

Book Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Thomas Pinney <i>A History of Wine in America: From Prohibition to the Present</i>	Daniel A. Sumner
John W. Haeger <i>North American Pinot Noir</i>	Domenic V. Cicchetti
Hugh Johnson <i>A Life Uncorked</i>	Peter J. Dougherty

THOMAS PINNEY: *A History of Wine in America: From Prohibition to the Present*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005, 532 pp., ISBN 0-520-24176-2, \$45.00

Professor Thomas Pinney's *A History of Wine in America* provides a magisterial overview of wine in America since Prohibition. His coverage is broad and detailed. He travels region by region throughout the United States dealing with industry trends, consumer behavior, individual personalities and public policy. The narrative steps year-by-year through the decades, dealing with the crises of an industry that struggled to establish an identity and secure an economic role in a society that was mostly indifferent or actively hostile. It also chronicles the industry's unsteady growth as the consumer base expanded and production adapted to the specific demands of the market. With its breadth of coverage his treatment is a welcome addition to the more narrowly focused literature such as James Lapsley's *Bottled Poetry: Napa Winemaking from Prohibition to the Modern Era*, to which Pinney makes regular reference.

Together with his previous volume, which covered the period up to Prohibition, Professor Pinney has now made available the story of five centuries of wine in America. The previous book covered several centuries; this book covers eight decades. But these 80 years witnessed a transformation from devastation to desolation and on to a painfully fitful recreation of the American wine industry into something that had not existed

before. Pinney concentrates on wine production in America and American consumption of American wine. There is little global context and he mentions U.S. wine imports only in passing and mostly ignores U.S. wine exports, which have (as he notes on page 340) become important recently. The 369 tightly packed pages of narrative are accompanied by 110 pages of endnotes, 25 pages of published and unpublished sources, and a 25-page index. The endnotes and list of sources provide a wealth of detail for the committed reader. The book is a narrative filled with data and stories of the people responsible for the modern wine industry in America and one imagines that there are more stories that the author could have shared.

The drama begins with the text of the Volstead Act, which appears on page one. Pinney mentions in passing that besides being the author of Prohibition in the United States, Volstead was best known as a supporter of farm interests in the Midwest. He does not note the irony of the agricultural destruction that the Volstead wrought or that Volstead was also the co-author of the Capper-Volstead Act, which provided the core legal support for farmer cooperatives, which became so important to the development of the wine industry a few years later. In Chapter 3, Pinney establishes the importance of cooperative wineries in the regeneration of the industry, especially in production of bulk wines that were a major force in the industry in the 1930s and for many years thereafter.

Pinney shows us how even Prohibition was not able to destroy the wine industry altogether as the remnants struggled to maintain some viability while they waited for the experiment to end. For the growers and wineries that survived Prohibition the post-Prohibition period was almost as difficult. New ventures entered, market prices fluctuated and the industry struggled with the Great Depression, much as did the rest of agriculture. The 1940s brought relief, as they did for other farm industries and during the war years higher prices created a short-lived prosperity. While not explicitly stated, the facts recounted indicate how much the wine industry is a part of agriculture, and how its history and fortune is linked to that of fruit and vegetable processing and marketing more generally.

The development of the wine industry for almost four decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s, was a struggle with disappointment following enthusiasm for those interested in creating a substantial wine market and wine culture in America. For many years much of the industry, that centered in the Central Valley of California, relied on sales of fortified wines – port, muscatel and sherry. This market encouraged the production of high-yielding low cost grapes and the use of raisin grapes as a major part of the crush. Sales of table wines were a minor part of the whole and were associated with the coast of California. Even in the 1960s, as table wine began to replace the fortified wines in the mix, much of the new demand was in the form of flavored wines or wine coolers, which also drew on very low-price grapes. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that what we now think of as the wine revolution in American finally took hold.

Just as the economic fortunes of the wine industry tracked that of other horticultural crops, so did the periodic use of public policies to enhance prices. Unlike the farm subsidies

typical for grains, direct government payments were not available. Instead growers used various supply control schemes to limit production or shift it off the wine market and thereby raise prices. While details varied, each attempt was short lived at best and brought little relief. Advocates simply found no effective collective mechanism to limit supplies that was strong enough to counter the private incentives to maintain or expand production.

One theme of the book is the use of research, technology and innovation to build the winegrape and wine industry. The emphasis on both quantity and quality was a hallmark of systematic research and industry innovation. As the industry grew and adapted, it could not rely on centuries of tradition to guide the choice of varieties, locations and production practices. While individual growers and winemakers did considerable work, university researchers, in Washington state, at Cornell and a few other schools in the east, and especially at the University of California, initially at Berkeley and later at Davis, came to play the central role in providing systematic research to support the industry. The tradition, reaching back to Hilgard in the 1880s, was renewed under Cruess and continued by Joslin, Amerine and Winkler, to name a few. Their work was not isolated to the laboratory or the field experiment. They participated actively in industry affairs and were increasingly relied upon by growers and winemakers. In the east with a much smaller industry and therefore much less institutional support, individual innovators, sometimes with informal networks of collaborators, developed practical information for their own use and that of their neighbors. For those outside California, major concerns were cold climates and conditions inhospitable to *vinifera* grapes. Steady progress allowed the gradual development of the Eastern wine industry, which now has devoted local customers and a strong base of activity in almost every state.

Despite market growth, Pinney develops a recurring motif of disappointment with wine consumers in the United States. First, he is dismayed that most American consumers do not appreciate wine at all or do not appreciate “quality wine” as much as they should. Sometimes, he attributes this failure to the wine industry for neglecting to cultivate a solid consumer base. At other times, this failure seems to be attributed to fundamental features of American history and culture. A second disappointment is that parts of the industry and some wine aficionados appear to appreciate too much “quality.” The final pages of the final chapter make explicit the author’s views. He longs for a wine culture in which wines he enjoys can be available at prices he can afford on a daily basis, and he wishes that more Americans shared this appreciation. He disdains the “idea that wine is inseparable from the worst forms of conspicuous consumption...” (pp. 368–69). And, he links the failure to cultivate a broad customer base for every day table wines with the emphasis, at least among those most closely associated with wine publicity, on wines for only the wealthy few or the special occasion.

Economists will find this an interesting and useful book, but this is not an *economic* history in that there is little economic analysis of historical events. For example, in accounting for “the Big Change” in the industry that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, Pinney outlines numerous hypotheses and concludes that they all may have contributed. But, the

idea of quantifying the contributions of income growth versus some broader cultural shift or improved grape varieties or wine making techniques does not appear on his agenda. Throughout the narrative economic issues arise, but economic questions are neither posed nor answered. No book can do everything and there is much work left for the economic historian of the wine industry.

In a break with much academic writing in economics at least, Professor Pinney makes little attempt to maintain a veneer of objectivity. His personal priorities color the story from the start. He champions the cause of wine in America and, despite its ups and downs, the story he tells is one of progress and optimism. He is clear that the forces for “good” are those that foster a successful industry and the forces for ill are those that interrupt the flow of progress. He wants consumers to value “quality” and he wants the industry to lead consumers to this ideal. He likes the idea of small personal wineries, but he appreciates that, in America, the large firms have often produced innovation and the bulk of the wine that is affordable for daily consumption. These views are not always explicit, but they are not far below the surface and the reader is not confused about where the author stands.

Economists will also find small frustrations scattered throughout. These include the casual use of statistics and a dearth of charts or tables. In many places the narrative would have flowed more naturally with reference to a time series chart or table of price or tonnage comparisons across regions. Instead, the text is encumbered with lists of selected numbers that leave the reader thirsty for a more systematic treatment. And, when economic trends and comparisons are considered, there are periodic slip-ups. For example, in comparing winegrape prices in California between 1968 and 1978, no accounting is made for the effects of general inflation during a period of very rapid climb in the general price level. When the author says, “In 1968, to take that year as a starting point, the average price per ton of wine grapes in California was \$71; a decade later, in 1978, it had tripled to \$210” (p. 232). The author and many readers will know that this statement mixes changes over time in the relative price of wine grapes, changes over time in the composition of wine grapes by variety and by region as well as the overall change in the price level. Unfortunately, while not affecting the basic message, such neglect makes it harder for readers to appreciate what was actually happening during this period.

For wine economists, *A History of Wine in America* will be fascinating and informative. It will also generate hypotheses and supply ideas for understanding the current situation of the wine industry on a global basis. The list of cited works and sources and the detailed footnotes will supply leads to follow up for further study. But, the most enjoyable feature of this history will be the wine industry stories, and more of them would have been even better.

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JOHN W. HAEGER: *North American Pinot Noir*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004, 445 pp., ISBN 0-520-24114-2, \$34.95

In a hedonistic description of Pinot Noir, Haeger quotes Joe Fleishman writing in *Vanity Fair* magazine: “At their best, pinot noirs are the most romantic of wines, with so voluptuous a perfume, so sweet an edge, and so powerful a punch that, like falling in love, they make the blood run hot and the soul wax embarrassingly poetic.”

It is a true pity that the same varietal has also experienced far less than adequate oenological coverage until now. Filling the void to overflowing, Haeger’s masterful text stands as a veritable gold standard in the field.

Using the wines of Burgundy as a historical benchmark, and launching point, Haeger traces the historical development of Pinot Noir and the initial challenges it presented to North American wine makers. They mistakenly treated the varietal in the same manner as other red wines, notably among them Cabernet Sauvignon. As Haeger is quick to point out, the mistake here was that Pinot Noir, vis à vis other reds, is generally appreciably lower in tannins and notably higher in acidity. Once these fundamental differences were taken into account, the development of acceptable, good, and exceptional Pinot Noirs was well underway. And the trend continues uninterrupted.

The book is encyclopedic in its coverage, namely: a comparison of Burgundian and North American Pinot Noirs; the broad areas of production in California, Oregon, and Canada: , in California, the Southern Central Coast, the Greater Salinas Valley, the Santa Cruz Mountains, Los Carneros, the Russian River Valley, and the True Sonoma Coast; in Oregon, the famed Willamette Valley; the Okanagan wine producing area that lies just beyond the American-Canadian border, about half way between the Continental Divide and Vancouver; and the Greater South Shore of Lake Ontario. These regions comprise over 95% of North American Pinot Noir. The remaining areas include the Pacific Pinot Zone in California, that lies to the north of San Luis Obispo; the Southwest, also in California; and, finally, the Mid-Atlantic States that include Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Each of the major wine regions is described meticulously in terms of its history as well as its terrain, terroir, and general descriptions of the vineyards therein. In a final part of this section of the book, Haeger compares the various major regions in terms of Size, Climate, Growing season, Soil content, Altitude, and the wines that are produced in each. There is also a very informative section on the development of Pinot Noir clones both in Burgundy and in North America. As Haeger puts it, the cloning of grapevines (here, Pinot Noir, in particular, although it is part of a more general viticultural issue) “...developed as one by-product of a more fundamental interest in growing healthy vine plants capable of producing commercially viable quantities of good fruit, in the face of growing threats from viral and other diseases.”

Individual wine regions are described in detail, each replete with maps and the specific or individual wine making practices, as well as the profiles of six dozen key producers; in addition, information is provided about: the varietal as developed at each of the wineries; extensive and detailed tasting notes of each of the multiple vineyards belonging to the winery; the wine growing and winemaking processes; upcoming Pinot Noir producers or ones to note in the future; finding enjoyable Pinot Noirs; and a delightfully written and very useful guide to the successful pairing of Pinot Noirs with food. One great challenge is pairing Pinot Noir correctly with seafood dishes. Haeger agrees with the notable Chicago chef, Charlie Trotter, that adding meat, meat stock, or mushrooms to the preparation serves to make the dish more Pinot Noir “friendly.”

In summary, Haeger’s treatise on North American wine is a must read for oenophiles the world-over. As such, it serves the dual purpose of a very enjoyable piece of prose; as well as being a most valuable reference source for information about the history and vicissitudes of North American Pinot Noir.

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HUGH JOHNSON: *A Life Uncorked*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006, 384 pp., 214 color illustrations, 14 b/w photographs, ISBN 0-520-24850-2, \$34.95

The proliferation of memoirs is so great that the stock appears to have split. It helps to think of them as micro-genres. One such genre may be called the confessional *a la* Augustine (as in David Ogilvy’s *Confessions of an Advertising Man*), another, the witness to history, *a la* John Reed (as in Peggy Noonan’s *What I Saw at the Revolution*), a third, the life as learning experience, *a la* Henry James (as in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*). In his memoir, *A Life Uncorked*, veteran and venerable British wine commentator Hugh Johnson transcends these divisions and raises the ante. Rather than lifting one or another established form from the memoir shelf, Johnson effectively invents his own – a form in which the life of the author imitates the essence of the subject. In *A Life Uncorked*, wine itself becomes a metaphor for the life of the man.

This is a large, sprawling, many-themed, multi-faceted, heavily illustrated (in color) book that demands to be sampled (dare I say, savored) gradually rather than read through in a linear, lock-step fashion. Johnson begins with some autobiographical reconstruction of his early exposure to wine as a student in Cambridge in the 1950s and his embryonic career as a London-based wine commentator (not a critic) and book writer. He adds a nice chronology of the high points of his life in wine (p. 29). He then follows this account by an orderly parade of sections defined by styles of wine – bubbly, white, red, sweet. But this simple frame belies the dense, overflowing appreciation of all things oenological.

Much as Johnson seemingly attempts to cram every possible facet and story of a life in wine in this book, he is not a man without method or manifesto. The philosophical heart of this book is revealed most frankly (and perhaps not unsurprisingly) in its concluding passage:

Its life, in the last analysis, is what sets wine apart. There is nothing else we buy to eat or drink that brings us the identity of a place in a time in the same way, that memorises and recalls (if we listen) all the circumstances that made it what it is...embrace the identity, enjoy the circumstances, be transported to other places and times. Embrace even the mythology: it adds to the colour of life.

Armed with the understanding that Johnson regards wine in all its complexity, fascination, uncertainty, and mystery as a living, breathing companion to humanity, an index to places, times, and events, the reader is free to sample and explore this book not so much as a single work, but rather as a collection of integrated sojourns – part education of the palate, part historical sociology of the field, part reminiscence of people and events, part geographical gazette, part business ethnography.

Just as Johnson's book offers many sides to the reader, readers of varying degrees of interest and sophistication will approach it from different angles.

It is perhaps the foremost mark of his love of the liveliness of wine that leads Johnson to plunge first into champagne, the "social drug" as he calls it in his chapter. For Johnson, champagne is "France's greatest contribution to human happiness," a claim that might raise more than the eyebrows of many of French winemakers he lionizes later in this book. After walking the reader through the history of bubbly from the monkish days of Dom Perignon onward, Johnson develops the story of champagne against the backdrop of Reims and the larger reaches of Champagne country, but the heart of this discussion comes later in the section when Johnson makes the case for champagne as an accompaniment to food – seafood and sea urchins and Asian delicacies. Following the travels of bubbly to sparkling wines the new world, Johnson finally circles back to a last acknowledgement of the monk Dom Perignon, whose attempt to blend a rival to burgundy led to the creation of champagne. That the bubbles were a happy accident fits Johnson, celebrator of serendipity, just fine.

White wine is, for Johnson, the most evocative of drinks; that which stimulates memories of the outdoors, seashores, and sun. From Sports Day in the Hunter Valley outside Sydney, Australia, to the mannered climes of the English garden party, marked by painter John Verney's depiction of summer at Saling Hall, whites capture and reflect the outdoor life. Invoking first the appeal of Riesling in this context, Johnson launches into his ethnography of whites beginning with the Germans, traveling through the French of Chablis and Chardonnay, then moving into his first extensive accounts of California and the southern reaches of Europe. He expects to be disappointed on the Mediterranean coast, but just as sure as the sun shines, identifies the bounty of Vermentino, Vernaccia, Malvasia, and other grapes peculiar to this region. One gets the impression from Johnson's excitement for white that the sun never sets as long as these wines are available.

The longest section of the book is, predictably, Red, but just as predictably, Johnson does not begin on an overly enthusiastic note. He rejects the over-zealotry of some red enthusiasts and rather more subtly sidles into his discussion of this vast subject, and obstinately adheres to his English affection for “clarets.” Dividing his main treatment of reds into explorations of Bordeaux and the Bordeaux persuasion and Burgundy and the burgundy persuasion, Johnson moves outward eventually embracing the many varieties, names, places, and people who populate this largest and richest dimension of wine and its culture. Johnson prefers the light reds of Bordeaux to the lustier, richer reds of other places. One gets the impression that, for all his affection for California, he regards American reds as he does American foods, a good match for each other if tad too intense for the European palate. He ends his discussion of red with more surprise and serendipity, noting that the reds varieties of Sicily – Fiano, Grillo, Falangia, Catarrato – offer a special treat in that they represent such an impressive sampling of native varieties.

Three hundred and twenty-six pages into this oversized work, Johnson begins his final section, Sweet. Herein he discusses Port, Tokay, and Madeira. This discussion is, not surprisingly, briefer than those of the earlier sections, but no less possessed of the wonder that he finds in the curious but splendid evolution of these varieties.

The reader of this review should know that the reviewer has merely scratched the surface and etched out the broadest themes organizing this book. Those readers steeped in the culture and commerce of wine will profit greatly from Johnson’s reminiscence of the many places and personalities that make up the world he has inhabited since his early days, a world that he helped to make. What appears to some as so much inside baseball of the wine business will be the greatest attraction to others, and this very real aspect of this book should not be understated.

That said, the impression Johnson delivers is unmistakably one of a lover, enthusiast, and commentator determined to reject attempts on the part of his fellow travelers to reduce life to form, art to science. For all High Johnson’s appreciation of what has come before, the past is prelude.

Peter J. Dougherty
Princeton University Press