

# Book Reports

*Book reports by Bob Foster,  
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## The Winemaker's Dance--Exploring Terroir in the Napa Valley

*Jonathan Swinball and David G. Howell,  
University of California Press, Berkeley,  
California 2004*

The title of this book, at first glance, seems a mixed metaphor of continually unrelated factors. How can one dance with geography or soil or weather? Yet the authors, quite properly, do not view terroir in a narrow context. Their sense of context covers the complete ecosystem for each and every vine. A vine and the wine it yields are impacted not only by the traditional components of terroir--geography, soil, and water--but also by scores of other variables such as rootstock, rainfall, fog, drainage, erosion, trellising, the orientation and shape of the vineyard, disease, and the winemaker's techniques. The authors conclude that how the winemaker deals with (or, as they phrase it, dances with) all of these factors in great measure determines the quality of the wine.

The book begins with a section on the formation of the Napa Valley. In great detail topics such as "Franciscan Formation", volcanic activity, and the San Andreas Fault are

covered, with a discussion of plate tectonics along the way, as the authors review the geological history of the Napa Valley, which began 145 million years ago. This is not a quick read, and is probably too technical for some, but it does lead to an understanding of the vastly different soils and bedrock found in the Napa Valley. Abundant use of color photographs (many are aerial shots) made it even more understandable for me (a poli sci, not a geology major, decades ago in college).

The authors then take each of the factors with which the winemaker must dance and analyze them at length. I particularly liked the section on fog, because it's the first discussion I've seen in modern literature, and the section on yields, because of the opportunity for intrigue. Winemakers are caught in a squeeze play. On the one side, "the Gods of Wine, Parker in particular" have stated repeatedly and forcefully that great red wine cannot come from a vineyard with yields of more than two to three tons per acre. These authors deem this an unproved assertion. Instead they suggest that high quality comes not from low yields but from vines that are balanced in their growing conditions. The authors cite the experiences of Doug Fletcher at Chimney Rock, who discovered that he could get top quality fruit by taking out every other vine on his valley floor vines while leaving his hillside vines closely spaced. The hillside vines were on 2.5 feet of residual sediment over bedrock while the valley floor vines were on twelve feet of residual sediment. The valley floor grapes grew larger, were more stressed and

began, in one vintage, to give fruit of the same high quality as the hillside. The key was not the yield, but the soil, the location, the pruning and the trellising. Thus the authors show the equation for quality is far more complex than a flat tons per acre decree from on high.

A special highlight of the book is its two driving tours of the Napa Valley. The authors give detailed directions on how to drive through different parts of the Napa Valley and observe all the geographic and other features they have described in the book. It's fascinating stuff.

In the last portion of the book the authors give short profiles on various producers in the Napa Valley and talk about how all of the factors they have discussed earlier in the book come into play in each particular vineyard or winery. I really liked this book. While some of it is highly technical, it gives a fascinating overview of the myriad of technical and human factors that inevitably are involved in making great wine.

*Very Highly Recommended*

## North America Pinot Noir

John Winthrop Haeger

University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004

There is no question but that wines' styles change over the years. Perhaps more than any other wine grape Pinot Noir has seen the largest change. When I got into wine in 1970, great Pinot Noir was hard to come by. Most of the wines were thin, insipid and often downright unpleasant. Today there is an abundance of rich, balanced, well-made Pinot Noir which can delight the wine drinker.

How did this happen? What caused the changes? In this topnotch work the author, a former columnist for *Wine and Spirits Magazine*, takes a thoughtful look at Pinot Noir. He covers where Pinot has been, where it is now, and where it is going. In Haeger's discussion of the mediocre era of Pinot Noir in California, he notes that the low points came after the first massive wave of technology hit the wine industry and a common belief took hold that an intense intervention with new techniques could and would make all wines better. But Pinot Noir was different. Its basic chemical structure is unlike that of other reds. Its anthocyanins are not linked to its glucose units, as they are in most other reds. Pinot Noir cannot be treated as roughly as, say, Cabernet Sauvignon without damage. Winemakers have finally come to realize this about the grape, and have adjusted their wine making accordingly. Thus, their Pinots have gotten better, much better.

The author first presents an overview of the grape, with sections on such topics as the vine's origins and history, the most recent DNA studies of its make up and its descendants, and how the wine has been received by critics over the years.

Haeger next discusses the influence of Burgundy on the American scene. Then he follows with an overview of the rise of Pinot Noir in California, beginning with the first great California Pinots. Haeger also includes a section on "Power wine making and Pinot Noir". This is capped off with a lengthy section on the modern renaissance of Pinot Noir and the concern that winemakers are making wines to get high numbers from Robert Parker or the *Wine Spectator* rather than trying to maximize the vines' unique varietal potential.

It's clear that a major topic of discussion for winemakers these days is Pinot Noir clones. Want an in depth lesson on each of the clones and its attributes and problems? This is your book. In his writing about clones the author raises a red flag for the future. As winery after winery plants vines in France which produce spectacular wines there, a new problem is created. While the vines do well in Burgundy, where they ripen early with less sunlight, in California most vineyard sites get far more sunlight. Higher levels of sunlight may cause sharply different qualities in fruit from the same clones, resulting in overripe, unbalanced wines in California. Clearly, there is still much to learn about Pinot Noir.

In the back of the book the author presents profiles of more than seventy producers of quality Pinot Noir from around the world. There are subsections on the history of each winery, clones planted in the vineyards, wine making techniques, and a section of tasting notes on the wines. The only problem is that most, if not all of the tasting notes, were made unblind. The reliability of any such note from any source is questionable. Another problem is that at the end of each subsection there is very limited contact information for each winery--just a single telephone number: no postal address, no web site, no e-mail address, only a phone number. Regardless, this book is a "must have" for all Pinot Noir fans. This is the definitive work on Pinot Noir for our generation.

*Very Highly Recommended*