

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

French Vintages on the Frontier

The Marquis's Wine Collection Is the Stuff of Legend

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Visitors to the Chateau de Morès State Historic Site in Medora have long been intrigued by a cache of wine bottles discovered in its cellar by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). How much did the young CCC workers drink? Is there any wine left? Why was there still wine in the cellar after so many years? These are the most popular questions we encounter.

Though the Chateau's owner, the Marquis De Morès, departed with his family in 1886, research suggests the family expected to return to their sprawling Western residence. This would explain why there was still wine on the premises. That said, wine was uncommon on the frontier, and the Marquis's fine vintages even rarer.

Unfortunately, the Marquis would only return on two brief visits, with the Chateau mostly left in the hands of caretakers. After leaving North Dakota, the Marquis went in search of other adventures, perishing in the Sahara Desert at the hands of Tuareg tribesmen a decade later. Eventually Duke Louis de Vallombrosa, the Marquis's son, permitted the caretakers to operate the Chateau as a boarding house from the 1920s to the mid-1930s. Those boarding house years were not good—the caretakers accidentally started a chimney fire and significantly abandoned the Chateau's upkeep—and much

This Barton & Guestier Médoc, on view at the Chateau, was a favorite wine of the Marquis.
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Civilian Conservation Corps workers with crates of wine discovered in the Chateau cellar, circa 1939–1941. *SHSND SA 00042-00174*

of the restoration subsequently undertaken from 1939 to 1941 by the CCC and Works Progress Administration (WPA) was to correct mistakes made during that time. In 1936, ownership of the Chateau was transferred to the State Historical Society of North Dakota, which along with the Marquis's son Louis initiated the restoration.

It was also during the government's restoration of the Chateau that the Marquis's wine collection re-enters the story. According to one legend, a small group of CCC workers found three hundred bottles of wine in the cellar, and proceeded to down quite a bit. While there is some truth to that, it was hardly the rowdy event of legend. Most of the wine was unfit for consumption, and the CCC foreman was quick to restore order.

All these years later, it is still not entirely clear who drank the wine, or why it was left to spoil in the first place. There are no records to answer that. Luckily, thanks to the diligence of the CCC workers and the State Historical Society, some of the wine and bottles were saved, and today what is left can be viewed on-site at the Chateau. Readers looking to sample the Marquis's vintages will be pleased to know that one of his favorite labels, Barton & Guestier, is still in production today. In fact, Barton & Guestier vintages can be purchased right here in North Dakota. Cheers to that!