

Book Reports

*Book reports by Bob Foster,
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Best Wines 2005! Gold Medal Winners from the Top Competitions

*Gail Bradney and Elizabeth Cline
The Print Project, Bearsville, NY; 2005*

The authors have a simple premise: if a wine has won a gold medal at any one of twenty-two selected wine competitions, it's worth drinking; if it's won three or more gold medals, you can buy it by the case without hesitation. Rubbish.

I have and do judge at seven of the authors' twenty-two selected competitions and I disagree with many of their assumptions. First, there is no explanation of the criteria used to select those twenty-two wine competitions. Indiana State Fair (which judges wines from all over the world) and San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition (the largest in California) were excluded, while the Oregon State Fair and Northwest Ecological Society competitions, open to only regional wines, were included.

Even assuming the authors had cogent reasons for their selections, I, myself, am absolutely unimpressed by a wine with a single gold medal. At one recent competition, for some

of the judges, including me, the Petite Sirah awarded a gold medal was undrinkable because of very high levels of *brettanomyces*, yet that dog of a wine is in this book. A gold medal is only as good as the panel that judged that wine. However, a string of gold and/or silver medals for a wine entered at several competitions is impressive. I look for consistent high performance, not a single shot to the moon from one panel.

But even with multiple gold medals, a wine buff should never buy a case of wine just on the basis of these results, as the authors recommend. The first obligation of a wine is to taste good to the drinker. Even if a wine has won 22 gold medals, if you try it and don't like it, it's not a good wine for you. I can't say this often enough: *try before you buy*. I would agree that a wine winning three or more gold medals is worth trying, but decide yourself, please, if it's worth buying. You must be your own whole panel of judges.

Recommended with reservations

Chilean Wine: The Heritage

*Rodrigo Alvarado
The Wine Appreciation Guild,
San Francisco, CA; 2005*

First published in Spanish in 2004 in Chile, this book was written by the dean of Chilean wine writers and wine historians, and was designed for a South American readership—one with a basic knowledge of Chile's history

and geography. Now translated into English, it is a difficult read for many North American wine buffs. When the author refers to "political changes that took place in Chile on September 11, 1973", how many of us know that this date is burned into the memories of Chileans? It is the day a democratically elected Marxist leader of Chile was overthrown and killed in a coup that may have had CIA assistance. As I read this book I continuously had to look elsewhere for maps (there is no detailed map) and more historical background.

However, the book provides an excellent overview of the development of major wines and wine making in Chile. The author does not center on Chile alone, but gives the reader a far broader picture by including sections devoted to other major wine making areas of the world in his descriptions of the development of wine in Chile in the 1800's and early 1900's. A sense of what was happening elsewhere at the same time allows the reader to put events in Chile in better perspective.

The author is no apologist for those decades when the wines of Chile were mediocre. He analyzes the reasons (many having to do with import and taxation rules and regulation) and documents recent changes that have allowed the development of an industry that now produces fine wines in Chile.

I was particularly taken by the author's discussion of why phylloxera has never reached

there. Chile had imported most of its European grape varieties before phylloxera struck Europe. Phylloxera later reached South America, especially Argentina, but never Chile. As to why not, theories abound: decades of severe limitations on importations of any soil carrying roots (still in effect today), Chile's geographic isolation, or some kind of unique terroir. The author adds an interesting discussion of how advertising this fact is a two-edged sword. It may be useful now, but if Chile ever does get the louse, it could be a wine and advertising nightmare.

There are no maps or photographs, but a charming set of water colored drawings illustrates the text. For the reader willing to take the time to fill in gaps in history and geography which stem from being raised in the US rather than Chile, there's a wealth of fascinating material here.

Highly Recommended

Great Wine Terroirs

Jacques Fannet

University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 2004

If you read the acclaimed work, *The Winemakers Dance*, reviewed in the Napa Valley Wine Library Report for Winter 2004-2005, you are immediately struck by how narrow the author of this work's view of terroir really is. The authors of *The Winemaker's Dance* recognized that terroir encompasses more than just the soil, that it includes

climate, angle towards the sun, trellising, geology, and a myriad of other factors. Although this work talks of terroir, it's really just about geology and geography.

But the information in this work is very interesting. For every major wine making region of the world (and for some lesser spots, like Brazil or the Canary Islands) the author carefully explains soil composition. And, there are lots of beautiful maps and charts. Of course, as is true for most works on terroir, why a particular vine does well in a particular type of soil is still an unknown factor. There is no question of a special relationship; it is just that the essential causal factor remains undiscovered.

Take note, this work is no quick and easy read. The material is often very technical. For example: "The albarizas were formed by the sedimentation of marine diatoms and radiolarians, microscopic algae with siliceous shells that then mixed with fairly fine grained sand." While there is a glossary of terms at the back, I found myself often having to stop and read elsewhere about the terms used, so I could understand what the author had written.

For the wine buff who really wants to dig into the topic of what soils help make great wine, this book is a must read. For this group,

Highly Recommended