud Larose 1874	23	4.50	103	50	= 192
Rauzan 1875	19	5.50	104	50	191
Léoville 1878	17	5.50	93	50	= 201
Pauillac 1878	22	3.-	66	-	200
Pontet Canet 1878	3	4.50	13	50	
Margaux Supérieur 1878	23	3.-	69	-	195
Durines Rages 1878	33	4.50	148	50	196
Branne Mouton 1878	10	5.50	55	-	191
Pichon Longueville 1881	1	5.50	5	50	
Château Lagrange 1881	14	5.-	70	-	164
St. Emilion 1887	149	2.50	372	50	
St. Julien 1887	241	2.75	662	75	
Margaux 1887	360	2.75	990	-	144
Cantenac 1887	152	2.80	425	60	
Cantenac 1890	216	2.50	540	-	
St. Julien 1893	1580	3.-	4.440	-	179
Château Lagrange 1893	595	4.-	2.380	-	183
à reporter francs:			13.343	85	178
					177

Figure 1. *Page one of the inventory of the king's wine, 1913. Source: ARP, Fonds Goffinet, no. 672, Liste des vins en cave rue de la Régence le 6 mai 1913.*

Overwhelming attention emerged at the occasion of a *fête brilliante* that Leopold I offered to the Brussels bourgeoisie in January 1844. It was organized in the *Théâtre de la Monnaie* for 3,350 guests (the royal palace being too small, then). The event attracted hundreds of nosy gazers. A newspaper listed the innumerable exquisite dishes and wines: "1,500 bottles of sparkling Champagne, 1,200 bottles of Bordeaux, 300 bottle of Madeira, Rhine and white Bordeaux, together 3,500 bottles" («Journal de la Belgique», 25 January 1844, 1-2). Another newspaper was equally impressed by the event but mentioned much more wine: "And to wash it all down: 4,000 bottles of Champagne and 6,000 bottles of Bordeaux" («L'Indépendance belge», 25 January 1844, 3). And yet another newspaper offered alternative data: 4,000 bottles of champagne and 8,000 bottles of wine («L'Organe des Flandres», 26 January 1844, 3)! So, according to the source, each guest would have had between one and an incredible 3.5 bottles (75 to 260 centilitres), all sorts mixed and assumed that all bottles were emptied. A French daily estimated the cost of the wine at 20,000 francs (*La Quotidienne* 25 December 1843, 3). Quite often, menus of dinners offered to the royal couple mentioned the wine distinctly, as was the case in August 1853, when the city of Ghent welcomed the king and the queen (figure 2). Mentioning the wine underscored its importance. At other occasions, the wine was noted between the list of dishes, which corresponded to the strictly prescribed meal order, to be found in wine manuals.

Between 1860 and 1890, the press reported less on royal gala dinners. Yet, their splendour did not diminish, but there was no need to organize feasts outside the palace because new, superb dining and reception rooms

Figure 2. *Menu of the formal dinner of the royal couple when visiting the city of Ghent in August 1853, with separate mention of the wine at the bottom of the card: Haut Sauterne, Champagne Crément, Johanisberg, Hochheimer, Saint-Julien, Château Lafitte and others. Source: Library of Ghent University, https://lib.ugent.be/en/catalog/rug01:002330377.*

were added to the palace after 1860: the *salle de marbre*, the *grande galerie* and the *salles des glaces* (Molitor 1993, 88 and 125; Smets 2000, 56-60). Also, a brand new, large kitchen was installed in the basement (Adriaenssens 2012, 9). News about royal dinners seeped occasionally through in the press when the royal couple dined out. For example, in 1869 in Liège, the 3,000 guests at a *banquet-monstre* in honour of the royal couple received half a bottle of Bordeaux and an entire bottle of Champagne each, totalling 112 cl (*La Meuse* 11 September 1869, 2). Some years later, the royal couple was invited in Huy (near Liège), where the wines included Pouillac 1858, Pommard 1846 and veuve Cliquot (*La Meuse* 19 August 1872, 2). During the above-mentioned visit of the royal couple to Ghent in 1872, each of the 1,200 guests got half a bottle of Bordeaux and half a bottle of Champagne (*L'Echo du parlement* 18 September 1872), or 75 cl each.

In 1885 an exceptional newspaper article was published, "Le Roi chez lui": an account of a day in the life of Leopold II and a caesura with the previous discretion. It mentioned his many activities and good works, including the king's meals: "Leopold II was endowed with an excellent appetite, but he drank very little and generally watered his wine down" («La Réforme», 10 April 1885, 1 which was taken from the Parisian «Le Figaro», 9 April 1885, 1). The next day, this piece was commented by other newspapers, and one concluded "All this is fantasy" («Gazette de Charleroi», 11 April 1885, 2). Yet, this article seemed to have opened the way to more comments about wine drinking at the court. In 1893, the yearly dinner offered by the king to the members of Parliament led one newspaper to comment that "all guests were satisfied with the food and the wine", while another noted "Here's the menu of this meal. Of course, wine, as much as one wished. And the needs of these gentlemen are huge" (*Vooruit* 29 November 1893, 2).

In the 1900s, the press's attention to the wine consumption at the palace grew, which coincided with the more general critical view of the royal family. In 1900, a banquet brought 1,600 guests to the royal table. They were served 400 bottles of Graves supérieur, 400 of Saint-Julien, 400 of Château Carney and 900 of Louis Roederer. Eighty sommeliers poured the wine. Together, 2,100 bottles were uncorked, i.e., 1.3 bottles for each diner or an impressive average of 97 centilitres («Le Patriote», 15 November 1900, 3). The following year, Leopold's wine preference was evaluated: "The King is a great wine connoisseur, particularly of Champagne. He demonstrates this by preferring the Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin, which is, upon my word, the king of Champagnes!" («L'Evènement», 11 February 1901, 2). In 1902, the reverse view appeared in a piece that praised the king's work ethics, intelligence, health and sobriety. The latter emerged in Leopold's frugal meals and drinking: "He drinks three glasses of wine, never more, and moreover this is never heady wine. He has never dipped his lips in a glass of Champagne" («Le Triboulet», 12 January 1902, 2). In the late 1890s and 1900s, a caricatured Leopold II often appeared in advertisements for automobiles and dressmakers but particularly for alcoholic drinks such as Dubonnet, Champagne Mumm or *digestif* Barthomeuf (the latter depicted Leopold with his mistress Cléo de Mérode) (Grand-Carteret 1908, 114, 118), which contributed to the king's image as a wine aficionado. The latter extended to the United Kingdom, as an advertisement for Champagne Laurent-Perrier showed: "His Majesty the King of the Belgians writes 'I find your champagne very good'", followed by the price of the wine («The Daily News», 3 November 1897, 7).

The death of Leopold II led to several comments in the press. Not a bad word about the dead, was the leitmotif of most of them. Referring to the king's wine reputation, one newspaper asked, "Did the king appreciate wine? Perhaps wines from Bordeaux, but certainly not from Burgundy. He was fond of a particular port wine but did not enjoy Champagne. His sobriety was proverbial" («Gazette de Charleroi», 20 December 1909, 2). Another newspaper published a long piece about Leopold II's inheritance, which included the allocation of the wines among his three daughters. "King Leopold possessed superb wines that include all grands crus, about 35,000 bottles of the very best sort" («Le Soir», 15 August 1910, 1). Whether the queen enjoyed wine and which wine this would have been, was totally ignored by the press.

Dining and wining with Albert I were generally viewed as tastier and more sophisticated. In 1910, a newspaper mentioned that wines "are provided by the royal cellar and are served abundantly" («Le Courrier de l'Escaut», 28 December 1910, 2). Another comment about the same occasion was critical about the quality of the wine: "One eats in total silence. A glass of wine is served. A minor Bordeaux. One eats a second dish, which isn't very tasty. Then one is entitled to a second glass of wine. A minor Bourgogne. A third dish is served. It's a bone to chew on. One gets a glass of Champagne, a small herbal tea of St. Nicholas for the use of constipated children. Then comes the dessert, one moves to the next, freezing room where coffee is poured. Ah! This is good: it's warm" («Le Soir», 30 December 1910, 2). Again, comments on the queen's wine consumption were absent.

Clearly, the royal cellars contained many fancy wines. The press mentioned these wines in two ways: the quantity of bottles served at special events, which generally was left uncommented, and the connoisseurship of the kings, which led to contradictory views.

3. Wine Diplomacy

I take on these contradictory views in the press to briefly look at the daily wine consumption of the royal couple, which informs about their actual interest in wine. What if the king of the Belgians preferred light Beaujolais wines, disdained Champagne or preferred mineral water? Would that influence the wine served at gala dinners? The pre-printed "Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche pendant la journée du…" registered daily what was eaten and drunk at the various tables (the table of the king and queen, of the princes[ses], the Grand Maréchal, the court's closest collaborators)[11]. According to some newspapers, Leopold II intervened in the choice of the daily meals. One newspaper ascertained: "The chef presents the menu, and the king erases what he dislikes" («Le Figaro» 9 April 1885, 1). Direct interference appeared in a letter Leopold II

sent to his secretary in 1867, some months after his coronation, in which he interceded in the appointment of a *chef de cuisine* and in the financial matters of the kitchen (Vandewoude 1968, 61). There are no traces of similar involvement about the wine, but this should certainly not be excluded.

The number of diners at breakfast, luncheon and dinner, the bottles of wine and mineral water, the menu and the price of the wine were noted in the *Relevé de la consommation*. I picked one ordinary month in eight years between 1868 and 1895 to establish the average number of bottles of alcohol per person at the king's and queen's table (Table 1). Wine was drunk every day, albeit with a few exceptions as in October 1871, when no wine, liquor or Champagne were served for seven days, with no apparent reason like illness, travel or number of guests. At least one bottle of mineral water (Célestins, Evian, Vichy…) was put on the table daily.

The wine consumption fluctuated between a minimum of 11 cl per diner in 1868 to a maximum of 26 cl in 1891, the average being 17 cl for the whole period. But the trend was on the rise: plus 50 percent between 1868/1871/1879 and 1888/1891/1895. The absence of wineless days had an impact. The daily 17 centilitres were far more modest than the quantities that were quaffed during gala dinners, as suggested by the above-mentioned newspapers. Of course, these quantities represent averages that assume that bottles were emptied and ignore individual intake: possibly the king and the male guests drank (much) more than the queen and the female guests.

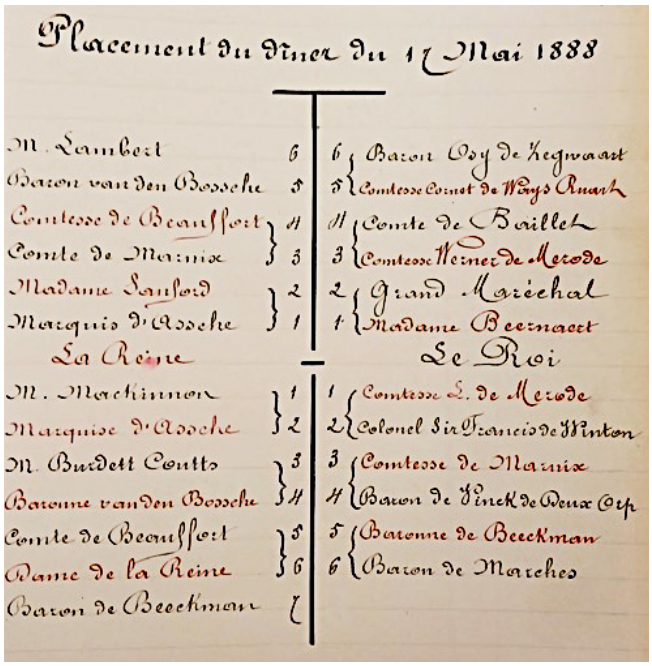
Saint-Julien, Château Lafitte, Médoc, Château Larose and Chablis were commonly poured in the royal glasses, names that were pre-printed on the *Relevé de la consommation*, which showed their frequent consumption. Particularly Château Lafitte (12 francs per bottle) and Saint-Julien (2.5 francs) were served. Later, Château Larose (9 francs) and Château Margaux (5.75 francs) were preferred. The value of the wine at the royal table oscillated around 8 francs per bottle, which was higher than the average bottle in the king's cellar in 1913. Alongside these brands, also Malaga, Schiedam, Sherry and Curaçao appeared frequently on the king's table. Champagne was served when guests were present, which occurred, for example, during five days in October 1885. No doubt: fancy, expensive wines were part of the daily life at the king's table.

Gala dinners required laborious planning. The *Grand maréchal de la cour* oversaw every detail: the guest list, their number, the gender balance, the seating arrangement at the table, the invitation cards, the order of entering the dining room, the dress code, the printed menu card, the decoration (flowers, e.g.), the timing, the food (in accord with the king and the *chef*), the number of waiters, the toasts and the drinks. Registers were kept that listed the names and function of each guest as well as their positioning at the royal table, which was essential in diplomatic relations (figure 3). As a rule, the king and queen were seated centrally opposed to each other, and close to the main guests. Now and then, this register contained a drawing of the table with the names of all

Table 1. *Alcohol consumption at the king's and queen's daily table (luncheon and dinner), per month, in selected years, 1868-1895. Source: ARP, Liste civile, Maison du Roi. Service du Grand maréchal de la cour.* Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche pendant la journée du…, *November 1868, October 1871, October 1879, January 1881, October 1885, October 1888, January 1891 and January 1895. I exclude meals with more than six diners.*

	No. of bottles (and litres)	No. of diners*	Bottles per diner	Centilitres per person	Days without alcohol
1868	42.5 (31.9)	285	0.15	11	4
1871	48 (36)	212	0.23	17	7
1879	38 (28.5)	216	0.18	13	2
1881	75 (56.2)	270	0.28	21	3
1885	38 (28.5)	191	0.20	15	3
1888	59.5 (44.8)	272	0.22	16	0
1891	102 (76.5)	295	0.34	26	0
1895	64 (48)	242	0.26	20	0
Average	58.4 (43.8)	254	0.24	17	2.4

*The number of diners refers to luncheon and dinner during the whole month. E.g., in 1871, "212" indicates an average of 6.8 diners per day (212 divided by 31), or 3.4 per meal, which means that, in general, the royal couple ate with one or two guests.


Placement du Dîner du 17 Mai 1888

M. Lambert 6 — 6 Baron Ooy de Kegwaart
Baron van den Bossche 5 — 5 Comtesse Comte de Mays Amark
Comtesse de Beaufort 4 — 4 Comte de Baillet
Comte de Marnix 3 — 3 Comtesse Werner de Merode
Madame Sanford 2 — 2 Grand Maréchal
Marquis d'Assche 1 — 1 Madame Beernaert
La Reine — Le Roi
M. Mackinnon 1 — 1 Comtesse L. de Merode
Marquise d'Assche 2 — 2 Colonel Sir Francis de Winton
M. Burdett Coutts 3 — 3 Comtesse de Marnix
Baronne vanden Bossche 4 — 4 Baron de Vinck de Deux Ch.
Comte de Beaufort 5 — 5 Baronne de Beeckman
Dame de la Reine 6 — 6 Baron de Marches
Baron de Beeckman

Figure 3. *The 36 diners and the seating arrangement at the gala dinner at the royal palace, 17 May 1888, 7.30 p.m., "en frac et grand cordon" (tailcoat and military jacket). Source: ARP, Grand maréchal de la cour, nr. 461, Registre des dîners, 1888.*

participants, particularly when over one hundred diners were to be seated. The luncheon started at 12 or 12.30, the dinner at 6.30, 7 or 7.30 p.m. In both cases, two hours was the maximum length of the meal.

Gala dinners occurred frequently (averaging 18 per year between 1835 and 1913), albeit with big fluctuations according to the health of the king, personal misfortunes, trips, financial concerns and diplomatic strategies. Both the latter went hand in hand. Leopold I's aim to become a first-rate European peacekeeper led to a diplomatic culinary offensive in the 1840s, just like did Leopold II's colonization plans in the 1870s and Albert I's accession to the throne in 1910. These were extremely expensive events, and, consequently, savings were required, which caused the number of gala dinners to fall in the 1850s and, particularly, between 1881 and 1909 (Scholliers 2024, 61-62).

The *Grand maréchal de la cour* separated the cost of the meals from that of the drinks. Unfortunately, the data are available only in the early 1880s and between 1895 and 1914. They allow to effectively assess the role of alcohol consumption at diplomatic events. In 1882, the ratio of the cost of alcoholic drinks to the total spending on food and drinks reached 13.9 percent, which slightly diminished to 12.4 percent in 1884. In both years, spending on food was particularly high. In 1910, the proportion attained 13.7 percent. So, 13 percent appeared to be the norm (Table 2).

However, in 1895, 1900 and 1905 the proportion of drinks on the total cost of both food and drinks rose to an impressive 24.3, 31.0 and 27.6 percent respectively. This spectacular growth – more than doubling – was caused by the severe savings on food expenditure but not on wine. Between 1884 and 1895, the cost of food fell by almost 70 percent, that of wine by barely 30 percent. The savings on food were a consequence of the harsh cutbacks that followed the extremely high spending on food and drinks in the late 1870s and early 1880s, which were directly linked to Leopold II's Congo-diplomatic offensive. Apparently, economizing on wine was far less acceptable than saving on food, which led to the diminishing of the quality of the meals at the court (Scholliers 2024, 64-65), but barely to less drinking.

The plentiful drinking of various sorts of alcohol at gala dinners at the court appeared in the comments by newspapers, as shown above. The documents of the *Grand maréchal de la cour* confirm this. A couple of examples are given in Table 3.

With 106 cl of wine per person, 1881 was the impressive exception, while three other years showed a stable quantity of 56 cl, which seemed to be the norm at special events. From 1868 to 1895, smaller parties of five to ten people were served between 10 and 80 cl per person, the average reaching 37 cl. Could this lower quantity be explained by the fact that less toasts were given, or that social control was higher?

Table 2. *Cost of alcohol ("cave") on total cost of meals at the royal palace in francs, 1882-1910. Source: ARP. Fonds Goffinet, no. 546, Tableau comparatif des dépenses des années 1882, 1883 et 1884; ARP Liste civile, États des comptes du Service de la Bouche; États des comptes du Service de la Cave, 1895-1910.*

	Bouche (A)	*Cave* (B)	Total (C)	Ratio B/C (%)
1882	237,658	38,509	276,167	13.9
1884	190,742	26,924	217,666	12.4
1895	59,473	19,123	78,596	24.3
1900	58,191	26,158	84,259	31.0
1905	63,314	24,146	87,460	27.6
1910	122,790	19,570	142,360	13.7

Table 3. *Alcohol consumption during dinners at the Brussels court. Source: ARP, Liste civile, Maison du Roi. Service du Grand maréchal de la cour. Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche, 1868, 1871, 1881, 1888 and 1895.*

	Guests	Bottles	Cl / person
9 July 1868	32	25 wine	59
10 May 1871	27	26 wine 2 liquor	77
24 January 1881	52	46.5 wine 27 champagne	106
29 November 1888	75	31 wine 13 champagne 12 liquor	56
8 January 1895	53	38 wine	54
Average	47.8	44	70

Compared to the daily wine consumption of the royal couple (on average, 17 cl per person), the 37 and 55 cl were quite impressive. Did the toasts play a role in the drinking at gala dinners? These required successive salutes which, obviously, could not be done without clinking glasses. That the toasting was a serious matter appears on the occasion of a dinner at the royal palace in August 1873, to celebrate the *Institut du Fer et de l'Acier* (the Iron and Steel Institute): "The moment of the toasts is there. The sequence of the thirteen toasts has been set before. M. Trasenster stands up and gives a short speech, whereafter he drinks to the health of the king of the Belgians" («La Meuse», 21 August 1873, 1).

A more detailed picture of "gala drinking" emerges when a particular year is investigated. I pick 1888 for it is the year with the amplest data. The combination of the "Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche" (*Liste civile*) with the "Régistre des dîners" (*Grand maréchal de la cour*) allows us to learn about the wine consumption, the individual guests and, hence, the occasion. Twenty gala dinners were organized in that year, of which seven were of particular interest (Table 4).

On average, 33 bottles of wine and other alcoholic drinks were served at the seven dinners, leaving 0.81 bottle per person, or 60 cl each, which concurs with the consumption from the examples between 1868 and 1895. It confirms the overall picture of relatively heavy drinking at gala dinners. A relationship between the number of diners (to indicate the number of toasts and, hence, drinking occasions) and the amount of wine, is lacking.

Going further into details, the seven dinners appear highly relevant in terms of diplomatic relations. On 18 November 1889, on the initiative of Leopold II, the Brussels anti-slavery conference started. It gathered representatives from the German empire, the UK, France, the USA, Italy, Spain, Russia, the Ottoman empire and other nations. The conference aimed at countering the critique about Leopold II's Congo policy, but it was considered "a talking shop", although one with impact because it was the first meeting devoted to the suppression of the slave trade that led to the Brussels Conference Act of 1890 (Mulligan 2013, 149). This conference was properly prepared by the Brussels court, among which the organization of seven gala meals in the year 1888.

Table 4. *Alcohol consumption at seven gala dinners at the royal palace, 1888. Source: ARP, Liste civile, Maison du Roi. Service du Grand maréchal de la cour. Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche, 1888; ARP, Grand maréchal de la cour, Registres des dîners, no. 460.*

	No of diners	% of men	Bottles of wine	Centilitres per guest	Main guest	Lunch/ Dinner
28 January	35	58	27	58	Lord Vivian	Dinner
9 February	60	51	43	54	Lord Vivian	Dinner
29 April	29	63	29	75	Johann von Alvensleben	Dinner
17 May	36	55	29	60	Henry Shelton Sanford	Dinner
5 June	25	70	18	56	de Jonghe	Lunch
29 November	75	?	58	59	José Gutierrez	Dinner
22 December	30	50	26	65	John Packhurst	Dinner
Average	41		33	61		

On 28 January, a first dinner in preparation of the conference was organized with Lord Vivian, the British Minister in Brussels, Lady Vivian, and the *fine fleur* of the Brussels court. Two weeks later, Lord Vivian again was invited to the palace, now with a larger party of 60, including general Burnell, Polydore De Keyzer (the Lord Mayor of London), Brussels aristocrats and members of the government. Baron Lambermont was present, who would become the chairman of the above-mentioned Brussels conference. On both occasions, plenty of fashionable wines were served: Saint-Julien, Lafitte, Sauternes, Champagne and various sorts of liquor, totalling 56 cl per person.

On 29 April, 29 diners were given 29 bottles of wine, an absolute record: six bottles of Saint-Julien, eight of Champagne, two of Sherry, one Curaçao and Cognac, and an undefined 11 bottles of German wines. Although German wines were drunk at the Brussels court, they came far beyond French wines in terms of status and consumed quantities. But the occasion called for a German touch: Count Metternich, Count Schmettau and Johann von Alvensleben, the Prussian ambassador to Brussels, were among the guests. They were honoured by serving Rhinewines. Baron Lambermont was also present. A gender dimension may appear: 63 percent of the party were men, which was above the proportion of previous occasions (Table 3). Could this explain the higher intake of alcohol[12]? The Prussian ambassador was one of the delegates at the 1889 Brussels conference on anti-slavery trade.

On 17 May, 36 guests were served 29 bottles of the usual fancy wine (including the expensive Château Rauzan, which was only rarely served), or 60 cl per person. Among the guests were Henry Shelton Sanford (former US-ambassador to Belgium), William Burdett Coutts (British MP), William McKennon (ardent colonialist of central Africa) and Francis de Winton (general administrator of the Congo Free State) (figure 3). Was the Château Rauzan a sign of respect to the American guest? When ordering ten boxes of Rauzan in 1790, Thomas Jefferson apparently established the reputation of this wine (Coates 1995, 228).

On 5 June, 25 guests lunched at the royal palace, where they drank 18 bottles of the usual posh wines, or 56 cl each. This time, the party included the Comte de Jonghe who was the Belgian ambassador in Vienna, Baron Whetnall (his colleague in Morrocco), and Hubert Van Neuss (the financial administrator of the Congo Free State). They all contributed to the 1889 Brussels meeting. Much more men than women participated in this lunch (70 vs. 30 percent), but this did not lead to more drinking, which nuances the above suggestion. On 29 November, 75 guests dined at the palace, and were offered 59 bottles of the usual wines, including 13 bottles of Champagne, which led to 59 cl each. Five bottles of sherry were opened, which was more than the usual one bottle. Interestingly, later in the evening, another 25 bottles of Médoc were uncorked, which I did not include in the calculation of the wine consumption in Table 3. Adding these 25 to the 59 bottles gives 84, or 1.12 bottle and 84 cl each. Baron Lambermont was again present and entertained the Spanish ambassador to Belgium, Don José Gutierrez Aguëra and other Spanish guests. No special Spanish wines were served, apart from the five bottles of Sherry. The Spanish ambassador participated in the 1889 Brussels conference. Finally, on 22 Decem-

ber, a party of 30 was served 26 bottles of wine, or an intake of 65 cl each. The US-ambassador to Belgium, John Packhurst and the chamberlain to the king of the Netherlands, baron Osy de Zegwaart, were among the main guests. Their role in the 1889 conference is not clear.

Conclusion

Gala dinners required a faultless organization. No detail was neglected. The Brussels example confirms this but specifically highlights the huge importance of wine at these occasions. Fancy drinking accompanied these occasions and, moreover, appeared to be the central element. It was part of the toasting ritual, and it put moods right since more than enough wine was poured in the crystal glasses: between 37 and 106 cl per diner and meal, the average being 55 cl during (at least) a quarter of a century (1868-1895). A clear relationship between this amount and variables such as the importance of the guests, the moment of the day or the gender composition of the party, appears only regarding the moment of the day: less wine was served at luncheons compared to dinners.

Knowledge about wine was crucial as a means of communication between host and guests, which led to pouring the *right* wines in the glasses. This mix of material and immaterial culture was crucial at diplomatic dinners. As a rule, the most reputed French wines (overwhelmingly from the Bordeaux region) were served during the long nineteenth century, mostly accompanied by Sherry, Schiedam or Curaçao during or after the meal, while a gala dinner without Champagne was unthinkable. On some occasions, the guests were honoured by serving specific wines, as shown by the example of the Rhine wines offered to the German guests in 1888.

At the Brussels gala dinners, wine seemed to have weighed heavier than food, which plainly appeared between 1885 and 1905 when spending on food diminished (fewer dinners and guests; lower cost per meal), but spending on wine fell much less. So, clinking glasses was more important than fancy food, which may be explained by the inevitable toasting ritual.

The wine drinking at gala dinners was embedded in a culture that not only accepts alcohol but also values it. Wine was irrefutably part of the bourgeois life in the long nineteenth century, offering excellent opportunities to underscore the most subtle status differences. In Belgium, the many wine merchants supplied wines of the highest reputation and price, which the connoisseurs appreciated. On top of the social hierarchy were the king and the queen with a daily average of 17 cl of exquisite wines – disregarded the gala drinking. The Brussels average reached about 8 cl per day. In general, the press praised the wine stock of the kings, which indeed included the most renowned grand crus wines of memorable years. The contrast with the condemnation of working-class drinking could not be clearer. A crystal glass full of fancy wine surely differed from a little, murky glass of cheap gin in all possible ways.

Notes

1 Sincere thanks to Baudouin D'hoore, archivist of the Brussels royal palace, for his kind assistance, and to Allen Grieco and Patricia Van den Eeckhout for commenting on a previous version of this text. Quotes in Dutch and French are translated into English. Up to 1914, one Belgian franc equaled one French franc, one Italian Lira, 9 British pence and 19.3 $ cents. The Brussels palace was successively inhabited by Willem I (1815-1830), Leopold I (1831-1866), Leopold II (1866-1909) and Albert I (1909-1934).

2 The "social question" assembled several issues ascribed to the working classes, including strikes, political movements, prostitution, burglary and drinking.

3 Archives royal palace (further, ARP): Archives du Grand maréchal de la cour; Archives de la Liste civile; Fonds Goffinet.

4 "Vente de vin" (with variations as "vente de vins" or "ventes de vin") appeared 2,240 times in Belgian newspapers between 1850 and 1914, or 35 announcements per year (https://www.belgicapress.be/, accessed 26 July 2025).

5 In 1831 sommelier François Rémy was enlisted (ARP, Fonds Goffinet, no. 505), and from 1834 to 1837 Victor François was "sommeiller-échanson" (*Annuaire de l'orde judiciaire du royaume de Belgique* [Brussels: Perichon, 1837, 10], but later this function was no longer mentioned.

6 ARP, Grand maréchal de la cour, no. 149. Moreover, additional benefits were added to his salary.

7 ARP, Liste civile, Plans. Palais royal de Bruxelles. Plan des sous-sols, 1903.

8 ARP, Fonds Goffinet, no. 672, Liste des vins en cave rue de la Régence le 6 mai 1913.
9 ARP, Liste civile, Dépenses mensuelles 1905 (October).
10 ARP, Fonds Goffinet, no. 672, "Liste des vins en cave rue de la Régence le 6 mai 1913"; *Le Matin*, 1 June 1903, 6.
11 ARP, Liste civile, Maison du Roi. Service du Grand maréchal de la cour. Relevé de la consommation de la cave et de la bouche pendant la journée du…, 1868-1895 (with big gaps).
12 Among the upper classes, men had the reputation to drink more than women, although most women enjoyed sweet liquors that they saw as medicine (Vleugels 2013, 83-86).

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