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Former president Nixon still known as a French wine maven

It's too early to tell what influence President Bush will have on American drinking habits. His predecessor, President Reagan, was a domestic wine booster, who insisted that American wines be served at state functions and at our embassies abroad.

Of all the recent chief executives, Richard Nixon

Beer, Wine And Spirits

Mort Hochstein



was the president most interested in wine, and he is still recognized as a maven by Andre Soltner at Lutèce, which is one of the former president's favorite dining places. Like John Kennedy, however, Nixon was very much a Francophile.

"The president's wine," at Lutèce, anyway, is an Alsatian Tokay from Zind-Humbrecht. He tasted it for the first time many years ago when he asked Soltner to suggest a wine for a dinner party. Soltner recommended a Tokay.

The president said he didn't want a sweet wine. Soltner explained that this was not Hungarian Tokay but an altogether different dry wine from Alsace.

Nixon went along and evidently liked the wine. The next day an aide called to ask where Nixon might buy three cases of the Tokay. "I told the secretary that we had an exclusivity on the wine, and it was unavailable anywhere," Soltner recalled.

"She asked if I could sell him some, and I said that wouldn't be legal. In the end I said send the chauffeur around, and I will make him a gift of a case. Since that time, Mr. Nixon has become a fan of Tokay."

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frequently, usually Veuve Cliquot and on some occasions a Ca' del Bosco Spumante.

He was not so generous toward California wines as Reagan, however. Nixon, a native Californian, appeared to have little respect for wines from his home state during his years as president and would not serve them at White House dinners. That little bit of gossip is found in a book of hitherto-secret presidential memos: "From the President: Richard Nixon's Secret Files," published by Harper & Row.

The memos show that even while directing the ship of state, the president took the time to select wines for the White House and to direct aides what to serve. On one occasion when a California red was served at an official function in 1969, the president relayed his feelings via a memo from his chief of staff, Robert Haldeman.

"It is his standing instruction," went a thundering memo from Haldeman, "that California wine is never to be served at state dinners — especially those for Europeans — without his specific personal OK."

Paraphrasing, Soltner's new list at Lutèce, the first major change since he opened in 1962, carries only three California wines, and they are there, he said, "for my French visitors, who want to taste American wines." The American wines are Pine Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma-Cutrer Chardonnay, and St. Clement Sauvignon Blanc.

Nixon wanted to be sure the White House served fine wines. In a memo dated March 16, 1970, he asked Haldeman to research the better vintages of Bordeaux.

"I know," the president wrote, "the '59 is an excellent year, even with my unsophisticated taste; but my recollection is that '66 is one of the poor years. We seem to have a huge stock of '66 Bordeaux on hand, and I wondered why. It may be that the real experts consider '66 to be a good year, but have it checked out." He planned to order about 30 cases.

Haldeman's research apparently convinced Nixon of the virtues of 1966 Bordeaux, and he ordered

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his appointment secretary, and like many of us, he had trouble with the French spelling: "I would like to make another purchase of the 1966 French Bordeaux, Chateau Margot Lafite, and Hoitbrian [Haut Brion]."

Nixon, however, kept a tight cork on his favorite French wines, particularly that same '66 Chateau Margaux. In "The Final Days," Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein tell how the presidential yacht Sequoia was stocked with 1966 Margaux, which then sold for about \$30 a bottle. Nixon always asked for it when beef was served.

However, according to Woodward and Bernstein, the president had issued orders to the stewards about what to do when large groups of congressmen were aboard. "Guests were to be served a rather good six-dollar wine; his glass was to be filled from a bottle of Chateau Margaux wrapped in a towel."

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Clip this: And put it away for St. Patrick's Day, because if you're like the rest of us, it's hard to remember a good toast. This is the classic one for the big day in March:

*St. Patrick was a gentleman
who through strategy and stealth
drove all the snakes from Ireland.
Here's a toasting to his health —
but not too many toasts
lest you lose yourself and then
forget the good St. Patrick
and see all those snakes again.*

The toast comes from "Sláinte!," a small book from The Irish Distillers. I enjoy reading it even though I've never been able to remember more than Slainte!, which is Irish for "health." Here are a few brief toasts for the time you may need a good one:

- Here's health to your enemies' enemies.
- May we be alive at the same time next year.
- May you have the hindsight to know where you've been, the foresight to know where you're going now when you're going now