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Mr. Thomas Jefferson – The Renaissance Man of Monticello



Dear United States of America,

Thomas Jefferson is one of those figures who is genuinely difficult to sum up. Statesman, architect, farmer, scientist, linguist, oenophile — he seemed constitutionally incapable of limiting himself to any one thing. His years in Paris as the young republic’s Minister to France only deepened this. He came back changed, with a passion for good food, good wine, and good conversation that he would spend the rest of his life trying to transplant to American soil. It was there that he absorbed **French Enlightenment theory**, ideas that would shape his **vision** for what America could become. The table, for Jefferson, was never just a place to eat, it was where ideas got tested, alliances formed, and the tone of a young civilization quietly set.

Jefferson took this personally. He spent his years in France visiting vineyards, building relationships with producers, and developing opinions about wine that were, characteristically, very strong. He became convinced that America was capable of producing something just as good as Europe and said so plainly: “*We could, in the United States, make as great a variety of wines as are made in Europe, not exactly of the same kinds, but doubtless as good.*” He then went home and planted vineyards at Monticello. He put real money, time, and energy into it. And yet he failed completely, since there is no historical record of a single successful bottle from his own vines. For a man who seemed to succeed at almost everything he tried, it is a wonderfully human footnote.

But what he couldn’t grow, he imported, in quantity and with great taste. He became the go-to wine advisor for Presidents Washington, Madison, and Monroe, effectively curating the cellars of the early republic. His influence on American dining culture was real and lasting. Virginia’s own wine industry didn’t come into its own until the late twentieth century, when **Viticulturists** finally solved the *Vitis vinifera* problem, by grafting European vines onto native American rootstock. What’s worth noting is that this same technique had already saved the vineyards of France and Italy during the Great Wine Blight of the late nineteenth century. The New World roots that once frustrated Jefferson’s ambitions had quietly rescued the Old World he admired.

Wine aside, there is another story that says a great deal about Jefferson’s character. When the British burned the Capitol in 1814 and destroyed most of the Library of Congress with it, Jefferson — then retired at Monticello — wrote to Congress and offered to sell them his entire personal library. It was the largest private collection in the country. Congress accepted, purchasing **6,487 books**. Just like that, the Library of Congress had a new foundation to build on.

But the real impact was in what the books contained. The original Library had been a fairly narrow legislative collection. Jefferson's ranged across architecture, botany, science, philosophy, mathematics, literature, geography, and multiple languages. Some members of Congress objected, after all what did science and literature have to do with making laws? Jefferson's answer was straightforward: "*There is, in fact, no subject to which a Member of Congress may not have occasion to refer.*" Words that contain an entire philosophy of governance and of civilization. It became the guiding principle of the institution. Because Jefferson believed that a lawmaker needed to understand the world — not just the law — the Library of Congress eventually grew into the largest library on Earth. Not bad for a man who failed to produce a single bottle of wine.

What remains is his legacy, in all its facets. He can be remembered in many ways, yet to me, as an alumnus of the University of Virginia, he remains not as Mr. President but as Mr. Jefferson, since all students at this prestigious University could call him that. It is fitting, too, because he himself did not wish to be remembered or addressed in the grandeur of office. He rather preferred that students and faculty not call him "Mr. President," but instead regard him simply as Mr. Jefferson. A teacher among learners, and a founder whose greatest pride lay in the pursuit of knowledge.

Yours, with great admiration and transatlantic devotion,

Franz J. Heidinger

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