

When and Where Was Wine First Made?

The wild Eurasian grapevine has a range that extends over 6000 kilometers from east to west, from Central Asia to Spain, and some 1300 kilometers from north to south, from the Crimea to Northwest Africa. Somewhere in this vast region, the wild Eurasian grapevine was taken into cultivation and eventually domesticated, perhaps more than once and in more than one place. The plasticity of the plant and the inventiveness of humans might appear to argue for multiple domestications. But, if there was more than one domestication event, how does one account for the archaeological and historical evidence that the earliest wine was made in the upland, northern parts of the Near East? From there, according to the best substantiated scenario, it gradually spread to adjacent regions such as Egypt and Lower Mesopotamia (ca. 3500–3000 B.C.). Somewhat later (by 2200 B.C.), it was being enjoyed on Crete. Inexorably, the elixir of the ancient world made its way in temporal succession westward to Rome and its colonies and up the major rivers into Europe. From there, the prolific Eurasian grapevine spread to the New World, where it continues to intertwine itself with emerging economies.

Winemaking implies a whole constellation of the techniques beyond taking the wild grapevine into cultivation. The plants must be tended year-round to ensure that they are adequately watered and protected from animals, which might trample them, graze on the vegetation, or eat the fruit. Pests, such as mites, louses, fungi, and bacteria that the vine is subject to, might have been invisible or just barely perceptible to Stone Age humans, but an early viticulturalist would have observed the tell-tale signs of disease and have tried to find a solution. Perhaps, suspect plants were rooted up, or the healthy plants moved and segregated elsewhere. With increasing knowledge of horticulture and natural contingencies, growers established new plants with the desired characteristics. The magnitude of this accomplishment is accentuated by the fact that it takes five or six years before a young vine produces fruit. Other prerequisites of the technology probably were developed in tandem with vineyard management. Airtight vessels were needed to control the fermentation and

to prevent the beverage from becoming vinegar or otherwise spoiling. Subsidiary equipment, including hoes and cutting implements, vats for stomping out or pressing the grapes and separating the pomace from the must, funnels and sieves, and stoppers, were also essential.

The tool kit of a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer was well enough stocked with blades and pounders to squash grapes at the right time of the year and make wine. Yet the essentials of deliberate wine production—horticultural technique, pottery, and food-processing techniques such as fermentation—lay in the future. The Neolithic period, from about 8500 to 4000 B.C., is the first time in human prehistory when the necessary preconditions came together for the momentous innovation of viticulture. Numerous year-round villages had been established by this time in the Near East, especially in upland regions bordering the Fertile Crescent—the foothills of the Zagros Mountains bordering the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers on the east, Transcaucasia to the north, and the upland plateaus descending from the Taurus Mountains in eastern Turkey.

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