

Early French Migration to South Australia: Preliminary Findings on French Vignerons

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The French in Australia form a small group of immigrants in terms of overall migration figures: the 1996 census records 16 000 French-born, while there were 240 000 Italian-born, 126 000 Greek-born and 120 000 German-born respectively, giving an idea of the relative size of the current French-born Australian population.¹

The French community is undoubtedly a small one; however, as Annie Stuer affirms, '[the French] have contributed more to the history and the development of Australia than is popularly known'.² Indeed, it appears that the French are renowned for running restaurants, trendy cafés and patisseries than for their involvement in the settlement of Australia, in the wool trade, in the winegrowing industry, or for their current interest in Australian natural resources. Although the French impact on Australia is far from insignificant, little has been written from an academic perspective about the French cultural and economic contribution to Australia.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to broadening the body of research on the French presence in Australia, presenting the initial findings of an investigation in progress of early French vignerons in South Australia, and focusing on two influential figures in the state's winegrowing industry; Joseph Gelly and Edmond Mazure.

First, an overview of nineteenth-century French migration to Australia, with particular reference to winegrowers.

In the late eighteenth century, the rivalry between England and France, the two super-powers of the time, led to active exploration of the southern seas. Although famous French seafarers such as Bougainville, La Pérouse, D'Entrecasteaux and Baudin were instrumental in exploring and charting the Australian coastline, the French missed opportunities to establish settlements before the British. Lack of luck or lack of support from French rulers too busy to deal with domestic unrest or wars in Europe? The fact is that the French aspirations to colonise Australia never eventuated.

Although Australia was never a part of the French colonial empire, right from the deportation days the French were among the first to arrive in the young colony. A Frenchman, Peter Paris, convicted in England, was part of the First Fleet, while other French convicts were transported over the following years.³ After the end of transportation, modest contingents of French migrants reached Australian shores.⁴

Among the first were refugees from the French Revolution who were granted farming land, along with business people who invested in real estate, as well as consular personnel, whalers and, of interest to us, after the 1850s, winegrowers.

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86 'The Regenerative Spirit: (Un)settling, (Dis)location, (Post-)colonial, (Re)presentations-Australia Post Colonial Reflections', Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 86-92.

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The discovery of large quantities of gold in Australia in the early 1850s was widely publicised in France.⁵ Young farmers, labourers and artisans hit hard by poor crops and economic depression in France were attracted to the Victorian goldfields for the prospect of a better life-style in the southern hemisphere. As most French diggers were unsuccessful, many turned back to their trades or to farming.⁶

In the second half of the nineteenth century, many French migrants were engaged in agriculture. A minority of French farmers were involved in winegrowing. In 1802, François Péron, Baudin's scientist, had already noticed Australia's potential for winegrowing. In the early days of the colony, expertise in this field was scarce. Two ex-convicts claiming to be expert vigneron were hired under instructions from Governor Phillip to plant 12 000 vines at Parramatta. Unfortunately, their lack of knowledge and skills forced them to abandon their winegrowing venture.

Lack of specialist knowledge led some of the early landowners like John Macarthur, James Busby and Samuel Davenport travelling to France to meet vigneron, to study winegrowing techniques and to obtain cuttings to develop an Australian vine stock.⁷

In the 1830s and 1840s, as new settlements spread westwards, vineyards appeared in the newly settled parts of Australia. Under the impetus of larger numbers of immigrants settling in Australia, the wine industry expended rapidly. In South Australia, for example, John Reynell planted vines south of Adelaide, while Christopher Penfold started his vineyard at Magill, west of Adelaide.⁸ A few years later, Johann Gramp and Samuel Hoffman settled in the Barossa.⁹ By 1851, Thelisma Aubert, besides cultivating oranges, had established a hobby vineyard at his home called *Sans Souci* in the Salisbury area north of Adelaide, possibly becoming the first Frenchman to grow vines in South Australia.¹⁰

Although French immigrants such as Joubert and Berthau in New South Wales, Brequier in Victoria and Aubert in South Australia had been among the first to plant vines, it is only from the 1850s that the French, many of them disillusioned diggers, became seriously involved in winegrowing. Such individual (including Gramp) initiated winegrowing in the Bendigo area. Camille Réau was among the first to plant vines in the Rutherglen district. Ludovic Marie and later de Coueslant settled in the Goulburn area to help establish Chateau Tahbilk.¹¹ Jean-Pierre Trouette and Emile Blampied introduced vines in the Great Western district.¹² Hubert de Castella, a French-naturalised Swiss, established vineyards in the Yarra Valley, while Léon Frère worked in Albury.¹³

Towards the latter end of the nineteenth century, the expansion of the wine industry in Australia was hindered by the absence of a domestic market—Australians were not wine drinkers—and by the difficulties Australian winegrowers had in publicising, marketing and selling their 'colonial' wines overseas, and in particular in Britain. These difficulties were partly addressed by setting up local wine shows and by participating in prestigious international exhibitions.¹⁴ As Australian wines won acclaim on the national and international scene, the domestic market slowly opened up. More than ever, the young Australian wine industry needed winegrowing and winemaking experts.

Two of those experts were French-born vigneron, Charles Gelly and Edmond Mazure, who migrated to South Australia in the early 1880s. The link between these two men was Sir Samuel Davenport, proprietor of *Beaumont*, east of Adelaide. Davenport worked in Europe in this period;¹⁵ however, it is not known if he procured their services while overseas or when they arrived in Australia. Whatever the means of their engagement, their influence was tangible and is still visible in the South Australian wine industry today.

Joseph Charles Gelly was another who brought much-needed expertise to Australia. Born in Hérault in France's South West in 1855, he was a graduate of the well-known Agricultural College of Montpellier. He migrated to Australia in 1882, spending two years in Victoria with Hubert de Castella. De Castella's vineyard, St Hubert's, was one of the first in the colonies to realise the possibilities for local wineries to profit from the phylloxera outbreak in Europe, particularly in the production of sparkling wine.¹⁶ Gelly relocated his family to South Australia in 1884 to manage the Beaumont winery. Interestingly, there is also documentation of another French vigneron, Pierre Mazonau, also from the Hérault district in France, who was also working at Beaumont during this period with his wife, Marie (née Gelly). It is not known if Gelly arrived at Beaumont on Mazonau's advice or if Mazonau came to work with his brother-in-law. Under Gelly's instruction, Beaumont was producing sparkling wine of some merit as early as 1887.

Gelly left Beaumont to become manager of Chateau Tanunda in 1892. His viticultural knowledge was well respected in the industry, he delivered speeches at wine industry functions on grape handling, differences in winemaking in France and South Australia and sugar and acid levels.¹⁷ His addresses and essays are still considered important to South Australian vignerons today.

In the following years, he synthesised his extensive wine-making knowledge and engineering know-how to register some interesting inventions. In 1894 he worked on a machine for filling bottles, preparing corks by compression and inserting them into the necks of the bottles. Complete specifications exist for this invention, although it is not known if the machine was ever built. Another Petition for Letters Patent was submitted by Gelly in 1898 for a hydraulic machine for automatically raising liquids and producing motive power. Records for this submission are signed by a proxy, as Gelly seemed to have been working as an engineer in Paris at the time.¹⁸ A naturalised Australian after 1884, there is no record of when Gelly returned to Australia. However, if he did return he is likely to have worked in Victoria as some of his descendants can be traced in the Mildura district.

More tangible historical traces were left by Mazure. It seems Leon Edmond Mazure was born in Villeneuve-sur-Coulommiers in Seine-et-Marne, France in 1864.¹⁹ Educated in Burgundy where his father and uncle were vignerons, he acquired some winemaking skills as an adolescent, and by the age of eighteen he was working at Clos Vougeot, the renowned French winery. He remained there for almost a year and then moved on to gain experience in the production of port and sherry in Spain, particularly in the Jéres and Catalonia regions. In Barcelona, he embarked on one of the

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Marquis de Ray's expeditions bound for New Ireland, but was disappointed with the prospects on arrival and anticipated returning to France. Whilst in Sydney in 1885 waiting for a passage to France, he accepted a position at Davenport's Beaumont winery in South Australia, where he gained experience in sparkling wines under Gelly's tuition.²⁰

By 1888 his viticultural expertise was renowned. At the Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition, he was in charge of the cellars and was responsible for classifying approximately 1,000 Australian and European wines. His skill caught the attention of the proprietor of Auldana Vineyard, Sir Josiah Simon, and he was immediately employed as manager, and later as partner at Auldana. In around 1895, Mazure pioneered large-scale production of sparkling wine according to the *Méthode Champenoise* in South Australia.²¹

Mazure's ingenuity and expertise were at their height during this period. To create ideal conditions for sparkling wine production, Mazure oversaw the construction of champagne vaults, tunnels cut from the rock under the hill at Auldana. He conceived a resourceful solution to the problem of birds in the harvest season by placing kerosene tins on windmills vanes filled with marbles. These devices made more than enough noise to keep hungry sparrows, starlings and wattlebirds at bay. He also submitted patent applications, including 'An improvement for corking machines' and 'an improved apparatus for cutting the ends of rolls of paper'.²² Again it is not known if any of these inventions came to production.

Under the guidance of Mazure, Auldana gained a reputation for fine wine. Mazure's sparkling wines were considered to be his strength, including a shiraz-based sparkling burgundy that is now recognised as the Australian style. He employed the services of French champagne experts like Bernier and Duray, who have been influential in changing the face of sparkling wine production in Australia. Mazure is also credited with creating St Henri claret and producing several lines of port, hocks, chablis, liqueurs, Italian-style vermouth and a wine cocktail. He introduced *levures*, a strain of bacteria that enabled him to make a sherry-style wine.²³

Mazure understood the importance of environmental factors in wine production. His quality fruit and superior wines were testament to his soil preparation and the advent of irrigation. Mazure realised that it would be almost impossible to cultivate vines over Auldana's clay subsoil, so he instructed his men to break up the 'hard pan' clay up to 45 cm deep. Mazure was a leader in encouraging local vigneron to make wine compatible with their land, and to try not to produce too many types of wine from the same vineyard.²⁴

Over a number of years, Mazure experimented with fertilizers, concluding that fertilizer delivered better results when placed deeper in the soil, encouraging deeper root growth and lessening the influence of heat and dry wind.²⁵ He was a pioneer in South Australia, investigating and disseminating the more scientific aspects of wine-making; a letter to an industry journal in 1905 offers an interesting perspective on the analysis of salt in wine, in which he highlights discrepancies of salt present in different soils and localities throughout Australia.²⁶

Although confident that his vines would flourish with only seasonal rain, Mazure installed a bore to assist in the irrigation of some of his vines. The difference made to the vines soon became apparent, as irrigated plants grew more vigorously. Mazure positioned the bore at the highest point of the vineyard and found that gravity assisted in irrigating all the vines and Auldana was soon able to shut off the public water supply and irrigate with bore water.²⁷

Mazure also had an influence on the standard of pruning in South Australia. He was an instructor and judge at annual pruning matches over thirty years and officiated regularly at South Australian and national wine shows. He also worked as a reserve instructor at Roseworthy Agricultural College. In 1909 he left Auldana to establish his own winery. He continued production of celebrated sparkling wine at La Pérouse and later Romalo vineyards.

Other significant French-born vigneronns include Joseph Hippolyte Foureur and Jean-Louis Edouard Bourbaud. Based in South Australia and working for a period with Mazure at Auldana, Foureur was one of the first producers of prize-worthy sparkling wine in the colonies, and even travelled to France to exhibit his sparkling wine through the 1880s. Bourbaud was another enterprising Frenchman, working as a winemaker and freelancing like so many of his contemporaries, as an inventor, submitting patent requests as varied as an appliance for cutting tobacco and an appliance for fastening boots and shoes.²⁸

France has been synonymous with Champagne and wine production for centuries, so it is fitting that the contribution of some French-born migrants in Australia in the late nineteenth century relates to this field. Although they rarely owned large vineyards, these Frenchmen, whether managers, cellar masters or technical advisors or wine merchants, were actively responsible for advancing the quality, the production and the distribution of Australian wines.

While the lives and achievements of some of the most prominent early French vigneronns working in other states have been documented, the same cannot be said for the French vigneronns who settled in South Australia. This investigation has identified several such individuals beside Mazure and Gelly, people involved in the wine industry at the end of the nineteenth century. Much work remains to be done in uncovering the impact of those early French migrants, the wines that are the result of their influence are today testament to these Frenchmen and their tenacity, ingenuity and perseverance.

90 Bouvet, Eric and Roberts, Chelsea 2004. Early French migration to South Australia: Preliminary Findings on French Vigneronns. In Sue Williams et al. (eds). 'The Regenerative Spirit: (Un)settling, (Dis)location, (Post-)colonial, (Re)presentations-Australia Post Colonial Reflections', Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 86-92.
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