

# Wine made for a Queen

Canadian collector Phil Culhane continues his passion for the Persian spirit in bottles.....

***"Sticking with the safe collecting areas is dull; why collect bottles if all they do is sit there? Before I started to collect Persian bottles I knew very little of the Islamic religion, barely enough even to be usefully ignorant. I knew that in many Islamic regions, at this time, alcohol consumption was not permitted. That was not always the fact and they exported it as well."***

The bottle shown above here was for many years in the Harvey's Wine Museum. It has a label that says "This bottle of Shiraz Wine, presented by a Persian Embassy in 1708 to Queen Anne. Rests in the cellar of the Duke of Rutland since 1758." The bottle was exhibited in 1931 and sold to Harveys in 1968. The museum contents were auctioned by Bonhams in 2003 and the bottle found its way to Phil via Early Glass specialist Mark Nightingale.

The Shiraz region (*original home of the Shiraz grape and that wine*) was a prodigious producer of an exceptional wine, if contemporary accounts are to be believed. Thus, it's a fallacy to say these bottles were made only to hold water. Of course, glass bottles can hold a variety of liquids, as well as many solids, but the original intent for the saddle flasks was to hold wine for sale and for personal consumption. They came in all sizes, from a quarter bottle, through halves, to the common saddle flask size (*usually holds around 600-700 ml*). Larger transport bottles held 3.5 litres to 10-20 litres.



**Above:** Portrait of Queen Anne - the recipient of the illustrious Persian bottle now in Phil's collection, which reached him via early glass dealer Mark Nightingale.

**Left:** Ex Harvey's Wine Museum Queen Anne bottle presented to Queen Anne in 1708.

In addition, more delicate bottles without the stringing around the neck appear to have been used as decanters or carafes. And the glass, throughout the early years at least (1600-1750), came in a wonderful variety of colours. In addition to the teal blue and dark greens, there were deep ambers, rich yellows, straw, pale to cornflower blues, and one exciting example that is a wonderful lavender hue.

Aside from wine, there were some marvelous wide mouth bottles used for transporting pickled fruits, usually two pounds of contents in a bottle. Smaller bottles were used for perfumes, oils and essences, rosewater, medicines, and of course anything else you might think of.

As late as 1911, a French traveller mentioned that "short, flat wine bottles with stringing around the neck were still being produced at Qumm". So yes, some late Persian wine bottles were blown in the 20th century, but for certain, not "most" of them. In any case 1911 is still antique and they were blown in Persia, not Mexico as many collectors incorrectly claim!

As mentioned in my first article, BBR 137, it appears, though I still cannot confirm, Persian saddle flasks went through an 'early', 'middle', and 'late' period. The earliest (from paintings and in my conjecture) Persian wine flasks had thin glass, thin stringing around the neck, a very long neck and rounded bodies with no flat base. The 1708 Persian embassy gifted bottle of Shiraz wine to Queen Anne sits, 300 years later, on my shelf, the only dateable Persian wine so far?

The 'snake' of glass around the wines and on decanters probably had a practical purpose. Reed or rush covering on wine bottles is not as rigid as cane and the coil may have helped keep it from moving. Carrying glass when about to photograph it also drew my attention to the desirability of horizontal ribs to help prevent dropping them.

Over time bottles get thicker, the neck shorter, and the body now has a base on which the bottle, however wobbly, can sometimes stand. Does this transition remind you of anything my black-glass loving fellow collectors?

The wine industry grew and became prosperous, glass manufacturers had





**Left:** Trio of wide mouths.

less time per bottle, and it became less an artisanal marketplace, and more industrial. Over time, I would suggest, bottles throughout Europe and England became thicker, more rudimentary and designs became less fine. Rather than producing a smaller number of more beautiful pieces of glass for the wealthy, glass manufacturers were churning out as many as they could for a blossoming wine industry.

Lip finishes are fascinating on late Persian wines, particularly the larger transport bottles which often had either a rouletted or roped string rim. Even the saddle flasks had some degree of workmanship on lips on occasion.

### My Continuing Research

Over the next couple years, I intend to work with two university professors to assess the almost 200 pieces in my collection. One will perform a chemical analysis on tiny fragments of glass from each bottle, hoping to find typical chemical signatures allowing us to ascertain that certain portions of the collection were blown in one region, or at one factory. It is a known fact the glasshouses in Shiraz used different materials from glasshouses in Isfahan, for example. Perhaps as well, this chemical analysis will help us situate the glass in time, to pick out outliers, and fakes/ forgeries, of which I am confident there are several.

A second professor will perform chemical analysis of the content residue remaining inside many of the bottles.

Many of them will likely contain wine residue, but there's such a variety of glass, it will be useful to get a broader understanding of what the various forms were used for.

There are relatively few pieces of late utilitarian Persian glass available for study, in museums or in private hands. To my knowledge, I'm one of a



**Right:** Group of different sizes.



**Above:** Range of variously coloured decanters.

handful of serious collectors in the world, in the Western world at least. I presume there must be others? I'm still looking for an art historian who is curious to look at glass bottles in Persian Art from 1600-1900. Given there are no dated Persian wines I know of, things like art and perhaps early photography are some things we need to fall back on. European travellers are well known, their stories of travels in Persia are well documented and recounted, but what of local accounts? Previous research by other, more highly trained researchers than myself, have turned up no records of volumes of trade done by Persian merchants, perhaps there are written sources out there to be found, and perhaps translated to English, to further illuminate the study?

Smaller bottles (*last image below*), around 6 inches high, purpose unknown but probably oils and unguents. The bottle on the far left has a tubular 'pocket' applied at the shoulders - perhaps to retain a chained stopper whilst in use?

The Persian glass I've purchased, aside from Marlana's collection, have been onesies and twosies - individual pieces of blown glass which somehow attracted the attention of a bottle collector whose primary focus was far, far away from late Persian glass. The story remains far from told. Perhaps these articles will help illuminate some additional facts. Perhaps there are "closet collectors" out there who can help fill in facts. I can tell you, however, at least half of what appears to be late Persian glass IS late Persian. Whilst fakes abound in most of the categories a hand-blown bottle is still, and always will be, a beautiful thing, and saddle flasks have a lot more interesting stories to tell than most people give them credit for!



**Above:** The 'snake' of glass around the wines and on decanters probably had a practical purpose. Reed or rush covering on wine bottles is not as rigid as cane and the coil may have helped keep it from moving? Carrying glass when about to photograph it also drew my attention to the desirability of horizontal ribs to help prevent dropping them.



**Above:** Dirty Karaba probably late 1700's. Unlike most of us Phil sees not a dirty bottle but evidence to be analysed. Harsh cleaning is not always the right thing to do!

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*If you want to see more of Phil's stunning collection go to [www.saddleflasks.com](http://www.saddleflasks.com)*



**Above:** Rope lip detail & (R) cylinder with spiral & vertical drop thread.



**Above:** Smaller bottles, around 6 inches high, purpose unknown but probably oils and unguents. The bottle on the far left has a tubular 'pocket' applied at the shoulders. Perhaps to retain a chained stopper whilst in use?