

Tales from the plague — more phylloxera anecdotes

Following the post “[Death to the hybrids](#)” on how technology saved the wine industry from an insect pest, here is some surprising phylloxera themed anecdotes that were brought to my attention by readers.

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Van Gogh's Red Vineyards at Arles

Phylloxera may have devastated vineyards, but it has also inspired artists. The mad genius Dutch artist [Vincent Van Gogh](#) was said to be “particularly enraptured with a local vineyard” near Arles in Southern France, whose colours had mesmerizing shades of reds and yellows. The result was this stunning painting, which, incidentally, is the only painting that Van Gogh sold during his lifetime. Apparently, you don't get these colors around harvest time unless the grapevines are sickened in some way. [Experts have concluded that the striking red and yellows hues at this particular stage of the grapevine development are indicative of phylloxera infestation.](#) I can't tell how solid this theory is, but I'll accept the romantic tale that *Daktulosphaira vitifoliae* helped inspire this fabulous painting.



Red Vineyards at Arles, 1888 by Vincent Van Gogh

Red Vineyard happens to be valued as the most expensive painting in the world. It is currently housed in Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, Russia, where it ended up after the Bolsheviks nationalized private art collections following the Russian Revolution—an act that resembles how the riches of Russian oligarchs are being seized these days. Anna Boch who bought the painting from Van Gogh for 400 Francs (about \$2,000 at today's value) later sold it for 25 times more to Galerie Bernheim Jeune, 25 Boulevard de la Madeleine in Paris. There are conflicting reports as to which of Russian businessmen Sergei Shchukin or Ivan Morozov purchased *Red Vineyard* from the Paris Art Gallery in 1909 to move it to their private collection in Russia. In any case, you can't buy the painting from the Pushkin today given the international sanctions on Russia that followed the invasion of Ukraine.

Phylloxera may have also played a role in an infamous tragic event in Van Gogh's tormented life. The artist mutilated himself by cutting off his ear during a bout of delirium, possibly triggered by his excessive consumption of alcohol. Van Gogh was known to indulge in absinthe, the herb flavored spirit. In the 1880s, cheaper, and may be even somewhat toxic versions of absinthe were distilled from grains, sugar beet or even potatoes instead of wine grapes due in large part to the shortages caused by the phylloxera plague. Consumption of the spirit soared. Thus the

phylloxera infestation may have helped provide the perennially broke artist with the cheap alcohol that fuelled his addiction.



Café Table With Absinthe, 1887, by Vincent van Gogh.

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Phylloxera and the Algerian War

Fellow plant pathologist and world traveler Eric Boa pointed out this remarkable BBC Radio episode "The Shadows of Algiers" from an

inspired series on France's complicated colonial past in the North African country. To my surprise, phylloxera was featured. It turns out that the destruction of the French wine industry caused by phylloxera triggered massive migration of bankrupt farmers and agricultural workers to Algeria, therefore setting the stage for the tragic end of that protracted colonial adventure. In fact, early in the 20th century, as the French wine industry declined, there was a massive boom in wine production in Algeria. The country even went on to become the world's largest wine exporter. As the narrator, Edward Stourton explains, this strengthened France's implementation in Algeria and the ensuing War of Independence that killed hundreds of thousands. And when Algeria's nationalist movement the Front de libération nationale (FLN) started their violent uprising against the French, they targeted vineyards—a symbol of colonial power.

“In the first of five programmes, Edward (Stourton) tells the surprising story of how an ugly bug—a tiny insect called phylloxera—created the climate for the Algerian War. The insect all but wiped out the French wine industry and caused huge numbers of French people to move to Algeria.

The French were initially seduced by the sun, sea and light of Algeria, exoticism captured in Albert Camus' famous novel, 'The Outsider'.

But the love affair quickly turned sour....”

Listen to the first episode here. The other episodes are powerful too. You can learn for example about the shady history of far-right politician and fouled-mouth racist Jean-Marie LePen as a French army paratrooper in Algeria. In 1957, LePen left his Hitler's youth dagger—unmistakable with his name inscribed in it—in the house of Ahmed Moulay, an Algerian nationalist who was tortured and executed in front of his kids and wife by a group of paratroopers. LePen's daughter, Marine, who continued his ugly brand of far-right politics is currently running second in voting intention polls for the April 2022 French presidential election.



LePen's Hitler Youth dagger recovered by Ahmed Moulay's 12 year-old son after his father was tortured and killed by French paratroopers.

Parenthetically, check Eric's fascinating blog post "[How to build an empire](#)" on his perspective on International Development and [China's belt and road initiative](#)—a 21st century colonial adventure.

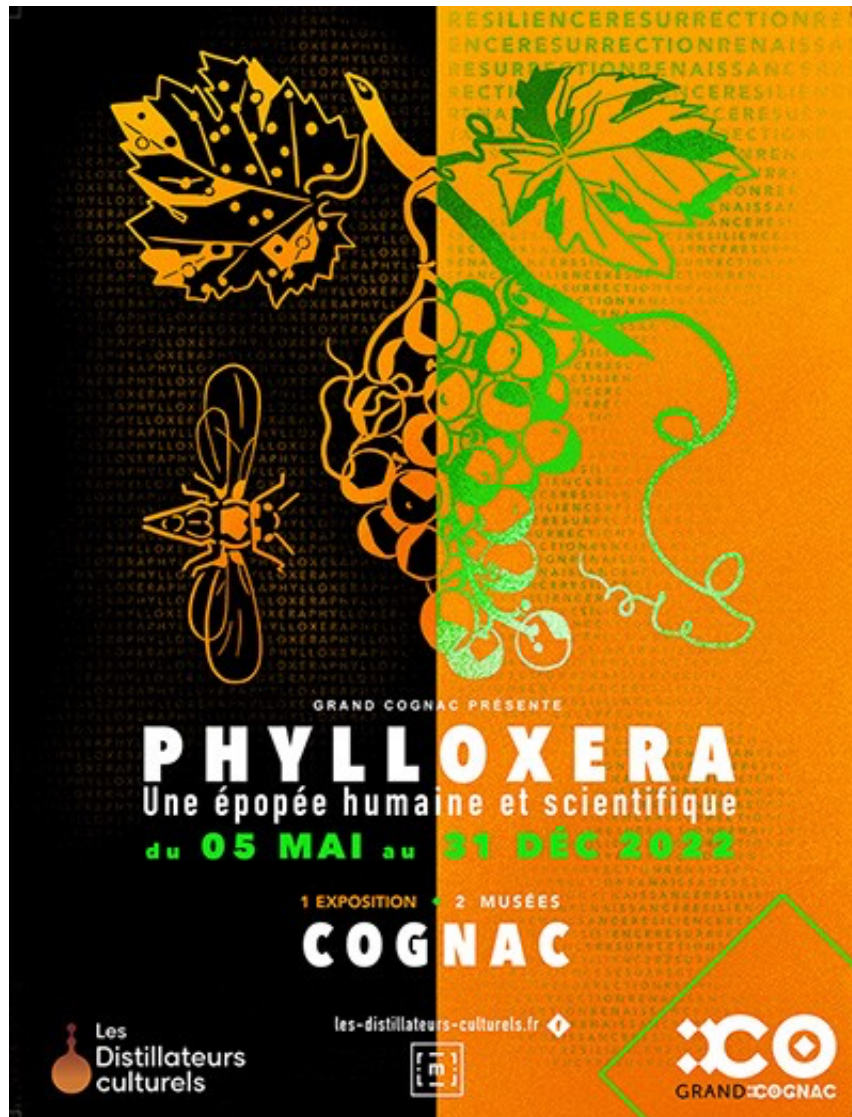
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PHYLLOXERA, une épopée humaine et scientifique

Now that we're again free to travel, you might be wondering where to go this summer. How about a trip to the [city of Cognac](#) in the [Charente department](#). There you can check the latest exhibitions at the [Musée d'art et d'histoire](#) and the [Musée des savoir-faire du cognac](#). From May 5th to December 31st, 2022, both museums will jointly display "[Phylloxera, une épopée humaine et scientifique](#)." Here is [a short blurb that advertizes the event](#) (my own translation with help from Google):

"This exhibition not just highlights one of the worst episodes in the history of Charente vineyards, but above all it highlights the collective resilience shown by the wine world."

Wow (or Waouw in French). This is so inspiring. I wish we could apply the same collective resilience to modern day problems and embrace new plant breeding technologies as scientists have done to face the phylloxera plague.



Phylloxera, une épopée humaine et scientifique

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The Botanist and the Vintner

Ian Dry, Grapevine Pathology Team Leader at CSIRO, Australia, recommends Christy Campbell's 2006 book "The Botanist and the Vintner: How Wine Was Saved for the World". I have yet to read it, but

the blurb suggests it's the story of Montpellier scientist Jules-Émile Planchon.

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