

Book Reports

*Book reports by Bob Foster,
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Judgment of Paris, California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting that Revolutionized Wine

*George Taber
Scribner, New York; 2005*

Most American wine drinkers have some idea there was a blind tasting in Paris. Put on by Steven Spurrier in 1976, the 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon and 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay bested a number of very well known French wines. But until now, there had never been any detailed coverage of these wines, judges and winemakers who made the award winning entries. At the time, author George Taber was Paris correspondent for *Time Magazine*. He was the only reporter present at the tasting. Now, nearly thirty years after the tasting, Taber has written a detailed book about the tasting and its impact on the world wine market.

The book is rather like an airplane movie. We meet all of characters, learn their individual histories, see them joined together at a critical moment and then follow them after the event. Taber introduces us to Steven Spurrier, owner of a small wine shop in Paris that sold French wines to the American and English community.

Spurrier's business did well and he opened a wine school that gave classes in English. We learn the genesis of his idea to conduct a tasting to compare the best of France with the best of California. Taber then devotes a section to each of the winemakers who made the California entries. We see how legends like Warren Winiarski and Mike Grgich came to the wine country and perfected their crafts. Next are detailed histories of the wines in the competition. Most run a few pages except for Freemark Abbey, which is given, but a scant paragraph. The only California winery with both a Chardonnay and a Cabernet in the competition, Freemark Abbey deserved a longer mention.

However, I particularly liked Taber's description of the actual tasting and certain comments of the French judges as they misidentified wine after wine. (The rankings of the wines are at the back of the book.) I enjoyed the collective squirming of the judges, and the reaction of the French to the tasting, which went from ignoring it, to distorting it, and then attacking it.

There is no question but that the tasting forever broke the price link between California and French wines. Before 1976, a California wine could never be priced higher than about 75% of its French counterpart. Taber goes further and denominates the event as a turning point

for the new wine era around the world. He contends that the tasting was seminal for most of the modern revolution in wine making. I think he goes too far. Certainly the tasting was important, but to make it such a keystone ignores so many other factors that began well before 1976: the rise of California wine making schools and modern techniques; increased interest in wine by the public that dates well before 1976; and numerous other factors. However, this is a fascinating story of an important event in the emergence of California as a prime winegrowing region.

Highly recommended

A Wine Journey Along the Russian River

*Steve Heimoff
University of California Press, Berkeley; 2005*

The great wine rivers of Europe have been repeatedly discussed. There are books about the wineries of the Loire, Rhone and Rhine, the Garrone and even the Douro. But the wine rivers of California have never been given their due. The author and West Coast Editor for *Wine Enthusiast*, has done a superb job depicting the Russian River as truly one of the great wine rivers of the world. Heimoff covers its geography, history, wines and wineries, and even some of his kayaking trips (and spills) along it.

In the first section of the book, on the geography and formation of the river, are several possible answers to the riddle of why the Russian River empties into the ocean, when almost every other major river in Northern California eventually pours into San Francisco Bay. Reading the theories on why the river takes a sharp turn to the west just south of Healdsburg is fascinating.

Heimoff goes on to portray many of the major winemakers whose wineries are on the river. While the profiles are informative they also reinforce the importance of the Russian River to quality Sonoma wines. The author discusses in detail the history and progress of Zinfandel from Alexander Valley, Cabernet from Russian River Valley and Pinot from Sonoma Coast. These well-told stories are both interesting and important. Heimoff presents a fascinating picture of the Russian River, its wineries, winemakers and wines dependent on the river. This is a must read for any fan of Sonoma County wines. I also want to note the importance of the emergence of University of California Press as a wine book publisher. When I started my wine book column, the wine book world was dominated by Simon and Schuster (in conjunction with British publisher Mitchell Beazley) and The Wine Appreciation Guild. Since then, Simon and Schuster has retreated from the field and UC Press has moved in with a string

of top-notch wine books in the last two years. Kudos to UC Press for their contributions to wine literature. Go Bears! *Very highly recommended.*

The Emperor of Wine: The Rise of Robert M. Parker and the Reign of American Taste

Elin McCoy
Harper Collins, New York; 2005

Whether you're a devotee of wine critic Robert Parker, or someone who finds his reviews seriously out of line and his influence on the wine world to be more negative than positive, you have to read this book. Elin McCoy has put together a fascinating biography of the most influential wine critic in the world.

But calling Parker the most influential wine critic is an understatement. As McCoy notes, Parker truly is the most dominant critic in the world today. If a movie comes out and gets two thumbs down from, it could still go on to become a box office smash. Ebert and Roeper's impact, like that of most critics, is only local or national. But Parker's influence is global. A score in the low 80's or the 70's from him will doom a wine's sales worldwide, and may mean financial ruin for its producer.

I do wish to note that during the few years Parker was resident wine critic on the Prodigy wine boards, the two of us spent many months arguing and debating a myriad of topics. I came away convinced Parker is unable to say, "We will have to disagree." It's more like, "We disagree and you're wrong because you are just one of those California palates that adores squeaky clean wine." I think it's fair to say we will never be on each other's Christmas card lists.

One of the major complaints by Parker critics is that the desire to attain a high score has caused winemakers around the world to alter their style and make big, over extracted, soft acid wines. Although Parker has often expressed his skepticism at such a trend's existence, McCoy does a good job of documenting it.

What's in the book is top notch but I think McCoy omits some critical issues. She shows Parker tasting wines unblind, often in the presence of the winemaker, the owner and even the sales director. McCoy accompanied Parker on a California trip and documents unblind tasting after unblind tasting under such circumstances, yet McCoy does not discuss the validity of such tastings. On Prodigy, when challenged on this point, Parker wrote that he had trained himself to not be affected by such factors, that he

could judge a wine blind as well as unblind, claiming he could filter out any biasing factors. I've been a professional wine judge for over 20 years and have yet to meet anyone else who makes such a bold claim. It would have been interesting had McCoy explored this topic.

Similarly, Parker has a high tolerance for odd or off odors like Brettanomyces. I once asked him to name a single California wine he had had that he rejected because it had too much Brett'. He finally admitted he could not name one. His tolerance for these smells would have made for an interesting discussion.

In any event, reading how Parker became such an influential critic and seeing so much of his personality is fascinating. McCoy describes the entire field of wine criticism, including the emergence of the *Wine Spectator* and the disappearance of Robert Finningan's newsletter, as she tells Parker's story. She properly gives Parker credit for causing an upsurge of interest in numerous wines from numerous areas, all previously unheralded. The work is highly readable and a must for all wine lovers. *Highly recommended.*

A History of Wine in America From Prohibition to the Present

Thomas Pinney

University of California Press, Berkeley; 2005

With this work Penney completes his survey of wine in America. His first book, published in 1989, did a masterful job of covering events from the earliest days in America to Prohibition. This work continues the story through to the present day. While the book is excellent, it covers an ever-expanding story in so many locations that it is less unified and more episodic than its predecessor.

Penney's chapters on the advent of Prohibition, life during that era and its immediate aftermath are, by far, the best I have ever read. He carefully documents how some wineries survived and many failed. He shows the impact on the vineyards from planting thicker-skinned grapes that could withstand a railroad journey to the east for sales to homeing). He shows how this changed the vineyards for decades. He also demonstrates how a growing interest in fine wines was obliterated for an entire generation and more. Penney carefully chronicles the re-growth of wine areas in many regions of the United States and discusses local and national influences in each region.

Although, as noted in the prior review, I am not a fan of Robert Parker, I was

startled to see no mention of him. In discussing the modern wine world, including its mindless collecting of trophy wines by score-blinded wine buffs, Penney makes no mention of Parker. Now, whether you think Parker's influence has been positive or negative, there is little debate he has had major impact on the wines of America. This is a most puzzling omission. Regardless, this is an excellent reference work and a fitting successor to the first volume.

Highly Recommended.

Oldman's Guide to Outsmarting Wine, 108 Ingenious Shortcuts to Navigate the World of Wine with Confidence and Style

Mark Oldman

Penguin Books, New York; 2005

When the review copy of this book arrived from the publisher, I groaned. I thought, "Not another introductory wine book." There have been so many in recent years, and most cover the same old territory in the same old way--old material in a new wrapper. But this book was a wonderful surprise. The author has 108 short chapters on numerous topics ranging from "Instead of Merlot, try Argentine Malbec" or "White Zinfandel: The Bee Gees of Wine." Within each

short chapter there is a Cheat Sheet giving a concise summary of the chapter, a label decoder for areas that may be mentioned on the label, a short pronunciation guide, and suggestions for matching the discussed wines with food. The book is written in an upbeat breezy manner that conveys much information without being too technical or intimidating. It's very well done.

The only odd note is from the interspersed comments of 83 wine enthusiasts listing the wines they like to drink. Wine importer Terry Theise telling us he likes to drink "Burgundy," or the preferences of Ludacris (an Atlanta rap star) I thought made for a distracting sideshow. However, this work vaults to the head of the line for wine books for beginners. It is one of the finest introductory wine books now available.

Highly Recommended.