



From Montpellier
to the Midwest:

*A French
Botanist Consults*
Ohio Wine
Experts

by Mary Manning





When the storied vines of southern France faced a near catastrophic plague from an insect they did not yet understand, French botanist Jules-Émile Planchon came to Ohio in search of a cure. He believed that experiments done by Ohio wine-makers to find the hardiest, best tasting species of grapes could hold the key to saving France's wine industry.

Planchon, a professor of botanical sciences, arrived in New York on August 29, 1874, with a clear mission. In France—and especially near his home in Montpellier—a pest known as phylloxera was ravaging the grapevines. A type of aphid that extracts nutrients from vines under cover of the soil, the phylloxera, left unchecked, had the power to devastate the French economy. The vineyards around Montpellier produced, on average, 1.2 billion liters of wine per year between 1860 and 1867—approximately a fourth of the wine produced in all of France. Planchon, in consultation with his fellow scientists, intended to study whether grafting American vines, seemingly resistant to the phylloxera, to the distressed French vines could enable the survival of the southern French wine industry and preserve their valuable taste.

Although he would consult merchants, botanists, gardeners, and other experts across the United States, Planchon spent a great deal of time in Ohio, where the wine industry boomed in the manner that France so desperately missed. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ohio produced a third of all American wine. Grape growers, located first near Cincinnati and then in northern Ohio, near Lake Erie, took advantage of the state's temperate climate to grow tremendous quantities of fruit in support of their quest to produce a superior American vintage.

CINCINNATI

When Planchon arrived in Cincinnati, after visiting Maryland and North Carolina, he declared: "Finally, I am here in one of the principal centers and almost the very cradle of the great culture of the vine in America." Cincinnati viticulturists were not the first to plant wine grapes in the United States, but they

had perhaps the most early success. The area's German immigrants had wine as part of their daily dining rituals, providing a demand for the product. Wild grapes also grew very well in Ohio soil, and the land around Cincinnati proved ideal for cultivating elite American wines. Nicholas Longworth, a banker and businessman who arrived in the city in 1804, saw growing grapes as a wise business proposition. He conducted extensive and deliberate testing of varieties to find the most sustainable and profitable ones and insisted on continuing to expand his market beyond local German immigrants. His research led him to pioneer sparkling wines in America. His sparkling Catawba was praised—even in Europe—as superior to proper Champagne.

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—JULES-ÉMILE PLANCHON, upon arriving in Ohio

Wine expert Robert Buchanan declared one of Longworth's properties to be the oldest vineyard in the county—and perhaps even further beyond—in the second edition of his treatise *The Culture of the Grape & Wine-Making* (1852). The vines had been planted 27 years earlier and "had little to contend with" in terms of threats or pests. By

1874, when Planchon arrived in western Ohio, Longworth's son and other winemakers had built on his legacy. Buchanan directed Planchon to Michel Werk, an Alsatian immigrant and entrepreneur who had furthered the development of the sparkling Catawba wine and had won an honorable mention at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1867. Werk allowed Planchon to taste a number of his wines and examine the health of his vines. Although Catawba grapes had long driven the Ohio wine industry, Planchon found the plants too delicate for his purposes, noting that many vines had already fallen victim to rot. As he inspected Delaware and Clinton grapevines, even ones that were relatively robust compared to the Catawba, he found them lacking as well—he feared that they were already weakened by the “invisible author,” the phylloxera, that he intended to defeat. Planchon left Cincinnati for St. Louis, another center of American wine production, with the intent of coming back through Ohio on his way home.

LAKE ERIE

After meeting experts in St. Louis, Planchon traveled to Sandusky. He wanted to visit the vineyards on the small islands just off the coast in Lake Erie, especially Kelleys Island. The earliest commercial winery on Kelleys Island was founded in 1845, and by 1865 the Kelleys Island Wine Company had been established as a cooperative to drive business for the island vineyards. They pioneered mechanical methods that increased production capabilities dramatically, including six large pressers operated by a steam engine with 15 horsepower that could process three tons of fruit in an impressive six hours. Planchon was inspired by what he saw.

Beyond his enjoyment at seeing new methods of production, his visit provided an interesting

case for Planchon. The vines, especially those of Addison Kelley and the Kelleys Island Wine Company, were clearly suffering from something that resembled the phylloxera pest, but not quite to the same degree. He noted that the pests seemed to have depleted a patch of Delaware vines, but had moved on to seek “succulent food” elsewhere. To Planchon, that transition suggested that a “hope for healing” still remained in American vines, even if he could not conceive of that healing path just yet. Planchon returned to France full of new knowledge and optimism that he could save the wine industry of southern France from destruction.

SALVATION

The path toward repairing the French vines remained decades in the future. Planchon died in 1888, having recorded the results of his travels and experiments in treatises and reports. French botanists needed further years of experimentation to understand how to choose the most resistant American vines to graft to the fruit-bearing part of the French vines. This procedure fortified the roots against the phylloxera while also preserving the prized, distinctive, subtle tastes of the French grapes.

It took about that much time for scientists to confirm that American vines had been the cause of the phylloxera crisis in the first place. Earlier in the century, when well-meaning and enthusiastic scientists had brought clippings of American vines back to Europe to study, they had not noticed the tiny stowaways on the roots. The pests soon escaped into other rootstocks in France and England that had not yet developed a resistance. Only vines grown in American soil could defeat the tiny aphids that had nearly brought the great French wine industry to its knees. ♥



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