

Hypocras, the medieval wine remedy with an antique origin

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During the era of Middle Ages, throughout Europe, a mulled or spiced wine commonly consumed at the end of a meal as a digestive, sweetened with honey or containing sugar, named “Hypocras” (or hypocras, hippocras, ypocras, ipocras, Latin: Vinum Hippocraticum), was the most famous aperitif, having also a cluster of supposedly drug qualities [1, 2]. Hypocras was regularly served as a digestive at the end of the meal, becoming symbolically the ceremonial conclusion of any banquet since 14th century [3]. Evidence of the high regard Hypocras enjoyed among the medieval lore is testified by the fact that a recipe of the wine enriched with rosewater and raisins, survived within the work “*On Wines*” written by one of the most esteemed physicians of the 13th century, Amoldus of Villanova (Armand Villeneuve, ca 1235–1313) [4]. For the production of Hypocras it was used white, red or claré (clean, nor white, neither red) wine, mixed with a long tube cinnamon, a knob of ginger and an equal amount of galangal, pounded well together, until a livre of sugar was to be added later on [5]. Other recipes included cardamom, coriander-seeds and nutmegs [6]. The mix stays in a stainless bowl for 48 h before refined through a double layer of cheesecloth [5, 6]. This type of clothing was named Hypocras Bag (made of white Cotton or

Flannel), having two or three layers for better distillation [7]. For the Hippocrates’ sleeve, as it was later on nominated (Latin: manicum hippocraticum), it was believed, that this conical bag was the one Hippocrates invented to filter water and thus it was named after him probably for the filtering of wine too (Figure 1) [8]. Although many recipes existed for the preparation of Hypocras and all sorts of wine were used for its production, in France at least, the Greek wine was preferable, maybe connected with the urban legend that the wine bears the name of Hippocrates its maker, or was a wine-remedy proposed by the Hippocratic School of Medicine, or named to honor the father of medicine, or even this nomination targeted to advertise the product [9]. Some reports existed that the Hippocratics were actually the first to compose various liqueurs, including Hypocras [10]. In some cases, it was referred as the wine “Ypocras for Lords” enriched with pepper, cloves, grains of paradise, ambergris and musk [11]. Hypocras, became so famous that it was trade under the pseudonym “wine of the gods”, sometimes containing violet water, soon becoming the preferable drink in the French Royal court [12, 13].

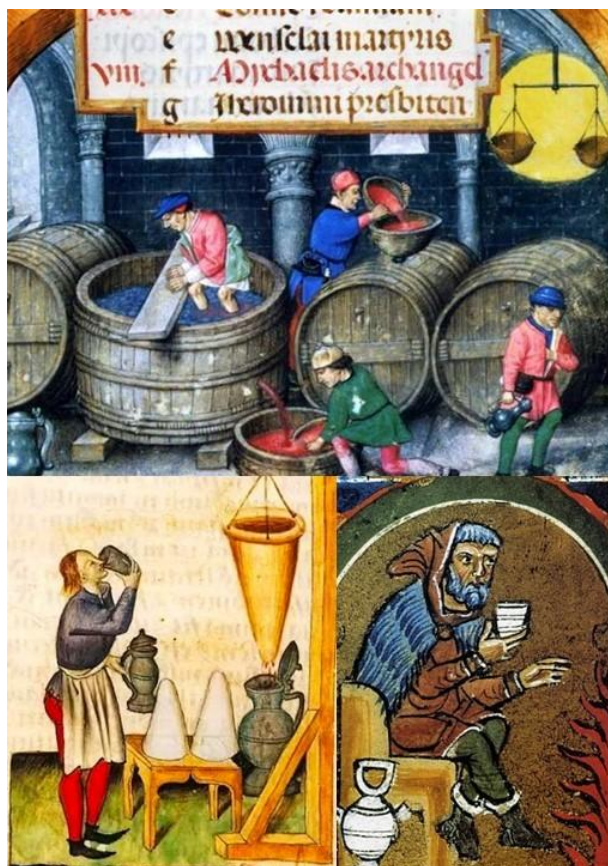


Figure 1. Treading and barreling the wine, from the “*Livre d’Heures*” by Jean Marion, 1500 (top side) & Production and tasting of Hypocras in the Middle Ages from the “*Tractatus de herbis*” by Pedanius Dioscorides (Dioscorides), Lat.993, f.142 r. 15th century, Biblioteca Estense, Modena (bottom left side) & A man relaxing having his cup of wine, colored miniature illustration from the “*Livro de salmos de Hildeshiem*”, 1235 (bottom right side).

Benedictine abess and polymath Hildegard von Bingen (ca 1081–1179) in his book “*Causae Et Curae*” was among the first to propose for the treatment of eye ailments, periodontal disease and toothache wine mixed with violet, rose, fennel tincture, fresh lettuce or chervil, absinthe (wormwood), a potion additionally sweetened with sugar [14]. Villanova noted that Hyppocras fortifies the brain and natural strength, promotes digestion, produces good blood, is good for the cough, protects the heart, prevents women to bear a child by altering the substance of the womb [4]. Rogerius Baconus (ca 1219/20–1292) the philosopher, advised the wine to make the blood clear and fine [15]. Military surgeon and alchemist, Hieronymus Brunschwig (ca 1450–1512) advocated to mix Gascony wine with herbs, a tonic known as “aqua vitae” to nourish the blood, disinfect the wounds, treat palsy and ringworm, expel poisons for the body and help heart’s, stomach’s and liver’s function [16]. The great figure of surgery, French barber-surgeon Ambroise Paré (ca 1510–1590) proposed for the invalids the potion of Hyppocras wine [17]. French physician Jean de Renou (ca 1568–1620) used it for diseases of the womb and the blood, both vessels’ and menstrual [18]. During the 17th century, there was the perception that a glass of hot Hyppocras clears a bad cold, while it was used to pamper the lustful desires of debauched persons in old age, to eradicate leprosy and other corruptions of the blood as well [19, 20]. Even a peculiar case was reported, of a man suffering from an ophthalmic disease, who used Hyppocras as a collyrium, letting the drops fall through the linen sleeve directly in his eyes, resulting to a surprisingly cure [21].

In Western medicine, wine continued to have a privileged position as a therapeutic modality, both for its properties and for the fact that physicians have always been prominent among the chartered consumers of good wines. With the evolution of chemistry unveiling the complex ingredients of wine, physicians assigned various wines as remedies varying from miraculous to significantly real treatments. Cardiac virtues of wine phenols, antiseptics and palliation rendered it a drug in vogue, being connected with moral virtue among the lower classes, which have accepted it as a liquor drug easily than whisky, gin and other modern products containing higher percentage of alcohol [22]. Research was focused in correlations between the chemical and sensory results of spicy wines, resulting to an awareness of the senses form the cluster of aroma-active odorants, promoting this kind of wines among others [23]. Modern medicine still surveys traditional medicine, adding sometimes intriguing results, as in the case of protective effects on cognitive disorders, including Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia of the moderate red wine consumption [24]. However, it is unclear whether the health benefits of red wine could be attributed to ethanol or non-ethanol active substances. Nevertheless, some studies highlighted the alleviating atherosclerosis-related inflammatory markers in healthy people, while more research is in need to validate more medical uses of red and white spicy wines [25].

Hyppocras was a delicious beverage, drunk as a wine, a liqueur, an aperitif, a tonic and a miraculous drug over the centuries. Scientific debates for the benefits of the wine are still in vogue. It seems however, that in the case of Hyppocras the name shadowed the commodity, ascending this wine to a higher paradox state of a remedy.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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