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### Animal skins the new qvevri?

In the market, hunting for purple Cherokees I bumped into Kevin McKenna of LDM (Louis/Dressner/McKenna). We were standing between the cucumbers and the red peppers when in the course of catching up, he told me that Louis-Antoine Luyt of Clos Ouvert had just finished his first fermentation in an ox skin.

Qveri move over, you now have serious competition.

Louis-Antoine told him the fragrance was differently complex.

I had to think. Could I bring myself to taste the wine? For sure the ox wouldn't have been a kosher one, but it was more kosher than a wine fermented in pig. A friend, a conservative rabbi told me ---*The use of leather pouches for storing wine is mentioned in the Bible, and there is a talmudic reference to putting a stone in the wine pouch (chemet yayin - presumably leather - the idea being that the stone will displace the air when the pouch is partially empty, so as to prevent spoilage by oxidation) , but these were presumably small pouches, like the ones you see in France sometimes, for drinking. I don't know of any references to actually making wine in leather. Buy it makes sense. I don't think kashrut or fleischig is an issue (other than for vegetarian reasons), since once the leather has been tanned, it is no longer edible and does not constitute food. I would be more concerned with the esthetics of making wine that way in the Ancient Near East, since they used to tan leather with excrement.*

So, I suppose the point is, could I get past my ick factor to taste the wine?

I'm curious. I'll do it. I'm a professional, after all.

I await the details on how he filled the carcass; the anus or the mouth? How did it get plugged up or is it open top? Whole cluster? Would carbonic have exploded the skin? How to you get the wine off the skin? Do you fill it with grapes like a pinball machine and then stomp the hide? And which skin, hi-toasted sheep? Neutral goat? Medium-toast tonneau-like cow?

I'm waiting for answers. In the mean time I fished out a photograph I took at the wine museum on Lanzarote this past January at the El Grifo Wine

Museum. A pig floating, and at one time bloated with not garbage but wine.



While the El Grifo wines will never make my [newsletter](#), the details in the exhibit were charming. I assumed this was for transport or storage, I never thought, until this morning, that it could have been used for a fermenting vessel.

I started to scratch the net and came across a writer about wine history, heretofore unknown to me. Stefan K. Estreicher who has the Paul Whitfield Horn professor in physics at Texas Tech in Lubbock and interestingly he wrote *Wine: From Neolithic Times to the 21st Century*. I hit the click and purchase then penned off a letter with a few questions. The short exchange was terrific, I also came away wondering why I never put together the idea of tanning leather and tanning a wine.



Also from the museum. Tannins used much longer than I had originally suspected. I cannot find the date on the can.

From the professor:

Q: Historically, do you know what kind of vinification would be used?

*It depends on what you mean by "vinification". You may want to crush grapes in wineskins (like they did in the early days in California), or transport must or finished wine in wineskins, but probably not do the fermentation because the CO<sub>2</sub> pressure would be a problem.*

*Animal skins have certainly been used for millenia for all sorts of purposes, including transporting wines. Wineskins were still used in Spain before the railroad to get Rioja wine to the coast, and in the Douro valley in Portugal, and in Madeira to get the must down from the mountain. So you find those in many places.*

Q: Have you heard about an ox-skin?

*Almost all the wineskins I have seen are from a pig, a sheep, or a goat: domesticated animals (many are available), "standard" size, small enough to be carried by one man (or woman) when full.*

*A full cow skin would be way too heavy for transport unless you have modern equipment. Two people can lift a full amphora with two handles, but not a cow skin without handles and filled with wine.*

*So the ox skin could be a recent trick. Not sure though. Some winemakers want to go away from wooden barrels and are tired of this oak and extra-oak and super-oak flavor in some wines.*

*We're not termites! If I want vanilla-peanut-butter-coconut flavor,*

*I go to a bakery, not a wine cellar.*

*If you taste a wine aged in clay (modern dolia or amphora if you like) or in old-old oak barrels (no wood tannins left) or maybe in ox-skins (??), you get much more tannins from the grape. Interesting. Very different taste.*

Q: How is the skin prepared?

*A: Preparation: I assume that you would have to scrape the skin and then soak it in tannins (barks of trees and whatever chemicals are naturally available) for a long time, then rinse and wash and rinse again. Just like regular leather products. Then it would last a long time. If you don't do that, the skin will rot and bugs will get to it.*

*The technology required to use leather products is very ancient. We always think of cave-men with leather underwear :) No evidence of this, but leather was used in Sumerian times for sure: they must have known how to prepare skins already then. Not a problem, especially if you have slaves.*

Turns out Louis-Antoine had another idea totally. From the looks of this, the wine is fermenting on the fur, like a tarp. I heard from a Chilean reader (thank you Francisco).

"It's an old traditional way to ferment in Chile, they cover with tight ox skin, not tanned, over an inverted triangular shape vat made of wood, put the grapes in and baaam, fermentation....."

And actually, here it is.



Stay tuned for part the second. Obviously "on the skins" here takes on a whole new meaning.