RURAL TAVERNS AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE IN EARLY MODERN CHAMPAGNE

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Despite a growing amount of research on urban taverns in the past two decades, there has been considerably less work done on their rural counterparts. Even the notable exceptions, such as Peter Clark’s pioneering study of alehouses in England or David Conroy on colonial America, tend to treat urban and rural taverns indiscriminately.¹ Perhaps there was no meaningful difference between public drinking in the city and the countryside, but as a French historian I am driven to ask the question. Much of the traditional history of alcohol in France assumes that peasants drank nothing other than water until the nineteenth century and leads us to wonder whether peasants knew what a tavern was.² But a little investigation in rural archives finds their existence, even if we currently lack the monographs that have explained their role in urban society. In this paper I would like to discuss some of the models we might use to understand the role of the rural tavern in France.

Of course, one frequently cited model of rural taverns largely ignores the question of peasants drinking. Rather, it points to the needs of outsiders traveling for business, pleasure, or even warfare and seeking hospitality.³ This model of the rural tavern, as the traveler’s haven, emphasizes its connections to the outside world and the development of transportation routes. “The proliferation of cabarets spontaneously accompanied the progress of economic exchange,” according to a study of rural Savoie. “The auberge profited from the movement of carriages and wagons, the cabaret from that of mule drivers and foot traffic [pietons].”⁴ Merchants also penetrated the local market from their headquarters at a tavern or met and exchanged with other merchants passing through. This model reminds us that the medieval origins of taverns in French cities were initially as a place for travelers. They offered board and often rooms to men
passing through on business. Until the rapid urbanization of the sixteenth century, the taverns in towns were legally restricted to serving such outsiders. By the seventeenth century, however, the legislation was clearly a dead letter, and town dwellers had conquered taverns for their social needs. In contrast, the rural tavern continued to serve travelers through the eighteenth century, and its conquest by the rural community is either left vague or pushed off to the nineteenth century.

An alternative model, one that finds a place for peasants at the tavern's tables, is much more tentative. Historians have often assumed that the sale of drink in rural communities was largely informal and impermanent. Like the alewife, who sold intermittently and whose house became periodically public with a bush over the door, the rural tavern has often been associated with a quasi-domestic economy and the informal sale of a surplus of wine or beer. And in a viticultural region, where practically everyone had a store of wine from their own vineyards, these sorts of taverns must have been particularly ephemeral. This contrasts starkly with the rural taverns in nineteenth-century France, which were centers of village sociability, of political debate, the "parliaments of the people," as well as places commercial exchange. Here the inhabitants might also learn of the wider economic and political currents of the day from travelers. But this represents a stage in the commercialization of drink and of leisure that is often assumed to be fairly modern. Studies of drink shops usually point out that the numbers in the nineteenth century were a big increase from preceding centuries. Vauban's survey of France in the early eighteenth century offered an estimate of some 40,000 taverns for the country as a whole, which amounted to roughly one drink shop per parish or one for every 500 people. This meant there was nearly a five-fold increase in the number of drinking establishments by the mid nineteenth century, a dramatic change if it is accurate. Yet Vauban was already accusing the peasantry of filling taverns on Sundays and holidays and hoping that an increased tax on wine sold in taverns would "oblige the sensible ones to stay home." The model of tavern as village gathering spot might perhaps already be found in the old regime.

Although these models are obviously not mutually exclusive, they are sufficiently
distinct that it should be possible to test for their relevance to the actual countryside. The wealth of judicial archives that has helped to define the urban tavern through the testimony of its customers is lacking in the countryside, but we can at least identify the location of some rural taverns, which gives us an important clue as to their function. For the two models suggest two very different geographies. The tavern as drink shop or center of rural sociability supposes that most communities enjoyed at least one such tavern and probably more in larger villages. Since they served this rural population, the number and density of taverns would be correlated to the rural population in this first model. The tavern for travelers, in contrast, would appear in fewer villages, depending on whether they were commercial or transportation centers. The number of taverns in this case would depend less on the rural population and more on the importance of the local market.

In this paper we will test these models by looking at the geography of public drinking in the countryside around the city of Reims in Champagne. An area covering several thousand square kilometers, it was particularly rich in both its viticultural and textile economy. It was also rich in leaving remarkably detailed fiscal records that allow us to locate taverns with some precision. The fiscal records of eighteenth-century Champagne suggest several geographies of rural taverns. The hearth tax of each village identified those who had earned money from the profession of keeping a tavern or auberge and gave a rough estimate of how much they earned. A sample of the tax records of 58 villages within forty km of Reims from around 1770 finds 95 of them, with an average of 1.6 taverns per village, or 240 inhabitants per tavern. This was roughly twice the density of taverns estimated by Vauban, but these taverns were very unevenly distributed. More than a third of these villages registered no tavern, and half of the taverns were found in just ten of the villages. Much of the difference had to do with the size of the village: those with taverns were twice as large, on average, as those without, and those with most tended to be even larger and have seasonal fairs.

There was also a geographical difference, with the villages west of Reims much less likely to have taverns than those east of the city. This geography was an
economic, as well as an ecological, one. The hilly terrain to the west and south of the city were chiefly viticultural villages, whereas the plain to the north and east were largely textile villages. In this sample, the viticultural villages had half as many taverns, on average, as villages that produced no wine. If this seems counterintuitive, contemporaries found it quite reasonable. A tax official explained that one of these small viticultural villages had no taverns because it was not a “transit spot [lieu de passage] and because all the inhabitants provision themselves with wine.”

This view argued that households producing wine would have no need to buy any and, hence, no need for taverns since they assumed that taverns served wine chiefly for consumption, rather than sociability. But this logic was not entirely supported by the geography, for the villages that produced a marginal amount of wine, particularly the small ones more remotely buried in the wooded hills, were less likely to have taverns than those villages closer to Reims that produced an abundance. In fact, the taverns in the most important viticultural villages tended to do slightly more business than the taverns in textile villages, though few of these tavern keepers appear to have earned much from their trade.

The hearth tax’s estimate for what drink sellers earned annually varied enormously, from twice what a day laborer was estimated to earn (probably some 600 livres) to only a twelfth that amount. This may sound like a modest income yet, in general, these were among the better-off members of rural society. They owned enough land, on average, to feed and employ themselves; thus they were not usually among the wealthiest but well above the large majority who had too little land to make a living. Their houses were bigger, on average, than those of their neighbors, so their “tavern” was probably a substantial room in a substantial house.

Most of them were clearly engaged as agriculturalists, and nearly two-thirds of them were identified by the hearth tax as simultaneously pursuing other professions, like baking, weaving, barrel-making, or farming, that produced more income than their taverns. The majority of the rural taverns in this sample appear to have been the part-time occupation of farmers or rural artisans. Few were engaged in elaborate commerce, since many lived among
vines and sold the wine of their neighbors, and the rest lived in a region with a busy wine trade, so it could not have been hard to supply themselves.

The records of petty debt, collected in the registers of notarial acts and private contracts in the region, also suggest a low level of commercial activity, with little more than one percent of some 4,000 contracts involving a rural drink shop owner lending money or selling on credit. Owners were twice as likely to be recorded as the borrowers. These kinds of small debts were probably a proxy for much of the exchange of goods, services and land that took place in the rural community. At one or even two percent of these contracts, owners appeared with little more frequency than their percentage of the population would merit, but in fact the kinds of petty trading that much of these loans represented were typical of a better off segment of the rural population. In other words, drink shop owners appeared less frequently in the records of exchange than their place in society would lead us to expect. Perhaps this is not surprising if we remember that urban taverns often relied on book debt and often faced legal problems in getting their debts recognized at all. But the record of petty debt does suggest that drink shop owners were not large-scale participants in the emerging exchange economy.

Other fiscal records paint a rather different picture. The wine trade generated substantial revenues and occupied the attentions of a whole quasi-public tax farm whose records only survive, unfortunately, from the last decades of the old regime. One of its largest sources of revenue derived from the wine trade, both the long-distance, wholesale commerce of wine and its local retail. So the tax farm paid close attention to identifying the retailers in each village and noted the circumstances that encouraged their business and whether they were trustworthy in their tax payments. When the tax farm considered the 58 villages mentioned before, they discovered twice as many drink sellers. Nearly every village had taverns. The small villages that had identified no sellers in the hearth tax now had an average of two each, and the larger ones had more than four. The geography had also changed subtly; the density of taverns was now somewhat more uniform across the region. Viticultural villages still had fewer taverns,
on average, but the disparity was narrowing. The villages in the wooded hills to the west of Reims, in particular, now had a larger percentage of the sample’s taverns. Drink selling of some kind seems to have been a feature of every village’s life.

The difference between the two fiscal records obviously raises questions about their reliability. The tax farmers found more taverns because they were carefully looking for them and probably included more marginal sellers. Some of it may have been wishful thinking, in fact. Yet the reports of the farmers repeatedly refer to a penumbra of part-time drink sellers who fraudulently hid their traffic and could not be included in the count. They complained bitterly about the growers with extra wine who tried to sell it unofficially, without admitting to the sale and so avoid paying the extra tax on retailed wine. These clandestine taverns (faux bouchons) appeared in all the viticultural villages in winter but were hard to prosecute since, according to the reports, the “master of the house knows that he can commit this fraud and get away with it [impunement] if he keeps company with his drinkers.” These faux bouchons were clearly not merely places to buy wine to take out. Thus a maximum list of drink shops would have been even larger.

The tax farm nevertheless confidently identified the taverns, sometimes by name, in more than 250 communities around Reims. Their survey discovered roughly twice the density of taverns as that suggested by the hearth tax, with an average of 4 taverns per community. Some of this density was due to several small towns in the region, which averaged 31 taverns apiece. Yet, without them, the rural average was still three taverns per village. Only 7 percent of these villages were without any tavern and only 16 percent had a single one. Far more common were the villages with two or three taverns (45 percent), and another 25 percent had between four and twelve taverns. This looks more like the model of the tavern as village center.

Indeed, the tax farm portrayed a rural world that already looked something like modern France. With an average of one tavern for every 101 people, the per capita density of taverns was five times greater than Vauban’s estimate at the beginning of the century. Even if we exclude the few towns above 1,000 inhabitants, the average was
still 114 people per tavern. The inhabitants in these villages were as well served as provincial England in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{15}

The geography of per capita density suggests how uniformly taverns blanketed the countryside.[Map 3] A large majority of villages had between 2 and 6 taverns per hundred households, with an average of 4.5. The density of taverns was independent of the size of the community and of the production of wine; it was only slightly above average in communities with fairs and markets. At the same time the map suggests other, overlying patterns. Taverns clustered along the rivers cutting through the region, the Vesle, and the Marne, particularly to the southeast of Reims. Both of these rivers served to transport goods and connect communities through the region, and the route between Reims and Chalons was heavily traveled. There was still evidence, then, of the tavern’s service to travelers and outsiders.

The density of taverns around Reims, however, was caused by the city more than by the river running through it. The average number of taverns per village was slightly higher (3.4) in the city’s immediate vicinity and the population density of taverns in these little suburban villages was strikingly higher (56 inhabitants per tavern) than in villages farther away. The city of Reims seems to have spawned more taverns in its immediate vicinity, in much the same way that rural taverns (guinguettes) sprang up around Paris, as an outing for city people. Thus the tax farmers commented on the very different, urban drinking patterns that had spilled out of Reims to the surrounding villages. They described a village in the neighborhood that “serves as a guinguette to the people of this town [and] provides a rapid and considerable consumption during the summer.”\textsuperscript{16} It attracted “a large concourse of workers and artisans who consume a prodigious amount.”\textsuperscript{17} Dozens of taverns there were “frequented by the workers of Reims on holidays and sundays, and many bourgeois of this city make a party there even on work days.”\textsuperscript{18} The small villages in the shadow of the metropolis had long since been colonized by urban elites buying up land, yet the taverns here show the arrival of a broader cross-section of the city seeking a drink at a rustic retreat. Other cities in the province, like Rethel, were also surrounded by guinguettes.\textsuperscript{19} This is a
familiar pattern of urban drinking, using taverns for leisure and sociability. The question remains: does the geography of taverns demonstrate that rural populations had adopted this urban pattern?

The reports of the tax farm also offer an interpretation of this geography and a tentative sociology of rural drinking. They provided a running commentary on the state of the drink trade, as agents warned the main office about which locales were expected to do well and whether they faced greater fraud than normal. As far as the agents of the general farm were concerned, the principal clientele for the taverns in Champagne derived from the region’s commercial traffic. Reports frequently noted that villages with large retail sales tended to be those with travelers (gens de passage), such as the one district “favored by the grand route from Reims to Chalons which crosses several of the parishes and by the quantity of wagoners who come to fill their wagons with wine.”

Only a short distance away, but “far from all passage” the village of Mailly sold little retail. Taverns served a whole world in motion: the shipment of wine meant a great number of carters going back and forth between the viticultural villages and Reims, of course, but in the forests to the south and west of the city there were also the shipments of wood and the movement of charcoal makers. Autumn, in particular, brought “weather favorable to logging [traité des bois],” and so saw a heavy demand by loggers. A constant commerce in “wood for the construction of barrels ... contributes not a little to making the consumption of the wine seller rapid.”

Taverns sold to travelers and they also sold to migrant laborers. The reports explained that one village was said to sell much in retail “since this countryside is heavily populated and houses many immigrant workers who are occupied either in logging or in working at a neighboring quarry.” Seasonal, migrant workers obviously turned to taverns because they did not produce their own wine. Reports like this revealed certain assumptions about the tavern’s provisioning role. A city dweller who wanted a drink had no choice but to seek a tavern, but wine growers made their own—why should they use taverns? As one report noted about the vineyards to the west of the city, “each inhabitant has wine in his possession and contents himself with it, which
leaves the taverns fairly deserted." And similarly of the vineyards to the south, "since there is neither traffic [passage] nor commerce in Vertus and the least of its inhabitants has his own wine it is easy to understand that the consumption which takes place in taverns is very modest [modique]." Yet a different response emerged in some places, like Cormicy where "many of the vine growers have sold most of their harvest and are obliged to have recourse to taverns for their consumption."  

Tax agents complicated their own model with the observation of a very different pattern emerging in certain areas. It appears that some villages south of Epernay were "composed of well-off farmers [laboureurs aizés] who often frequent taverns." And in a village west of Reims the "vignerons and laboureurs are well-off [aises] and drink a lot at taverns." And a textile village to the north was inhabited by "a great quantity of serge weavers, which leads to a lot of consumption at taverns when their commerce is doing well." Evidently a good income was bringing local peasants into taverns, though it was not just their income. The taverns in another part of the region did well because of the "inhabitants' wealth [aisance] and passion for wine." Elsewhere it was because of the "vine grower's taste for wine and the wealth [aisance] he enjoys when the work in the vines starts up." The tax agents seem to have been torn between their satisfaction with a flourishing retail trade and growing sense of disapproval at the drinking habits of the peasantry. In one village, which "produced more wine than the inhabitants can consume," the vine growers were said to be "given to debauchery and frequenting taverns." A different report claimed that the whole village had a "natural taste for wine and debauchery." The agents explained that retail sales in one village were good because "the numerous youth of Courmas give themselves willingly to debauchery," just as the youth of another was "debauched" and the taverns of a third sold much wine because "there are a lot of youth." Without similar reports from earlier in the century it is hard to know how new this pattern of peasant drinking was, but the tax farmers were clearly uncomfortable with it.

They were echoed in some of the cahiers de doléances produced by these same villages just before the Revolution. Although the number of villages that referred to
them was relatively rare, they identified their local taverns as a social problem in terms that were surprisingly similar to urban and even modern complaints. “Most of these houses are social plagues,” one cahier declared, “nearly all are the cause of disorder among the youth; one can generally say that they are the real source of quarrels, of swearing, of debauchery and drunkenness, and even the ruin of households.” Part of the moral panic focused on youth and on taverns “being the source of all sorts of libertinage to which youth are only too given in these unhappy times when disorder is carried to the highest degree.”

There is something odd to find, amidst the grievances against the vestiges of medieval feudalism or an illiberal monarchy, the hand wringing of urban moralists. We ask, said one cahier, “that his majesty forbid all inhabitants to drink in the taverns where they live, for experience proves too clearly that these taverns cause the ruin of families and the disruption of households and that, to pay for their bills, many heads of family turn over their grain and straw or, if they have none, turn to theft.” Another demanded an injunction against “playing cards or other games or concluding any business [marchés]” in taverns. Others simply objected to taverns allowing inhabitants to drink on their premises. It was fine to let inhabitants buy wine to take home with them, they said, but the practice of frequenting taverns, “l’habitude du cabaret” was an “abuse and disorder.” Evidently youth, income, and a habit of public drinking were turning taverns into centers of peasant sociability.

The numbers and geography suggest that a new model of taverns was emerging in the eighteenth century in Champagne, as do some of the last documents produced by the old regime. Unfortunately, the tax reports for other parts of France lack the precision of those from Champagne, and they offer only an impression of drink shops throughout the countryside. Thus we need to ask how representative this sample was, and the nature of the region raises doubts. Champagne was a famous vinegrowing province, after all, and produced more wine than most other regions. Yet the tax farmers clearly presumed that abundant wine production was actually an impediment to the drink trade, since most households were able to supply their own wine. In fact,
much of the province did not produce wine, and the geography of taverns in this sample shows no correlation with wine production. A third of the villages in the region actually produced no wine at all and supported more than a third of the taverns. Evidently the drink trade required access to wine or other alcohol, but that was not uncommon in France. The limiting factor was, rather, a “taste” for wine and taverns among the peasantry, and we still know far too little about peasant culture to determine their tastes. There is still much to be learned.

2. Thomas Brennan, “Towards the Cultural History of Alcohol in France” Journal of Social History, 23 (1989), pp. 76-77, surveys the literature, but see the portrayal of rural culture in Jean-Pierre Gutton, La sociabilité villageoise dans la France d’ancien régime (Paris, 1979), for example, which says virtually nothing about rural taverns.


8. Sebastien Vauban, Projet d’une dime royale (Brussels, 1708), pp. 114-15. This works out to a density of roughly one tavern per 500 inhabitants, which would increase by 1830 to four or five per 500 inhabitants and to six per 500 inhabitants by the end of the nineteenth century according to the Annuaire statistique de la France.

9. These villages are discussed at greater length in my “Peasants and Debt in Eighteenth-Century Champagne” Journal of Interdisciplinary History (forthcoming).

10. AN G² 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 9.

11. Since each household was assessed for the value of its housing, it is possible to say that the average house of these tavern keepers was worth 2.5 times the overall average of housing and 1.7 more than the average housing of those who owned their homes.
12. See the contrôle des actes in AD Marne.

13. Medieval injunctions against tavern owners in Paris having the right to prosecute for debt were still being invoked in the eighteenth century, Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police*, 3: 719.

14. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 1v.


16. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 1.

17. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité de la direction de Reims concernant la regie générale des aydes (undated but 1781 from internal evidence), fol. 4.

18. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 2v.

19. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire sur la localité des directions de Rethel et Mezieres (undated), fol. 1.

20. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 1.

21. Ibid., fol. 2 v.

22. Ibid., fol 4.

23. Ibid., fol 6.

24. Ibid., fol 9.

25. Ibid., fol. 5.

26. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité de la direction de Reims concernant la regie générale des aydes (undated but 1781 from internal evidence), fol. 9v.

27. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire instructif du local des directions de Chaalons et Ste Menehould avec des observations sur les differens abus qui s’y commettent, 1782-1783, fol. 2v.

28. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 6 v.

29. AN G^2^ 26, Memoire concernant les conoissances localles necessaires au controleur ambulant des aydes pour l’élection d’Epernay (1771), fol. 1v.
30. AN G² 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 9.

31. AN G² 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 14.

32. AN G² 26, Generalite de Chalons, direction d’Epernay. Memoire sur la localité de cette regie (undated), fol. 11.

33. Ibid., fol. 5.

34. AN G² 26, Memoire sur la localité de la direction d’Epernay dressé par le controleur ambulant soussigné pour servir a son successeur (1773), fol. 4.

35. AN G² 26, Generalite de Chalons, direction d’Epernay. Memoire sur la localité de cette regie (undated), fol. 7.

36. AN G² 26, Memoire de localité des departemens de Champagne de la direction de Reims (undated), fol. 5v, 7.


38. Ibid., pp. 956-57, cahiers of Sermiers.

39. Ibid., pp. 796-97, cahiers of Ormes.

40. Ibid., pp. 915 -16, cahiers of St-Masmes.

41. Ibid., p. 396, cahiers Chamery

42. Figures for wine production in the 1780s by department, in Marcel Lachiver, Vins, vignes et vignerons: histoire du vignoble français (Paris, 1988), pp. 604-05, show the Marne to have been the eighth most productive department out of 74. Thirty-three departments were at least half as productive as the Marne.

43. If we ignore the bourgs and towns, there was virtually no correlation between taverns and wine production (R=0.1760).