

Ode to Catawba Wine

“Written In Praise of Nicholas Longworth's Catawba Wine Made on the Banks of the Ohio River” By
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, circa 1857

Nicholas Longworth was a self-made millionaire and attorney who had an avid interest in horticulture. Beginning as early as 1813, he started vineyards along the banks of the Ohio River, hiring German immigrants whose homeland work was similar. He first began with a grape called “Alexander”, but found that it was only palatable as a fortified wine. He also planted “Catawba” vines and made a table wine which met with some success with the German immigrants in the area. An accidental discovery in the 1840's led him to produce, with the later help of instruction from French winemakers on the “methode champenoise”, a sparkling Catawba wine - which met with great success both locally and on the East Coast. By the 1850's, Longworth was producing 100,000 bottles of sparkling Catawba a year and advertising nationally. In the mid-1850's he sent a case to poet, Henry Longfellow, then living in New York City, who wrote this ode. Remember, when Longfellow refers to the “Beautiful River”, he is referring to the Ohio River, which begins in Pittsburgh and passes through Cincinnati and Louisville, Kentucky on its way to Mississippi.

Note to Readers: This poem is a great way to learn about grapes, rivers, and wine-making regions. To whit: Muscadine and Scuppernong, a type of Muscadine grape, are native southern American grapes with very thick green or bronze skins and frequently used in the South to make jam. Mustang and Isabella are purple/black native American grapes and Muscadel, a white one, were popular in the United States in the late 1800's. Verzenay, and Sillery are two of the “grand cru” wine-making regions of France known for the production of fine French Champagne. And the rivers: The Danube and Rhine, in Germany, and Guadalquivir in Spain. By the way, “Queen of the West” refers to Cincinnati, a boom town in the first half of the 1800's.

This song of mine
Is a song of the Vine
To be sung by the glowing embers
Of wayside inns,
When the rain begins
To darken the drear Novembers.

It is not a song
Of the Scuppernong,
From warm Carolinian valleys,
Nor the Isabel
And the Muscadel
That bask in our garden alleys.

Nor the red Mustang,
Whose clusters hang

O'er the waves of the Colorado,
And the fiery flood
Of whose purple blood
Has a dash of Spanish bravado.

For the richest and best
Is the wine of the West,
That grows by the Beautiful River,
Whose sweet perfume
Fills all the room
With a benison on the giver.

And as hollow trees
Are the haunts of bees,
Forever going and coming;
So this crystal hive
Is all alive
With a swarming and buzzing
and humming.

Very good in its way
Is the Verzenay,
Or the Sillery soft and creamy;
But Catawba wine
has a taste more divine,
More dulcet, delicious and dreamy.

There grows no vine
By the haunted Rhine,
By Danube or Guadalquivir,
Nor on island or cape,
That bears such a grape
As grows by the Beautiful River.

Drugged is their juice
For foreign use,
When shipped o'er

the reeling Atlantic,
To rack our brains
With the fever pains,
That have driven the
Old World Frantic.

To the sewers and sinks
With all such drinks,
And after them tumble the mixer,
For a poison malign
Is such Borgia wine,
Or at best but a Devil's elixir.

While pure as a spring
Is the wine I sing,
And to praise it,
one needs but name it;
For Catawba wine
Has need of no sign,
No tavern-bush to proclaim it.

And this Song of the Vine,
This greeting of mine,
The winds and the birds shall deliver
To the Queen of the West,
In her garlands dressed,
On the banks of the Beautiful River.