

BY DECREE: THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY'S 14TH-CENTURY AOC

by Rod Phillips



Most all serious winelovers will have heard of the 1395 ordinance of Philip the Bold (Philippe le Hardi), Duke of Burgundy—the ordinance that decreed the destruction of all Gamay vines planted in Burgundy. Philip famously called Gamay a “very bad and very disloyal” grape whose bitter wine made people ill and had ruined Burgundy’s reputation for fine wine. He ordered that all Gamay vines in the duchy should be cut down within a month.’

Capture rectangulaire





This ordinance has been understood in many ways. Some have seen it simply as a forthright statement that Gamay made poor wines and that Burgundy's reputation as a producer of fine Pinot Noir wines had to be protected from it.² Others have regarded it as a measure designed to protect owners of Pinot Noir vineyards from competition from the higher-yielding Gamay vines.³ (Philip's ordinance might well have been self-serving in this respect, since he owned nearly 200ha [500 acres] of vines.⁴) The ordinance has even been portrayed as an ill-tempered, emotional reaction to Gamay wines; the duke "disliked it [Gamay] so much he tried to ban it entirely [...]. One [...] imagines the duke glowering at his writing desk, vassal to a king-size hangover."⁵

More recently, historians have understood the ordinance in its political and economic contexts. Rudi Beaulant has emphasized its broader intent rather than its specific content, arguing that concern about the spread of Gamay was exploited by the duke as part of a more general attempt to increase his authority at the expense of municipal governments such as Dijon's and Beaune's. From this perspective, his attack on Gamay was a means to a political end rather than the sole end in itself.⁶ Meanwhile, Thomas Labbé, focusing on the economic crisis of the late 1300s and early 1400s, has argued that the ordinance was an attempt to shore up the wine sector, an important source of commercial and fiscal revenue in Burgundy, where it was the most important commodity subjected to taxes.⁷

A careful reading of the ordinance suggests that a number of motivations was in play but that it was far from simply the act of an erratic, despotic ruler who disliked wines made from Gamay. Although there was some apparently intemperate language in the ordinance, it becomes decidedly less so when read in context. Nor was the ordinance necessarily designed to establish a monopoly for Pinot Noir as Burgundy's red grape variety. But whether Duke Philip was primarily motivated to give Pinot Noir privileged status, to extend his authority, to protect his financial and fiscal interests, or to stabilize Burgundy's economy—and these are not mutually exclusive aims—the ordinance also made a case for what was arguably France's first wine appellation: Vin de Bourgogne.

Of course, it is anachronistic to think of Philip trying to establish a wine appellation in the modern sense in the late 14th century. What is argued here is that he sketched out rules that prefigured those of modern appellation regulations and that were tantamount to a simple de facto appellation. But already at this time, appellations in the broadest sense were implied in that wines (and other commodities) were generally known by their places of provenance, such as *vin de Beaune*, *vin de Dijon*, and *vin d'Aquitaine* rather than by, say, grape variety.

While there were no rules governing grape varieties or production metrics and methods in such wines identified by provenance,⁸ consumers expected wines from specific places to have certain characteristics and quality. The 1395 ordinance, as we shall see, refers to consumers and merchants feeling deceived when *vins de Bourgogne* did not meet the standard they expected and paid for—allegedly because they were blends that included some Gamay. The 1395 ordinance aimed to put this right.

The background to the 1395 ordinance

Until the 1300s, Burgundy lagged behind Bordeaux in winning recognition for its wines. Except for the region around Auxerre, Burgundy's main wine-producing zones were far from navigable rivers, and merchants were unable to ship wine predominantly by water, the least expensive and most rapid way of transporting it. Barrels of wine from Burgundy (mostly 408-liter *queues*)⁹ made the slow and expensive overland journey by ox-drawn carts to the rivers Yonne and Seine, which would take them to the all-important Paris market and to destinations beyond, both within France and in northern Europe. Other barrels were hauled to the River Loire, destined for customers downstream and in the Mediterranean region.

The additional shipping costs made Burgundy wines expensive at their destination markets, and during the 1300s their main consumers were popes, kings, and nobles, who began to seek them out for their cellars and for special occasions. They were served at royal coronations in Reims, proved popular at the papal court at Avignon, and were the choice of aristocrats and archbishops. By the 1330s, they were being taxed at a higher rate in Paris than wines from elsewhere, a measure of wine quality; wines from the area around Beaune (now the Côte de Beaune) paid a tax of 5 sous, compared to 4 sous for wines from Bordeaux and a little more than 1 sou for wines from the region around Paris.¹⁰

Throughout France at this time, most grape varieties were not clearly or consistently identified, and vineyards tended to be interplanted, so that wines were generally field blends. But in Burgundy there was more awareness of varieties, and although vineyards were often interplanted with several, vigneron tried to keep Pinot Noir separate when making wine. Evidence of this comes from an unusual source: a charge against a vineyard owner who struck and killed a young worker, Jehannin, during the 1394 harvest near Auxerre because he failed to separate Pinot Noir grapes from the other varieties. The owner appealed to King Charles VI for clemency, saying "he had told the harvesters to keep the Pinot [*Pinoz* in the original] apart, without putting the other grapes with them; but despite this, the said Jehannin put the Tressots [*Treceaux* in the original] and other grapes with the Pinots."¹¹ This suggests that grape varieties were interplanted, rather than separated in the vineyard, and that harvesters were responsible for putting the different varieties into separate baskets.

It was Pinot Noir that was used to make the wines—variously known as *vin de Bourgogne*, *vin de Beaune*, and *vin de Dijon*—that became so popular among the rich and powerful in the 1300s. They were prized not only for their quality but also because they were scarce: Pinot Noir yields at the time were far lower than the maximum yields permitted today, and in years of poor weather there might be no wine, or virtually none, at all.

As for Gamay, it was widely planted in the south of the Duchy of Burgundy, notably in the Mâconnais, as well as in nearby Beaujolais (which was not part of the duchy) and the area around Lyon. Gamay wines were quite well known in Beaune by the 1360s, and Gamay plantings seem to have moved north from that time, reaching the area around Dijon (Chenôve, Marsannay-la-Côte, and Couchey) in the early 1390s about the time of Philip's ordinance.¹²