



# BALLYFIN



## Wine Geese

Visiting Bordeaux in 1787, Thomas Jefferson, then serving as the first ambassador to France from the United States, found time among other, presumably more pressing, engagements to advise his President, George Washington, on his wine cellar. He reported back on the leading producers in the regions: ‘Gernon, Barton, Johnston, Foster, Skinner, Copinger and McCarthy’. The presence of Irish names at the centre of Bordeaux winemaking – that activity at which France most quintessentially excels – might surprise, for while the mass emigration of the Irish to America in the nineteenth century is well known, at earlier dates, too, political pressures and confessional persecution had led thousands to seek a new life in continental Europe.

From the Flight of the Earls at the beginning of the seventeenth century to the mass exodus following the Crown’s dishonouring of the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, Irish men and women, mostly, but by no means exclusively, Catholic, set off from Ireland’s shores, forced into uncertain exile. Collectively these waves of Ireland’s finest are known as the ‘Wild Geese’ and while in the process Ireland lost generations of leaders, the exiles went on to make an enormous contribution to European culture. The numbers are remarkable given the dangers of the journey made in small boats and the distances to be covered, as William Butler Yeats put it ‘the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide’.

Many émigrés achieved fame and distinction fighting in the armies of France and Spain, others as scholars in Irish colleges from Rome to Prague to Seville. Others, still, entered the wine trade in Bordeaux and established great châteaux many of which still bear their names. In addition to those mentioned by Jefferson are the families of Lynch, Dillon, Burke, Roche and Walsh. The move into wine making was natural for these exiles as they developed pre-existing connections with the wineries of France. In the early eighteenth century Dublin imported more casks from Bordeaux than the whole of England and Scotland combined. The English peer Lord Chesterfield commented sourly ‘one gentleman in ten in Ireland are impoverished by the great quantity of claret which, for mistaken notions of hospitality and dignity, they think it necessary should be drunk in their houses’. Even worse, he continued, ‘the affectation of drinking wine has got into the middle and lower ranks of people’. The Wild Geese winemakers of Bordeaux were among the most innovative viticultural pioneers of the eighteenth century and in honour of this Irish contribution to France, wines have been carefully selected for the cellar at Ballyfin from twelve vineyards established by Irish exiles – known, inevitably, as the Wine Geese.

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