

# Dutch Burghers and Their Wine: Nary a Sour Grape

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Historically, beer was a dietary staple throughout northern Europe, as the brewed liquid was far safer to drink than plain water [fig. 1]. In the early decades of the 17th century, per capita consumption of beer in the Dutch Republic has been estimated at 250 to 300 liters (or 66 to 79 gallons) per year, and small beer, which had very low alcohol content, was considered suitable for children. [1] Municipal revenues from excise taxes on all types of alcohol confirm beer's dominance. For example, in fiscal year 1644–1645, Rotterdam's consumption tax on beer furnished a whopping 91.5 percent of the city's alcohol impost receipts, whereas wines provided just 7 percent, and brandy's share amounted to a mere 1.5 percent. [2]



Fig. 4 - Jacob van Walscapelle, *Still Life with Fruit* (detail), 1675, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Juliet and Lee Folger/The Folger Fund

Over the course of the 17th century, the Dutch Republic's booming economy ensured that wines imported from France, the Iberian Peninsula, the Mediterranean, and the southern Rhine valley came within the financial reach of an increasingly large segment of the population [fig. 2]. [3] People tended to drink "new" wine, as wines did not keep well and even higher-quality ones turned bad after about a year. Stronger and longer-lasting wines would have been reserved for truly special celebrations. The case of a June bride hints at the occasions when Dutch burghers splurged. Afraid to serve her wedding guests inferior wine (often referred to as *slootwater*, or "ditchwater"), a bride-to-be and her brother visited the cellars of a wine buyer to taste the contents of a barrel of upscale French wine. Their subsequent order for one oxhead of the wine reveals that it must have been a grand party to warrant the purchase of 228 liters (60 gallons) of wine [fig. 3]. Wine's status as a luxury product does explain its presence in many of the still-life and genre paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, but artists undoubtedly also included the translucent liquid in elegant glasses to show off their virtuoso handling of pigments and brushes [fig. 4].

All alcohol was subject to consumption tax, and municipalities employed *wijn roeiers* (sworn wine gaugers) for proper assessments. Applying sophisticated mathematical skills, these specialists could calculate a barrel's exact content after measuring the liquid's level with a marked rod stuck through the bunghole. Tax was paid on quantity and quality, and the resulting impost voucher became akin to a barrel's passport, by which it could be cellared, sold, and transported. Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek, the celebrated scientist who was likely immortalized by Johannes Vermeer in both *The Astronomer* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) and *The Geographer* [fig. 5], was appointed one of Delft's official wine gaugers in 1679. [4]

The various taxes placed on alcohol made smuggling an attractive option. Tax evasion, however, also created unfair competition by allowing a tavern keeper or wine merchant to sell his stock at below-market prices. One account mentions two wine buyers going undercover to assess the black market. In an unlicensed house "filled with so many people that it was difficult to find a place to sit," they drank new wine at the bargain price of 25 cents per pitcher. In another tavern, the

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publican admitted that he “sold much more smuggled wines than before,” but that he was loath to have too many people flock to his establishment because it might draw the attention of the law.

Only failed attempts to avoid the hated excise tax on alcohol turn up in public records. For example, in 1628 municipal impost officials arrested a woman leaving a wine buyer’s house with a pitcher of wine for which she had not paid tax, despite a boisterous crowd coming to her aid. In a second case, a revenuer stopped a woman carrying a bottle of wine that did not have its impost voucher [fig. 6]. The story, dating from 1627, is remarkable because the use of bottles remained a rarity for much of the first five decades of the century, as almost all wines were kept in barrels until bought by the consumer. Another report describes men drinking wine straight “from the big barrel.” After getting a hold of “an eighth” (of a bushel?) of oysters, a wine buyer and three friends decided to wash the shellfish down with “house” wine. They were sitting on small barrels around the large barrel in the wine buyer’s warehouse when impost officials caught them red handed [fig. 7].

A moralistic publication of 1641 warns Dutch youths against debauchery in taverns. Upper-class students, enrolled in Rotterdam’s Latin school, spent much of their time drinking and playing cards in taverns. A group of four revelers ran up a huge tab of 24 guilders in the tavern The Prince’s Ship, and after gambling away all their money, they first pawned their clothes but later resorted to theft to pay for their wild ways. They were expelled from school.

Under normal circumstances, enjoying a glass of wine did not create a situation that led to a police report, so most evidence we have of alcohol consumption comes from import and taxation statistics, plays, and genre paintings and “merry company” scenes. So how much wine did the Dutch actually consume? If we believe Sir William Temple, England’s ambassador, the Dutch population was wretchedly frugal, except in one thing: “Their great Forreign Consumption, is French-Wine and Brandy; But that may be allow’d them, as the only Reward they enjoy of all their pains, and as that alone which makes them rich and happy in their voluntary Poverty, who would otherwise seem poor and wretched in their real Wealth.” [5] Voluntary poverty notwithstanding, the port records for Amsterdam seem to suggest that in fiscal year 1667–1668 the good people of Amsterdam consumed 20,622.5 tons of imported French wines. Applying the population estimate of 220,000 residents in the 1680s, per capita consumption of French wines alone would have been 85.6 liters (22.6 gallons) per year, or almost 0.25 liter (one cup) per day, for every man, woman, and child. But these numbers do not

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include smuggled quantities or wines from any other supply zones, nor could all families afford to drink wine. Those who did spend money on wine clearly drank far more than the above-mentioned average.

A poem of 1623 emphasized that “wine chases away sadness,” but this mood enhancer only applied to the happy few who drank wine on a regular basis. And it was this happy echelon of Dutch society, with a glass of wine at hand, that the masters of genre painting depicted so expressively [fig. 8].

## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** David Teniers the Younger, *Tavern Scene*, 1658, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith, 1975.77.1



**fig. 2** Jan Steen, *The Marriage Feast at Cana*, 1665–1670, oil on panel, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), NGI.4534. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland



**fig. 3** Jacob Duck, *The Wine Connoisseurs*, c. 1640–1642, oil on panel, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, SK-A-1940



**fig. 4** Jacob van Walscapelle, *Still Life with Fruit*, 1675, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Juliet and Lee Folger/The Folger Fund, 2001.71.1



**fig. 5** Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer*, 1669, oil on canvas, Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main. © Städel Museum - ARTOTHEK



**fig. 6** *Bottle with Glass Seal*, c. 1660–1670, clear, dark green glass, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, On loan from the Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap



**fig. 7** Cornelis Dusart, *October*, 1679–1704, engraved print, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
**NOTES**

- [1] Richard W. Unger, *A History of Brewing in Holland 900–1900: Economy, Technology and the State* (Leiden, 2001), 91–98.
- [2] J. H. W. Unger and W. Bezemer, eds. *De oudste stadsrekeningen van Rotterdam* (Rotterdam, 1899).
- [3] Except where noted, the following information is derived from my book: Henriette de Bruyn Kops, *A Spirited Exchange: The Wine and Brandy Trade between France and the Dutch Republic in Its Atlantic Framework, 1600–1650*, *The Northern World* 32 (Leiden, 2007).
- [4] A. Schierbeek, “Landmeten en wijnroeien in Leeuwenhoek’s tijd,” *De Natuur* 60, no. 7 (1940): 117–119, 145–148, 178–180.
- [5] Sir William Temple, *Observations upon the United Provinces of The Netherlands* (1672; repr. Oxford, 1972), 120.



**fig. 8** Esaias van de Velde I, *An Elegant Company in a Garden*, 1614, oil on canvas, Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection