

About Books

Book reports by Bob Foster

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*Passion for Pinot; A Journey Through America's
Pinot Noir Country*

*Text by Jordan Mackay with Photographs by
Andrea Johnson and Robert Holmes
Ten Speed Press, Berkeley; 2009*

When I first opened this book it seemed to be no more than one more coffee table book about wine. Not so. The author has written an amazing overview of perhaps the most difficult grape grown on the West Coast. As André Tchelistcheff, legendary wine maker at Beaulieu Vineyard once proclaimed, “God made Cabernet Sauvignon, whereas the Devil

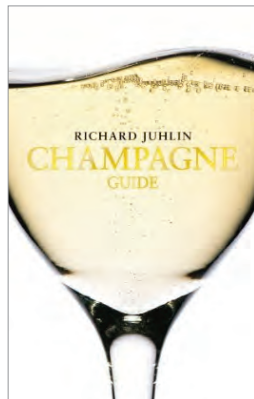
made Pinot Noir.”

The book first covers the history of cultivation of the grape on the West Coast, with marvelous asides such as a winemaker swearing he’s not trying to make Burgundy but moments later describing such wines as Burgundian. Next is a thorough exploration of *terroir* for every wine made from Pinot Noir, including each growing area and kind of wine produced. Then “A Year in the Vineyard” follows the months each grower spends nurturing this grape. An amusing section addresses how to start a Pinot Noir business with the pros and cons of every major decision that are truly mind-boggling. Equally interesting is the section on knowing when this grape is properly ripe for harvest and another on clonal selection. Here the author points out that rootstock may be *the* most important factor, but is often left out of any discussion. The final section covers the making of wine from Pinot Noir, with an overview of the thousands of decisions that go into each bottle, such as whole cluster fermentation or destemming, wood or stainless steel fermentation. Your head will spin, making good Pinot Noir is so complex.

So much for a topnotch text. The photographs on nearly every page are flat-out excellent. Each is in-synch with the text and well illustrates its topic with a focus not only on

the land but also on the scores of people growing or making Pinot Noir. The two photographers who contribute to this book are professionals, and it shows.

Highly recommended



Champagne Guide

Richard Juhlin

*Imported by the Wine Appreciation Guild,
South San Francisco; 2008*

Wow! What a great book. Juhlin, a Swede, who has written about Champagne for some time, has produced a superb book. If you are a fan of Champagne, this book is a must-buy. It begins with a fascinating explanation by the author of how and why he became involved with Champagne—his

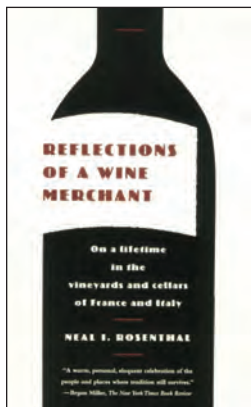
palate is so developed, Juhlin once named 43 out of 50 wines served to him blind. The book then turns to a short chapter on the history of Champagne and an explanation of how Champagne is made. So many technically advanced methods have been introduced that now even the lowest level products are far better than before. (Of course, the focus of the book is on the best of the wines from this region, not the worst.) There is also a detailed chapter on touring Champagne, with suggested itineraries and detailed sections with photographs of places to stay and dine. Juhlin writes with authority as a man well traveled in the region.

The core of the book is almost 400 pages of tasting notes on thousands of Champagnes. Each producer is rated on a one-to-five star system. For each producer Juhlin indicates if it is N-M (a Champagne house with the right to buy grapes), R-M (a grower who makes Champagne), C-M (a co-operative) or N-D (a wine made from a grower’s grapes and under his or her name, but distributed by the firm that made the wine.) The producer’s address and phone number is also listed (but, sadly, no e-mail), followed by a paragraph or two of the producer’s history. Then comes a rating of the wine with two scores. The first reflects how the wine tasted and the second how it will age. Juhlin is not

an easy grader. Unlike some American wine writers who are giving out 99 and 100 point scores more and more often, very few bubbliques in this work achieve such a lofty level.

The best wines of each vintage are charted in the back of the book. Juhlin also lists his top 100 Champagnes of all time. Taken altogether, this book is a fascinating read.

Very Highly Recommended



Reflections of a Wine Merchant;
On a Lifetime in the Vineyards and Cellars of
France and Italy
Neal Rosenthal
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York; 2008

The author, one of this country's top

importers for French and Italian wine, has written an autobiography of his lifelong quest to find quality wines to import. This is a serious work. Rosenthal pulls no punches recounting experiences with individuals who have not dealt with him with integrity or honesty. I suspect there are those in the wine industry who may be troubled by his comments.

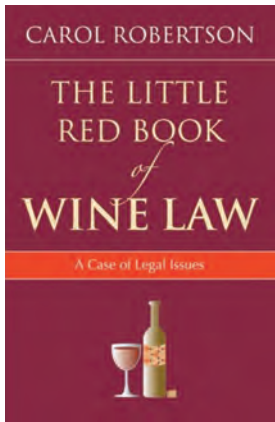
One glaring exception to his tell-all approach is the “elite American critic” who had lavished praise upon the Pouilly-Fuisses from Madame Ferret. As an American importer, Rosenthal set up a special dinner at the winery for the critic. It began with a tasting of several older vintages back to the legendary 1969, an exceptional vintage, forward to the current release of 1989, thought by the critic to be “rather chunky...with an almost sweet fruitiness and a round creamy texture.” Madame Ferret asked the critic, as guest of honor, to choose the wine for dinner. The critic chose the 1989 vintage, the blockbuster over the legendary and scarce 1969. Rosenthal was filled with surprise and dismay, although he never reveals the name of the critic. Now, let's see: a major American critic who prefers large, chunky wines? Hmm.

This book may not have the humor other autobiographies by wine importers have had

(such as Kermit Lynch's *Travels on the Wine Route*), but there is a wealth of interesting information. While the author chronicles his early days in a straight timeline, he later brings together many of his experiences into general topics such as loyalty, character, succession, and friendship. Under loyalty he provides a virtual encyclopedia of tricks played on visiting wine importers by unscrupulous producers—shipping older, lesser quality wines than the ones purchased, or trying to raise an agreed on price. There are fascinating lessons in how not to be deceived. I have to confess I was mystified by the author's description of *brettanomyces*, a wild yeast that imparts a wet horse-like smell and taste to wine, and is considered a flaw in California, but can be an attribute in Europe. Rosenthal thinks it can be part of the “essential” make-up of a wine. He writes of a need for wine to connect to nature, and seems to believe that *brett* is part of the essence of place. Rubbish. *Brett*-filled wines have a smell that transcends place or vintage and eventually obliterates varietal character. How yeast that strips away fruit and takes over flavors can be deemed essential totally eludes me. But, this is a small point in a much larger picture. The book sheds much light on the struggles a wine importer searching for great wines must endure.

Highly recommended





*The Little Red Book of Wine Law,
A Case of Legal Issues*

Carol Robertson

*American Bar Association Publishing,
Chicago, 2008*

Robertson examines twelve published decisions from different courts illustrating legal issues permeating the wine industry. The author explains the facts that led to litigation and the human issues behind them. For example, in one case the question was whether an unsigned carbon copy of a will could control distribution of a deceased's estate where the signed original could not be found but there was testimony the deceased had signed the original and that the carbon was an accurate copy of what had been signed. Sounds dull, but Robertson explains that the legal case was an attempt by distant

members of a wine grower's family cut out of the will to gain a share of the estate by finding the wine grower died intestate. Had he died without a will, these relatives would have been entitled to a share of his vast empire.

In a sense, the author is giving readers the "rest of the story." The published decision explains the legal issues. The author reveals the wine-related human story behind each case, which include contracts, relationships with distributors, labor issues and trademark disputes (the infamous Gallo against Kendall Jackson over the Turning Leaf label is here). It is interesting material, well told. Interspersed between case studies is a series of "vignettes" in which the author discusses small, less detailed legal battles that have flared up over the years. I found the section over the struggle to control Chateau d'Yquem especially interesting.

However, there is one serious flaw—there is no index. In a work replete with detailed footnotes, a hallmark of seriousness of purpose, and a back cover which indicates the book should be viewed as a "law/reference" book, how can a publisher be so dim-witted as to think this work can be used for reference? Given the number of readily available computer programs for indexing, there is simply no excuse for publishing *The*

Little Red Book without an index. Shame on ABA for this misstep.

Recommended, but not as a work of reference

California Grapevine is published six times a year.

To subscribe (\$36.00), please write
Post Office Box 22152

San Diego, CA 92122

Or e-mail niclett@san.rr.com or