

## Book Reviews

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AMY B. TRUBEK: *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey Into Terroir*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2008, 318 pp., ISBN 9780520252813, \$45.00 (paperback: ISBN 9780520261723, \$18.95).

For many, the term *terroir* conjures up images of soil, rock, slope and sun. The *goût du terroir* of a Chablis can summon the steely minerals of a limestone-rich earth. But the notion of terroir is also said to be somewhat mystical, an unquantifiable sensibility, philosophy, history. In his Foreword to James E. Wilson's *Terroir*, Hugh Johnson writes, "If Chablis tastes different from Meursault, Margaux from Pauillac, the first place we must look for the difference is underground. Terroir, of course, means much more than what goes on below the surface. Properly understood, it means the whole ecology of a vineyard, every aspect of its surroundings from bedrock to late frosts and autumn mists, not excluding the way the vineyard is tended, nor even the soul of the vigneron" (Johnson 1998, 4). According to Amy Trubek (food anthropologist, French-trained chef, and Assistant Professor of Nutrition and Food Sciences at the University of Vermont), contemporary understandings of terroir assume that quality is linked to an origin of some kind. But such an understanding is further complicated by the production, exchange and consumption of terroir products in a global marketplace. The difficulties in translating terroir, both linguistically and conceptually, strike to the heart of Trubek's question in *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*. How has terroir become a transnational concept for discerning taste? Why has an idea that is predicated on specificity and place gained momentum at a moment in which food systems and wine industries have become increasingly industrialized and globalized? Does terroir mean the same thing in France as it does in Northern California? In Vermont? In Wisconsin?

With these questions in mind, Trubek takes us on a cross-cultural voyage in search of the many meanings and practices that have come to be associated with *goût du terroir*, which Trubek translates as 'the taste of place'. This narrative, which begins in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, finds its conclusion in a discussion of maple syrup in present-day Vermont. In between, Trubek introduces us to wine producers, farmers, chefs, restaurateurs and local consumers in the rolling vineyards of Languedoc-Roussillon, in the hills of Northern California and on the plateaus of Wisconsin. Chapters 1–3 will perhaps be of most interest to wine scholars, although the importance of the subsequent chapters should be no less diminished for those wishing to know more about expressions of terroir in the contemporary United States. Chapter 1, "Place Matters," situates terroir in historical context in 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century France, and describes how new institutional initiatives (such as the 1855 Bordeaux wine classification and the establishment of the AOC in the 1930s) motivated changing notions of terroir. Chapter 2 focuses on present-day articulations of terroir in France; Trubek's study of the Robert Mondavi Winery's failed bid to establish a winery in southwest France highlights the way in which terroir takes on different meanings in France and the United States. Chapter 3 takes us to California, where Trubek investigates the practices of taste and place at wineries, and then introduces us to the idea of a 'culinary terroir', as exemplified through the emergence of 'California cuisine.'

Chapters 4 and 5 expand on the idea of culinary terroir, as articulated in the practices of local restaurants and networks of tastemakers (most notably, chefs, culinary students, farmers and researchers). The final chapter more fully inquires into the tension between place-based tastes and commodification by contrasting terroir and branding as two different categories for understanding taste and protecting food. The book then concludes with an appetite-whetting comprehensive index of products that are protected by European institutional initiatives, beginning with French AOC products (cheeses, meats, produce, olive oils and wines) and then moving on to all of the other food products within Europe that are protected by an E.U. Designation of Origin.

One of Trubek's primary arguments is that contemporary practices of tasting place are interventions into globalized orders of food and wine production and consumption. To this end, Trubek shows us how current articulations of a taste of place are conscious practices in both France and the United States, albeit for very different reasons. She traces the trajectory of terroir and *goût du terroir* in France in demonstration of the fact that its current meaning – as an indicator of taste, place and quality – is a recent development (Trubek 2008, 22). For centuries, the French vision of terroir was bound up with the construction and preservation of a French agrarian ideal: the taste of place rooted tradition in the French soil. This conception changed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of the 1855 Bordeaux wine classification. The attempt to codify the taste of place connected it to ideas of quality, an approach that gained momentum at the turn of the twentieth century as the notion of terroir became more implicated in wine culture. By the 1930s, the state had introduced the *appellations d'origine contrôlées* (AOC) system in the service of protecting French wines in a growing international marketplace. The emergent relationship between taste, place, quality and wine culture consequently persuaded terroir to take on a layered meaning in France: while it indicated a non-quantifiable cultural approach to place, such as local winemaking traditions and philosophies of flavor, it also came to denote a scientific approach to place, as something that could be known and studied (69). Over the course of the twentieth century, the French notion of terroir assumed a meaning that drew more heavily on the former; it became deeply connected to roots, memory and identity. In an increasingly fast-paced and urbanized context, the taste of place has become a conscious practice, a form of nostalgia for an agrarian history (52, 93). As such, contemporary manifestations of terroir and *goût du terroir* in France can best be understood as a way of maintaining a national identity within a globalized economy. Trubek values the French model because it embraces the cultural as well as the scientific components of terroir. But, she astutely warns that the contemporary manifestation of the French taste of place privileges nostalgia and perpetuates a view of terroir as an essentialist form of heritage-making, which thereby precludes the imagination of new possibilities in a global context (247).

The case is somewhat different in North America. Trubek traces the global circulation of the idea of terroir and shows us how the concept gives rise to different interpretations and practices in the United States. The Mondavi Affair in Aniane, France, in 2001 unfolded precisely because the California-based winery had construed 'place' and 'terroir' to refer only to quantifiable geographic properties; it understood 'soil' to the exclusion of local

tradition and identity, and was consequently denied the opportunity to build a winery by the citizens of Aniane. Similarly, Trubek shows us how many wineries in California often interpret terroir-based practices to entail only a less invasive method of production, such as the application of biodynamic methods. In the absence of tradition, practices of taste and place in the United States tend to privilege the more quantifiable, geography-based aspects of terroir, and we see that this is especially true for Northern California's wine industry. Culinary terroir, the progeny of California's wine terroir, is predicated on the idea of environmental sustainability as a reaction to a highly industrialized, de-localized food system. But the emergence of both local cuisines and taste-of-place-based food products also introduces a cultural component, wherein networks of tastemakers and consumers come together to forge robust local agrarian food cultures (237).

One might think it odd that Trubek concludes a book about taste and the specificity of place in both France and the United States with an abbreviated discussion of Slow Food, the non-profit Italian (and now global) organization that seeks to counteract the effects of an industrialized, globalized food system by linking taste, place and culture through practice. But Trubek's appeal to Slow Food emphasizes that 21<sup>st</sup> century terroir is about consciously slowing down in a fast society, and forging the local in a de-localized world. In France, this means appealing nostalgically to a bygone era and tradition in which French identity was rooted in the land. In the United States, it entails innovation and bricolage, whereby local sustainability counteracts large-scale homogenous production and where local tastemakers encourage the development of new values. In an effort to consider the global possibilities for terroir, Trubek laments Slow Food Italy's "brand of historical determinism" for privileging tastes rooted in Italy's authenticity and tradition, though she acknowledges that economic ambitions can help create new markets and motivate consumer publics to forge taste-based values (240, 243). Trubek's limited discussion of Italy should encourage us to think about the taste of place in new contexts. For example, what should we now make of the Super Tuscans, the innovative, high-quality, highly branded and American-focused Italian wines which challenged the antiquated classification system that for a long time legitimated poor quality, watery *fiasci*? Originally made in an 'international' style (that is, made with Bordeaux-style varietals and aged in *barriques* [Bastianich and Lynch 2005, 210]), but trumpeting the links between taste, place and local culture, the shiny Super Tuscans beckon us to consider how what Trubek takes to be potentially competing values – terroir and taste of place versus market forces, aesthetic ideals and cultural capital (Trubek 2008, 245) – may be differently configured. Might the innovative Super Tuscans offer us a new (or another) model for thinking about the possibilities for terroir in an increasingly globalized context? While Trubek's discussions of maple syrup and cabécous de Rocamadour cheese suggest that taste of place practices and branding strategies have the potential to co-exist, we might wonder whether they must always be "very distinct framing categories for preserving, protecting, and promoting farming and food" (212).

Trubek's work is highly engaging, accessible and provocative. We should take the book's final few pages on the taste of place in Italy as an invitation to consider global iterations of

the local beyond what Trubek so adeptly and passionately devotes to France, California, Wisconsin and Vermont. As Trubek tells us, place (still) matters.

Jaclyn Rohel  
New York University

## References

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URSULA HERMACINSKI: *The Wine Lover's Guide to Auctions. The Art and Science of Buying and Selling Wines*. Square One, New York, 2007, 256 pp., ISBN 978-0-757-00275-5 (paperback), \$17.95

My paddle shot upward following a brief pause of perhaps two seconds. “Too late, sir”, replied the auctioneer. “Last chance...and sold! The 2000 Chateau Leoville Las Cases to the gentleman in the back.” I had failed to react decisively when the opportunity struck. In this instance, I offered the same price as the high bidder, but was beaten to the punch by a split second. Fortunately, my rather inglorious initiation to wine auctions proved to be a learning experience.

In an age of convenience marked by instant access to everything through smart phones, GPS, and the web, it takes real powers of persuasion to inspire us to decamp from our sofas to tackle a new frontier. Yet, Ursula Hermacinski's infectious enthusiasm for wine auctions compelled me to travel to New York to attend my first recently. That alone speaks volumes. Not only did the book pique my interest, it helped me to successfully navigate the auction and make it a fulfilling experience. I recommend this guide to anyone who seeks to participate in these events. While written at an introductory level, auction veterans may find useful nuggets as well.

Subsequently, I placed more decisive bids on other wines, but left the auction empty-handed. Yet, this experience qualifies as a success, not a failure. Why? Apart from being outmaneuvered on the Leoville Las Cases, I never became the high bidder for any wines for one simple reason. The bidding prices rose beyond the prescribed limits I had set for myself. Had I bought other wines, I would have done so only by “overpaying” by my standards. This is not to say I wasn't tempted, in the heat of the moment, to cast aside my spending limits. Ultimately, I attribute my success in avoiding “paddle fever” to Hermacinski's level-headed counsel to carefully research wines for sale and set strict price limits.

This book sets out to introduce wine lovers to the operational aspects of wine auctions. It also seeks to engage readers with chapters on the history of wine auctions, the basics of wines, and building collections. It succeeds impressively in its primary intent, but accomplishes less

toward its secondary objectives. Still, the guide is mostly an enjoyable read, made more pleasant by the many succinct sidebar comments, data tables, photos, and descriptive text boxes.

Ursula Hermacinski is an award-winning American auctioneer who has spent the bulk of her career in New York and California. She is currently marketing director for Screaming Eagle winery. Her auction and marketing experience at this leading cult winery give her a ground-level view of the world of high-stakes wine sales and the buyer frenzy surrounding coveted, limited production wines. Hermacinski is at her best when describing the dynamics of auctions, such as bidding strategies, learning idiosyncrasies of auctioneers, and “landing on the right foot”, a reference to properly aligning one’s own bidding with the auctioneer’s bid increments and steps.

The book is divided into four parts: understanding auctions; preparing for and buying wines at auctions; selling wines; and enjoying wines. Each part serves its intended purpose, although the concept of “less is more” could have been applied more conscientiously. The overall effect would have been enhanced had the book focused on the parts two and three and significantly reduced the others.

Part 1 includes chapters on the history of wine auctions, essential wine basics, and introduction to wine auctions. The first chapter, devoted to historic context, is a tad dry and perhaps unsuited to the task of deeply engaging the reader to win his commitment to read the full volume. Yet, some interesting facts emerge, such as that wine auctions began in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, but only arrived in the U.S. in 1969. New York law banned auctioning of alcohol until 1993, so the first wine auction there occurred only in 1994, a humble beginning for what is now considered the world’s premier wine auction city.

The essential wine basics chapter is informative, but it strikes me as superfluous for serious wine collectors reading a book on wine auctions. That audience is already familiar with the grape varietals, major wine regions, classified growths, etc. highlighted by the chapter. Those seeking a deeper introductory education on wines can find numerous volumes that cover the topic skillfully.

The author provides a useful overview of wine auctions in the following chapter, outlining their pros and cons, bidding formats, sales units (lots), etc. She states that gaining access to rare and coveted fine wines is the main motive for most participants and the lack of quality guarantee (buyer beware) is the greatest drawback. Buyers of bottles that turn out to be of poor quality have little recourse – even when the bad wines fetch thousands of dollars. Given the wealth of auction houses and the awareness of the seller’s identity, it seems a pity that compensation or private insurance for bad wine remains rarely available. Fortunately, this is not a common outcome.

The next chapter highlights the roles of each of the main auction players – the boss, the auctioneer, the marketers, and of course, the buyer and seller. The influence of wine critics receives special notice, as they help raise credibility and generate excitement around certain wines. Perhaps the most interesting role is that played by the auctioneer.

This individual has a surprising amount of discretion in running the auction, but must exercise it with caution, without favoring buyers or sellers. The auctioneer, for example, can elect to override a reserve price, ignore certain bids, or alter established bid increments. As a market facilitator, he strives to sell at the highest price the market is willing to pay. The auctioneer's personality helps build momentum among bidders and the author sensibly advises them to take note of any tendencies that may tip off certain actions, especially an item's final sale. I observed this directly at the auction I attended, noting that one auctioneer worked considerably faster, and dropped the hammer sooner, than the other.

Part 2 leads prospective buyers through chapters covering the auction catalog, bidder preparation for auctions, types of bidding, and receiving purchased wine.

The auction catalog offers indispensable information and may be the single most important preparatory item. The means by which "lots" are assembled and sold receives ample attention. Lots are the units offered at auction, and range from a single rare bottle to many cases. All bidding aims at buying a lot. Usually collectors prefer to buy full cases of a wine in its original wooden case, but sometimes auction houses organize mixed lots around a theme, like California reds or Bordeaux of a particular vintage.

The catalog includes sales price range estimates based on prior auctions and market conditions. Typically an auction house price range brackets the likely sales price, but sometimes outlier results fall beyond it. This occurs with extremely rare bottles where low sales volumes provide limited historic guideposts and at the beginning of new market shifts. During the 1990s when growing private wealth and rising popularity of wine collection met with the emergence of scarce and coveted cult wines in the U.S., auctions repeatedly saw price breakthroughs. More recently, a growing fraction of wines have sold below their estimates as the global economic downturn dampens prices. Near the nadir of the recession, a review of a Christie's auction in New York (December 2008) shows that a significant share of first growth Bordeaux lots sold below their estimated price range.

Much of the guidance provided is more common-sense oriented than revelatory. Still, it is helpful to hear it from a seasoned veteran of auctions. For example, she advises bidders to study the list of lots for sale in advance, select those worthy of bidding upon, set maximum price limits, and stick to them. Hermacinski encourages those lacking the discipline to remain within their own price limits during the heat of the auction battle to consider using absentee written-order bidding submitted prior to the auction instead.

Coverage of the auction itself is a veritable "how-to" manual, with information on what to expect, when to arrive, and even how to dress and where to sit. This chapter is excellent preparation for neophytes like me seeking to avoid common missteps while plunging into the world of auctions. The author's characterization of different bidding styles (the "early-action bidder" and the "late-entry bidder") offers insight into the dynamics of auctions and the role personality may play in the bidding. Perhaps most comforting, the book encourages participants to ask questions and interact freely with the auctioneer if they are confused or need help. This helps to humanize an environment that can seem intimidating.

Part 3 details steps and strategies for selling wine at auctions. While only a minority of consumers buys wine at auctions, even fewer sell at auctions. As such, this information may be of limited practical interest to most, but it offers important glimpses into auction economics.

A major element of selling wines is selection of an auction house. Numerous auction companies deal in wines, and some may be better suited for particular types of collections than others. The author advises prospective sellers (consignors) to examine competing auction houses, and follows with a suggested approach to researching them. She sensibly suggests proposing the same list of wines to be sold to more than one auction company in order to compare their estimated sales prices and reserves. This method allows the consignor to gauge each auction house's selling philosophy, professionalism, and willingness to negotiate. Selling philosophy refers to the approach taken in attracting bids from buyers. Some houses may set low reserve prices and let the bidding escalate in hopes that momentum built through starting at lower levels translates into higher final hammer prices. Others start with higher reserves – but run a greater risk of bidders failing to reach the reserve price, and items going unsold. The bottom line for sellers is selecting the auction company that will provide the best financial outcome, net of service charges and other fees. This is not an easy task, and the book illuminates the process and raises the likelihood of satisfying results.

Some auction houses are more willing to negotiate terms with consignors than others, particularly when valuable collections are at stake (worth in excess of \$500,000 or so). Commonly, the vendor's commission charged to sellers falls in the range of 15 percent of the entire collection (the buyer's premium is in the same range). Additionally, insurance, shipping, handling, and other fees apply to sellers. Auction companies prefer not to negotiate these fees, but in the end, they may be willing to adjust or waive some of them, depending on total value and other factors.

Chapter 11 details the operative elements of selling wines. Prospective sellers submit a list of their wines to an auction house, which evaluates it and returns an appraisal of wine values and charges. If both parties agree to proceed with an auction, the auction house provides a detailed contract. Hermacinski provides helpful insights regarding the contract, providing plain English translations of typical legal language. Above all, she urges, read the contract carefully and consider having an attorney review it.

Part 4 covers the basics of wine collecting, charity auctions, and wine tasting. While this content may be of interest to some, I find it to be of limited use since it strays from the central subject of guiding readers through wine auctions. Others cover these subjects more thoroughly, and I refrain from reviewing them here.

The economics literature on auction theory offers useful insights. A number of interesting questions have been posed by economists. Do different auction bidding formats result in distinct outcomes regarding efficiency or distribution of surplus between buyers and sellers? Why do hammer prices at a given wine auction frequently vary substantially for the same wine? Is the popular English auction format the most practical approach? Which format maximizes gains for sellers? For buyers? By offering details of how auctions intend

to function, and how they actually work, the book may stimulate further thought by economists on these and related questions.

In closing, *The Wine Lover's Guide to Auctions* fully accomplishes its core mission of preparing prospective (and current) wine auction attendees to participate successfully in these events. Happily, the author emphasizes personal enjoyment as a key part of the auction experience, and helps to elevate it beyond merely a forum for economic transactions. The book capably addresses its secondary objective of providing basic background on wine types and regions, collecting, and tasting, although these sections are burdened by their attempt to cover deep subjects with great brevity. Overall, the book is an important, user-friendly contribution in an area of rapidly growing interest, and undoubtedly will assist numerous wine lovers to engage favorably the intriguing world of wine auctions. I consider myself among those who have been thus informed by Hermacinski. Armed with the book's insights, now augmented by my recent auction experience, I feel well-equipped to lay claim to my own case of Leoville Las Cases at a future auction – but only if the price is right.

Mark Heil\*

U.S. Department of the Treasury, Washington, DC

**HERVE THIS:** *Building a Meal: From Molecular Gastronomy to Culinary Constructivism*. Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise. Columbia University Press, New York, 2009, 135 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-14466-7, \$19.95.

**GERARD LIGER-BELAIR:** *Uncorked: The Science of Champagne*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, 152 pp., ISBN 0-691-11919-8, \$27.97.

**JONATHAN NOSSITER:** *Liquid Memory: Why Wine Matters*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2009, 262 pp., ISBN 978-0-374-27257-9, \$26.00.

If you are new to the phenomenon of Hervé This, *Building a Meal* may be the best place to start. The book, one of at least ten by the redoubtable French chemist and cofounder of molecular gastronomy, gives a survey of its author's interests while retaining the advantages of variety and brevity. The book is arranged around six recipes, and with one exception (a futuristic chocolate mousse), they are basic to the repertoire. In presenting these familiar foods, leg of lamb, for example, or lemon meringue pie, This expands on his fundamental interest, the chemistry of cooking processes. The lamb leads to a discussion of grilling, braising, and the behavior of collagen. The pie chapter gets into meringue as an example of the physics of crack propagation. *Building a Meal* also includes photographs, boxed-text digressions, and interviews, all of which help make this short book friendlier reading than, for

\*No official endorsement of the views in this paper by any agency of the U.S. government is intended or should be inferred.

example, his more technical *Molecular Gastronomy*. Yet it's not all chemistry. Cooking's social and artistic aspects are also on the menu; philosophy, history, art, love—it's all you can eat, in a usually accessible but occasionally jargon-basted, excitable style. "[C]lassical cuisine has now been superseded," This tells us, by culinary constructivism, molecular gastronomy's applied form. "Tomorrow we will eat what we invent today."

Researcher, educator, television personality, blogger, Hervé This is on a mission: to test some twenty-five thousand traditional beliefs he has gathered from the fatted corpus of French culinary literature. Is it true, for example, squid are tenderer cooked in water containing burned matches? Pursuing this goal has led neither to indigestion nor madness. Rather, it's generated a large, often fascinating amount of information on kitchen chemistry. Emulsions, foams, gelling agents. Liquid nitrogen, Maillard reaction (browning), inhibited polyphenol oxidases (to keep your beans green). That a scientific understanding of terms like these has found its way from lab bench to restaurant, where it has encouraged more experimentation and discovery, owes much to This's efforts. The ambitious aim of all this activity is to put the usually willy-nilly transformation of culinary practice onto a rational basis, while giving practical advice to home and professional chefs.

You may not cook a great deal of squid, but what about boiling eggs? Ask five people how to make a good hard-boiled egg, and you'll likely get ten answers, a fair indication this is a complicated question. Similarly, bouillon. It seems straightforward, but when you start taking the task apart into pot choice, cut of meat, temperature, time, water depth, lid, no lid, lid partly open, and so on, you realize you are sailing uncharted depths. Hervé This wants to nail this business down, and the popularity of his work is a strong signal many sympathize with his determination, believing if not life in its grander dimensions then at least cooking would be more pleasant if we could clear up some of our quotidian uncertainties.

I for one have removed a measure of randomness and anxiety from making French fries thanks to This, and I know how I did it. Cut 12 mm wide sticks. Rinse them to remove free starch granules, which will burn otherwise. Dry them, so the water doesn't drop your oil temperature, which is 180 degrees C. Crust the surface starch by immersing the potatoes in the oil for seven minutes. Remove and pat dry within one minute, while internal steam pressure is still preventing the fries from absorbing oil. Reheat oil to 200 degrees. Fry the potatoes again, crisping them now until golden. Drain and dry. This recipe makes consistently good, healthy fries. They are so light and dry I dress them with olive oil. (Use enough frying oil to cover the amount of potatoes you are cooking. Most of this recipe is in *Building a Meal*. I had to turn to *Molecular Gastronomy*, though, for the cooking times. In neither place does This discuss choice of potato and oil, or the challenging geometry of cutting rectangles from a sphere. Cooking is complicated!)

Owing largely to kitchen chemistry's popularity, the French Academy of Sciences has created a Food Science and Culture division to encourage culinary science nationwide. A cadre of culinary engineers is emerging, trained to seek out and use innovations like *fibrés* (artificial meat and fish) and *conglomèles* (artificial fruits and vegetables) across the food

industry. *Le maître* seems earnest in his concern for healthier, happier eaters. One can only hope all the hard work doesn't simply lead to cheaper Yoplait.

Since its genesis in 1992, the culinary scientific dalliance has spawned a delightfully lurid trend in luxury restaurants. By 2006, alarmed at the public perception their cooking had become the mere pursuit of novelty, mol gast luminaries Heston Blumenthal, Ferran Adrià, Thomas Keller, and writer Harold McGee found it necessary to issue a statement distancing themselves from the movement. "'Molecular' makes it sound complicated, and 'gastronomy' makes it sound elitist. We may use modern thickeners, sugar substitutes, enzymes, liquid nitrogen, sous vide, dehydration and other nontraditional means, but these do not define our cooking," they say. "Our cooking values tradition, builds on it."

I'm all for accuracy in pleasure's preparation, and for proper tools, both causes This champions in his struggle to wrench kitchen practice from what he understands as its medieval backwardness. And I can't help feeling a bit disappointed if leading chefs (with the exception of This devotee Pierre Gagnaire) are losing their enthusiasm. Yet like them, perhaps, I'm wary of cooking—and of science, too—becoming so well comprehended it's clinical, dead. Doesn't even chemistry involve a little unpredictability and improvisation, the occasional thrill of flying blind?

Leave on your lab coat and safety goggles. Reims physicist Gérard Liger-Belair's *Uncorked: The Science of Champagne* is another techie read, this one taking a microscopically close look at a tiny, surprisingly interesting topic, the bubbles in effervescent wine. *Uncorked* is good fun in the Horatian sense, useful and charming, not unlike the beverage itself, I suppose. It presents its topic with patience and simplicity, benefiting greatly from its author's easygoing tone and a generous number of instructive illustrations and photographs.

Facts are a poor substitute for wit, of course. But while not all of us can be witty, many of us can remember a few things. If you suspect you are a dud on the rug, listen up. This is a list of Liger-Belair champagne wow-formation.

Removing a champagne cork disturbs the thermodynamic stability reigning inside the bottle. Bubbles appear as the formerly dissolved carbon dioxide rushes like kids going on recess toward a new equilibrium, with the atmosphere outside the bottle.

An average bubble measures 500 micrometers across. In a flute of champagne, two million of these would form if you didn't have the brains to drink it before something as explicable as that happened. (By the way, the champagne coupe may not have been modelled on Marie Antoinette's breast. As Liger-Belair points out, it could have been Madame de Pompadour's. Its own anatomical parallel aside, a champagne flute is in any case preferable. It extends the flow of rising bubbles and concentrates the flavors and aromas the bubbles transport.)

Bubbles do *not* form on tiny scratches in the crystal of your glass. The scratches are too small for that. Instead, the bubbles "nucleate" in cavities in the fibers of paper or cloth that will still be in your glass no matter how well you wipe it.

A photograph of something really little is called a micrograph. *Uncorked* presents micrographs of fibrous “bubble nurseries.” The busiest ones produce thirty bubbles per second, three times more than beer, dude.

Between birth and death champagne bubbles grow in volume by a factor of one million. They grow because they continue to take in dissolved carbon dioxide on their way up, up, up.

Organic compounds in champagne partially insert themselves into the surface of a rising bubble, stiffening it. This collection of surfactants, as the fragrant and flavorsome bits are known, would slow the ascent were the ongoing growth of the bubble not continually enlarging the clean surface. The surfactants end up at bubble bottom, acting like a rudder and keeping the path of the bubble straight.

Bursting bubbles launch aromatic, 100-micrometer jet drops into your nasal nociceptors. That’s why you don’t need to swirl your flute. Interestingly, nociceptors are there to sense noxious, potentially damaging stimulation. It’s not just buying champagne that’s masochistic.

Champagne crackles rather than producing steady white noise because popping bubbles set off chain reactions of more popping: avalanche behavior!

Bubble rafts, bubble caps, flower-shaped structures, violent sucking: Liger-Belair has plenty of pictures of stuff like this. If you are turned on by fractals, you will probably like these.

Surfactants tend to gather on the surface of the champagne, first around the rim. This eventually makes it difficult for bubbles to burst, which is why they tend to hang around longer if you are not drinking up.

Fat molecules (potato chips; lipstick) tug at the bubble membrane, and the bubble pops faster than it would otherwise.

Long-lived bubbles degas without bursting. Their carbon dioxide just seeps out in a silent sigh.

Finally, if you don’t drink your champagne but go on staring at it, you will see your bubbles revolving in little galaxies, vortex patterns determined by your cup’s circular rim. Of course, if you are drunk, the same thing may happen, which proves drunks sometimes make sense, I think.

Like Hervé This, Liger-Belair is into lifting the veil, revealing the face of an enthralling mystery. This is science, impulsively voyeuristic, typically human. Champagne, thankfully, has the power to preserve its mystique. For though I know now what Liger-Belair knows, like Faust, I feel I’m basically as clever as I was before. Champagne is still champagne, with plunging depths, euphoric velocities no camera will catch. We may be able to describe it, that is, but short of making a pact with the devil, I suspect we’ll never understand it. Champagne is chaos, true, irreducible complexity.

A reworking of his 2007 *Le goût et le pouvoir*, *Mondovino* director Jonathan Nossiter’s book *Liquid Memory* is a rambling combination of travelogue, memoir, and

politico-philosophical analysis of wine and its place in our consumer society. Nossiter offers his book as a fresh take on the subject of his memorable and provocative film. For me the content and approach are about the same, and produce roughly the same reactions: an occasional nod of agreement, the suspicion the documentary tone is a cover for a one-sided, convenient agenda, and a good deal of head-scratching over what his theoretical ideas mean. As reality-bound as the books I've just discussed but not nearly as carefully expressed, by the end *Liquid Memory* had me on the run back to the hardheaded world of the scientists.

Nossiter once more casts himself in the lead, in the familiar, creaking guise of Don Quixote. Again he wanders a fragile, threatened world of wine (Paris, New York, Rio, Madrid), talking to greater and lesser of its denizens, seeking affirmation for his unpersuasively literal view that wine is a form of human memory and for the drastically phrased thesis that it is "our only safeguard against the devastating lies of marketing and the cynical exploitation of global markets, culture, and politics." An additional defense, one he urges every wine drinker to forge, is taste, "the coherent relation of ... preference to one's own conduct, to an ethical relation to oneself and to the world." What he means in plain language is learn not to drink cheap, overly sweet, mass-produced wine because you are cheating yourself, screwing the small producer, damaging the environment, ruining the chances of your children to drink good wine, and generally messing up society. If that strikes you as news so stale even a Miami Beach retiree with her Yellow Tail on an intravenous drip knows it (and it's not stopping her), that's because it is. Nevertheless: "The moment you abdicate responsibility for your own taste is the moment you voluntarily abdicate your freedom." High-minded, patronizing, optimistic, embattled, nostalgic: Nossiter has a style all his own. (As you can see, his book is also a fine example of how badly expressed leftist ideas morph instantly into righteous-sounding Tea Party talk.)

Crucial to Nossiter's ideas is *terroir*, like wine itself, a slippery subject. Wine is not just chemicals, of course, and *terroir* is not just rocks and weather. Yet trying to take the definitions past this point gets tricky. Nossiter is undeterred, and predictably *terroir* is many things to him: "where you come from and where you are going"; "this notion of claiming a *heimat* [homeland], without the *heimat* claiming you"; "the beauty of a specific identity, a specific culture"; an expression of "individuality"; "identity"; "diversity"; "an act of generosity." At the same time, "*terroir* has never been fixed, in taste or in perception"; and "because neither *terroir*, nor nature, nor men are fixed ... a wine of *terroir* is by its nature an ultimately indefinable, unquantifiable agent of memory." And yet: "Bearing witness and preserving memory [of cultural *terroirs*] is the bedrock of civilization."

I am happy to agree that *terroir* is open to definition. But if it is, then it can't have an intrinsic identity, right? Nossiter hems and haws, finally abandoning his reader in this loop, forcing us to have our Zind-Humbrecht and drink it too. His bothi-ness of reasoning is the book's most confounding element, muddling his discussion of taste, which must somehow be democratic and nonjudgmental, as well as his definition of wine. On one page he celebrates the likeable idea that wine "is a curse for relentless rationalists, unrepentant pragmatists, and all the busy codifiers of this world, anxious for absolutes." Yet on another he goes the opposite direction(s): "The specific subjectivity of the wine-drinking experience became clear to me, though it didn't mean that taste and perception were infinitely relative. That's

a postmodern position as fatuous as the eternal adolescent notion of applying definitive judgments.” Hand-wringing and cage-circling like this are characteristic of the book and tiring reading.

Other topics include wine words, fancy restaurants, wine retail in Paris, the rape of Spanish wine, interviews with leaders of the younger generation in Burgundy. Of these the interviews have the most value. Nossiter on wine words is a study in smirking self-contradiction. He ridicules those who use them, uses them himself, and offers no plausible alternative. He also disregards the brain science pointing toward verbalization as an inevitable mode of understanding (summarized by Jamie Goode in *Questions of Taste*). If you enjoyed Nossiter’s treatment of Michel Rolland in *Mondovino*, you will approve of his drive-by on eminent chef Alain Senderens. Elsewhere Robert Parker, Jr., reprises the purple punching bag. He’s been an easy target for myopic sarcasm and the acidity police for too long. When is someone going to give the Parker phenomenon the nuanced attention its complexity and significance deserve?

*Liquid Memory?* Redolent of barnyard.

Peter Musolf  
Yokohama

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BENJAMIN LEWIN: *What Price Bordeaux?* Vendange Press, Dover 2009, 292 pp. ISBN 978-1-934259-20-7 (hardcover), \$34.95

Benjamin Lewin is a scientist who is the founding editor of *Cell*, a leading biology journal, as well as the author of several books on science. He also is a Master of Wine, a title granted to less than 300 worldwide by the Institute of Masters of Wine in London. His skills in both areas enabled him to provide an in-depth investigation and analysis of the topic of the pricing of Bordeaux wines.

My interest in this book stems from my background as a scientist and a grape grower in the Outer Coastal Plain AVA in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

As we learn from Lewin, much of the wine produced in Bordeaux is relatively mediocre and inexpensive, yet Bordeaux wine at its best is rarely equaled and is one of the most coveted luxury beverage items. How can wine from Bordeaux range in price from under \$5 a bottle to over \$1000? While *What Price Bordeaux?* by Benjamin Lewin is not an economics text, it does illuminate how the Bordeaux wine market functions and how such price differences occur. It is particularly focused on the high end of the market where the current price is still related to a classification system that was constructed in 1855. To give us unprecedented insight into the pricing of Bordeaux wines, Lewin relentlessly pursued

the facts from records and archives and spoke with countless chateau proprietors, negociants and others inside the wine trade. He has assembled and presented this information quantitatively in this excellent book which includes 117 figures comprised of pie charts, bar and line graphs, rankings, maps and other illustrations.

From a grape growing viewpoint, Bordeaux is a “cloudy climate” region like our Mid-Atlantic as opposed to the “sunny climate” regions of California or Australia for example. While cloudy climate regions generally produce less powerful and less fruity wines than the sunny climates, the wines often are of greater elegance and finesse. Terroir has been the basis by which the French approach and appreciate wine. Elements of the ecosystem known as terroir include the climate, soil, grape varieties grown and the technology that man uses to grow and produce the wines of a given area. While there is no ideal terroir for all grapes, one can define goals for growing grapes and making wine to produce wine of the highest quality. That is one of the functions of an appellation system.

Lewin makes several important points about wine pricing in Bordeaux as it has evolved over time in relation to the fundamental concepts of terroir and the appellation and classification systems that help define the market.

First, some of the elements of terroir in Bordeaux have changed dramatically over the past several centuries. One of the most important man-made changes has been the draining of the *marais* (marsh areas) of the Medoc by the Dutch beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Good drainage is one of the most important aspects of soil in the production of high quality wine, especially in a cloudy climate region like Bordeaux. Gravel mounds, consisting of topsoil on sand on top of a gravel bed with underlying layers of clay and sand, and “deep” soils where there is no restrictive layer to limit root growth, are some of the good grape growing soil characteristics one can find in the better growing regions of Bordeaux as well as our Outer Coastal Plain AVA.

The importance of the weather during the growing season gives rise to the use of the vintage year on the label. Weather and soil drainage contribute much more to wine quality than other aspects of the soil nutrition of the vine. Yet, as Lewin points out, due to the unpredictability of the weather, crisis is the rule rather than the exception in the Bordeaux region. In 1956 winter cold temperatures killed many of the vines necessitating replanting of vines that should have a life expectancy of over 50 years. Bad weather increases vineyard costs and may decrease the quality and the price of the wine in a poor vintage. Recouping the loss in a poor year requires especially high prices during good years. While it is unclear that the frequency of “great” growing seasons will change, the climate in Bordeaux is warming and there is less rainfall at harvest, both of which can contribute to better grape ripening and lower likelihood of rot.

The grape varieties grown in Bordeaux have changed from a preponderance of white grapes to over 90% red. The red grapes grown include Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Carmènere and Malbec. While Carmènere and Malbec are rarely grown and Cabernet Franc plantings have declined, the proportion of Merlot grown has seen a steady

rise. The reasons for this are manifold and include the earlier drinkability of Merlot-dominated red wines due to lower amounts of tannins and more supple tannins than Cabernet Sauvignon and the increase in sugar content at harvest which yields higher alcohol wines. Most Bordeaux reds are a blend of two or more of these varieties. This has the advantage of adding sophistication, complexity and roundness which a wine made from a single variety may lack. The disadvantage is that the consumer may not be familiar with the blend of a chateau. It was as recently as 2005 that the INAO allowed the mention of the grape varieties on the label, something that Americans are quite familiar with and look for in choosing a wine.

According to Lewin, grape growing and winemaking techniques have benefited greatly by scientific advances over more than a century. Diseases such as powdery mildew, phylloxera and downy mildew invaded French wine growing regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and eventually were brought under control in the century's latter half. Pasteur's elucidation of the role of yeast in the process of fermentation put winemaking on a scientific basis. Lewin points out some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributions which the great French enologist Emil Peynaud made to our understanding of the production of high quality wine including the importance of malolactic fermentation and the need for barrel replacement. Another aspect of wine culture which is mentioned but perhaps is underemphasized, is the importance of wine in the lives of so many of the Bordelais since grape growing was established in Bordeaux in Roman times. Bordeaux is the largest grape growing area in France. There are currently 10,000 producers and 13,000 grape growers with 310,000 acres under cultivation in Bordeaux along with some of the best institutions for the study of viticulture and enology. Its history and vast size make the wine growing culture associated with this region second to none in the world in wine knowledge and experience.

Lewin excels in his description of the wine market system in Bordeaux. There are 3 billion Euros in sales of Bordeaux wine annually, making Bordeaux second in sales in France only to Champagne. 70% of those sales take place in the system of wine professionals known as the *Place de Bordeaux*. This system is comprised of three groups whose roles and relative importance have changed over time. The two main groups are the proprietors of the chateaux and the negociants. The negociants are wine brokers who may serve as the distributors in France and importers to foreign countries. The third group is the courtiers who serve as intermediaries. The system is set up to smooth out price fluctuations in the market such as those that occur between poor and good vintages. Yet the system does not prevent the wine lake of nearly 20% of the wine which cannot be sold and often winds up at the distillery, or the huge gap in prices of the lower versus upper end wines. Comparatively little is done in the promotion or advertizing of wine and relationships between proprietors and negociants are rarely cordial and often adversarial.

Lewin devotes a large amount of material to a critical examination of the 1855 classification in which a five-group hierarchy was established for the best wines of the Medoc based on price. He points out the major differences in the wines and winegrowing at the time of the classification compared to now and brings into focus the issues related to current pricing. Based on the average prices in the Medoc over the past decade, only

one-third of classed growths would be in the same group today as in 1855. It is clear from his arguments that there are so many factors that have changed that this classification is outdated. While this is not a new concept, it has never been as well supported.

What role do the critics play in the pricing of Bordeaux wines? The topic is examined here, at least for the high end wines, by a quantitative look at critic's scores. The low correlation (only 40% to 60%) between critic's ratings and the release price that Lewin finds is disconcerting. In this consumer driven industry, information about wine is often through the wine critic's interpretation or the reputation of the chateaux rather than by the consumer actually tasting the wine. Lewin shows that a more important factor in the release price of the wine is the price of the previous vintage. Since this question has been well examined by economists and others, some references to their work would have greatly improved the presentation of this topic.

Lewin assails the current system of selling future wine production known as *en primeur*. In this system wine is sold in the spring of the year following the harvest. The wine will not be bottled and released for nearly 2 years or more after being sold, so the quality and ultimate demand for the wine is unknown. The price of the wine that is sold is based on barrel tasting, market hype and the reputation of the chateau. While Lewin gives excellent arguments and facts regarding the folly of what he terms as the "*en primeur* game" it is surprising that he omits recent important economic analyses of the process. Such analyses support his position in that they show the lack of correlation of the *en primeur* price and the market price and further demonstrate that the market price is better correlated to the growing season of the vintage.

This book is an excellent addition to a wine library as it provides the consumer with an important foundation of information regarding the history, function and constraints of the wine market in Bordeaux. It is particularly informative regarding the pricing of high end wines and describes (albeit without economic rigor) market efficiencies in producing and selling these benchmark wines. It examines the changes in Bordeaux grape and wine production that have occurred which should inform the consumer that the use of the 1855 classification in determining wine price is fraught with problems. The book has a section entitled *Wine as an Ultimate Luxury Item*, which was relatively well written but also was a lost opportunity to present important economic publications addressing this subject. It would have been better to have included this topic in a chapter on wine investment that addressed such issues as investing in wine for portfolio diversification and the real return from collecting wine.

It is surprising that the author omits much of the wine-relevant economic literature. Furthermore, despite his presentation of a good deal of information on supply and demand issues and changes brought about by competition from sunny climate regions, he fails to mention the production of wines of similar style and elegance from cloudy climate regions which likely will be a future source of competition that could alter the supply demand relation.

Lawrence R. Coia  
Outer Coastal Plain Vineyard Association

ROBIN GOLDSTEIN and ALEXIS HERSCHKOWITSCH: *The Wine Trials 2010: The World's Bestselling Guide to Inexpensive Wines, with the 150 Winning Wines Under \$15 from the Latest Vintages*. Fearless Critic Media, New York, 2nd ed., 240 pp. ISBN 978-1608160075 (paperback), \$14.95

Like previous editions, Goldstein and Herschkowitsch's *The Wine Trials 2010* would be a valuable addition to any casual or serious wine drinker's bookshelf. The pithy descriptions of the 150 best wines under \$15 provide information about each wine that, quite remarkably, is not collated elsewhere in a convenient usable format.

If such descriptions of good value wines were all that this book accomplished, the book would probably not merit a review in this journal. However, this book also has considerable interest to economists. The source of this interest is two-fold. First, this book convincingly describes how consumers' lack of information about individual wines may generate social welfare losses and argues that blind tasting is the best way to eliminate this information problem. Second, the book follows its own advice and reports data on the best wines collected using modern methods that should be familiar to any economist doing empirical work today. The ultimate result of Goldstein and Herschkowitsch's efforts may be no less than a fundamental shift in the way the wine market operates to an environment in which value, as measured by taste rather than perception, is paramount.

In the first section of the book, the authors eloquently detail how today's wine industry actively encourages consumers to pay far above marginal production costs to drink wines that simply do not taste any better on average than inexpensive wines to most consumers. They provide evidence that the information consumers have about wines prior to purchasing them is largely controlled by the wine industry. More expensive wines are rated higher by industry publications like *Wine Spectator* even when blind taste tests reveal no significant relationship between price and taste for everyday consumers (Goldstein et al., 2008). Even self-proclaimed wine "experts" do not find the more expensive wines to taste much better. The authors posit that much of the reported enjoyment consumers derive from drinking wine has nothing to do with its taste but rather the perception that they are drinking a good wine. Because they are stuck in an environment that rewards flash and marketing over taste, even small producers have a disincentive to produce wines with the best taste, thereby perpetuating the problem. Ultimately, the book's first section is a critique of the wisdom of drawing welfare conclusions from revealed preference data in an environment with asymmetric information. The authors' critique of the wine industry should apply equally to other consumer products that feature many closely substitutable varieties about which information is scarce to the consumer.

The wine reviews themselves, which make up the bulk of the second part of the book, are written by the authors based on reports of blind taste testers. This amounts to a one-page report on each of the 150 highest ranked wines one by one including useful suggestions for food pairings. Most interesting to a general (wine-neutral) economist audience is how the underlying data points are collected. The authors randomized 450 wines into numerous blind tastings and selected the 150 best for the book based on the resulting data using reports filled out by

testers. The fact that the resulting data set captures individuals' preferences for only the taste component of the wine drinking experience across wines leads to some intriguing questions.

Subject to the technological constraints of the human palate, the authors do a commendable job of data collection. The blind tastings organized by the book's authors successfully achieved random allocation of wine attributes not observed by tasters (like price) across the tasting population. This facilitated successful isolation of preference relations over taste not conflated with other attributes of the wines. Assuming that individuals' wine preferences are not perfectly idiosyncratic, something that could be tested with the blind tasting data, the same preference relations also exist on average out of sample, meaning that the book contains valuable welfare-enhancing information for the rest of us. Elsewhere in the economics literature, the closest that one comes to this sort of exercise are the speed-dating experiments conducted by Fisman et al. (2006, 2008). However, the *Wine Trials* authors are in some sense more ambitious. Rather than simply report on the attributes of wines that people prefer, they come to normative conclusions about inefficiencies in the wine market that crucially depend on the underlying model of behavior that generates the data.

Two mechanisms come to mind as potentially important in rationalizing the claim that pricier wines are not more enjoyable. Kamenica (2008) formalizes a model in which the choice set contains information about the (unobserved) quality of each choice. In this context, his model would argue that the authors are essentially correct, that people do not drink more expensive, heavily marketed, or cute-label wines because they actually like them better but because in the face of costly information acquisition, they have some evidence that these wines are popular. The fact that the popularity is a choice of the wine industry itself is either lost on people or an accepted second-best outcome for risk-averse consumers because it at least indicates that the wine they are buying is not God-awful. In this environment, the \$14.95+tax cost of this book is a small price to pay to improve one's wine selections and the *Wine Trials* series clearly has tremendous social value for it breaks the wine industry's near monopoly on information.

A competing explanation is that the utility most people derive from drinking a glass of wine is actually a function of both the taste and the prestige, which is increasing in price, marketing, cuteness of label or experts' or peers' ratings. This is akin to the "warm glow" effect demonstrated to be an important component of charitable giving (Karlan and List, 2007). To be clear, suppose that the wine drinking component of utility has the production function  $V(T,R(p))$  for Taste and Prestige, which itself is increasing in wine price  $p$ . Therefore, we can express utility as  $U(V(T,R(p)),y-p)$ . Based on evidence in Goldstein et al. (2008), assume that  $T$  is not a function of  $p$ . Given some continuous distribution of income  $y$  in the consumer population, wine producers will sell wines at all points in the optimized price distribution. As is argued in the extensive hedonic literature going back to Rosen (1974), consumer heterogeneity means that the equilibrium price function is likely to be steeper than the marginal willingness to pay function for better "quality" wine, as measured by  $V$  or prestige. That is, pricier wines are "better" in the sense that they deliver a higher  $R$ , but not as much better as the price difference implies because of positive sorting on income.

As a benchmark, assume that producers are perfectly competitive and all have access to the same technology. If they are pricing at marginal cost, it must be that the inputs into producing expensive wines are more costly. Evidence reported in the book demonstrates that the marketing costs of prestigious wine producers are indeed much greater than those of producers of table wines. But there is an inherent inefficiency here in that the equilibrium price-prestige relationship is pinned down by consumer preferences. Therefore, achieving high prices given perfect competition *necessitates* high marketing costs assuming wine production costs vary little with prestige. One way of interpreting the authors' lamentations about the current state of the wine market is thus not that people have preferences over prestige per se, but that prestige is increasing in price and thus is also increasing in marketing. If a superior rating in independent publications such as *The Wine Trials* establishes itself as an alternative marker of prestige, then this relationship will be broken and preferences reduce to become a function only of taste. However, if prestige is truly a structural function of price then there is little scope for welfare improvements. While it may be theoretically possible to engineer non-distortionary lump-sum rebates back from producers to high price paying consumers, this is probably not practical.<sup>1</sup>

My first explanation for the current state of the wine market leads the question as to why a market for better information heretofore has not been well developed. In some sense, one may argue that *The Wine Trials* is a solution to such a market failure. Since information about wines' quality is a public good, there might have been under-provision by the market. If the second model is more accurate, one may ask why wine producers do not establish their prestige by using means other than price, allowing them to undercut their competitors. One answer is that there is no incentive to shift this equilibrium because they would all make 0 profits either way. The only difference would be that in the current environment the rents go to promoters and in the alternative environment most of those rents would go to consumers. If it is costly to shift the equilibrium, no producer would find it to be a privately worthwhile investment, even if it may be socially worthwhile. Once again, in this environment *The Wine Trials* could be the conduit through which the primary marker of prestige changes.

In the beginning of this review, I stated that *The Wine Trials* would be a valuable resource for the expert wine drinker as well as the casual one. My claim is in contrast to Eric Asimov's criticism in his "The Pour" blog posting from April 22, 2008, a piece also discussed in the book. Asimov's central argument is essentially that wine aficionados have enough experience that they know what they are doing, and by revealed preference they therefore must be doing things right. His claim is that the wedge between experts' opinions and the blind tasting results is attributable to the setting. While this argument may be correct, meaning that non-taste attributes are important, I submit that it is still important for people who claim to be wine experts to actually think deeply about the attributes of the

<sup>1</sup> Alcohol taxation is the primary mechanism by which such rebating already occurs, though unlike lump-sum transfers it is likely to involve deadweight costs.

wine drinking experience that lead to their enjoyment and to non-experts' enjoyment. Otherwise, they cannot truly be experts. The authors' introduction to *The Wine Trials* provokes such deep thinking and self-reflection. It may additionally be the case that while experts do not find more expensive wines much tastier on average, they know wines well enough to only drink the expensive wines that they themselves find tastier. Data from *The Wine Trials* may provide valuable new insights into this selection process.

The accuracy of the authors' claims of inefficiency in the wine market does ultimately rest on whether price enters directly into people's preferences, or whether price is just an indicator of status or a perceived indicator of taste. If price enters directly into utility, one can legitimately argue over the authors' assertion that people would be better off if it did not. The debate over endogenous preferences is well beyond the scope of this review, but it is a serious debate with valid points on both sides. It may be true that we would all be better off if we did not care directly about the price of the wines we drink, but such a claim is probably not empirically testable. However, it does seem that it would be feasible to empirically distinguish between the preference relations over price, information and prestige in wine tastings for future editions. In future tastings, Goldstein and Herschkowitsch may wish to additionally randomize over listed prices and another measure of prestige to distinguish whether people enjoy drinking higher price or higher prestige wines more, independent of taste, ultimately recovering the V function. In addition, it would be instructive to have versions of the trials in which there is full disclosure about the wines being tasted to serve as a baseline control set. In any case, *The Wine Trials* is an interesting, provocative and eminently useful book that through its mere existence has the potential to fundamentally improve the functioning of the wine market.

Nathaniel Baum-Snow  
Brown University

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ROBERT M. PARKER: *Parker's Wine Bargains: The World's Greatest Wine Values Under \$25*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2009, 512 pp., ISBN: 1439101906 (paperback), \$17.99.

[Disclosure: I am the co-author of *The Wine Trials*, another print guide to inexpensive wines. Our first edition was released the year before the publication of *Parker's Wine Bargains*, and our second edition, *The Wine Trials 2010*, was released afterward. While this gives me a unique perspective, it also might be viewed as a source of bias. In the interest of fairness, the editors also offered Parker the opportunity to review *The Wine Trials* for this journal, and he declined. While no author can claim to be perfectly free from bias, I hope that you judge the integrity of my review on its merits.]

Even if the exaggerated style of winemaking championed by the critic Robert M. Parker, Jr., has fallen out of fashion amongst wine geeks these days, there are a hundred legacies that will endure for generations beyond the particulars of the man's palate: his points.

Robert Parker was not the first wine critic to employ a 100-point scale, but it was he that etched the paradigm of attaching numbers to wine into the collective consciousness of the gustatory media. Parker's leading competitors in America—Stephen Tanzer, *Wine Spectator*, *Wine & Spirits*, *Wine Enthusiast*—all currently use 100-point rating scales. Even the divergent foreign competition now gravitates toward other functionally numerical forms of secondary-school-test-mark mimicry: letter grades from A to F, points out of 10 or 20, glasses out of three, stars out of five.

If attaching numbers to wine turns out to be Parker's main legacy, it's a major one. A few decades ago, the wine writer's primary role was merely to describe wines. But the purpose of the wine writer after Parker is to quantify their quality. The few prominent modern wine critics whose reviews *don't* revolve around numerical ratings are in the minority, and they tend to be interpreted by some observers as an anti-Parker faction—even when they have no intention to be. You know that a framework has become canonical when anything in the field that doesn't adopt it is understood as an attempt to refute it.

Canonization can have a stifling effect on the developing talent in the enterprise of writing. The literary scholar Harold Bloom has suggested that the canon can be a paralyzing force in the lives of up-and-coming poets, who struggle with the task of differentiating themselves from the same voices that inspired them to pursue poetry. Read too much, in other words, and you might convince yourself that there's nothing new to write. The novelist Benjamin Kunkel, asked by London's *Observer* whether he was influenced by the more famous novelist Dave Eggers, expressed that tension in a way that will be familiar to many writers: "Everyone I know has read him, but I don't read very much contemporary fiction. I wanted very much to create my own sound, and I didn't want to feel that I was either running to meet him or deliberately running away from him."

Not reading Eggers is a choice that any fiction writer can make. But not reading Parker is hardly an option for the modern wine writer: the shelves of most upmarket wine stores are strewn with past and present *Wine Advocate* shelf-talkers, which function like permanent

retrospective installations of Parker's work. So we have no choice but to engage, and in so doing, we often divide: into those who run to meet Parker, perhaps with deference to Jacques Chirac and decades' worth of popular wisdom from industry veterans; and the increasing numbers that run away from him, perhaps with complaints of global convergence on a big, oaky, high-alcohol style of winemaking, the marginalization of terroir, and maybe just a tinge of jealousy toward the man who made millions tasting wine.

If contemporary critics are split on the merits of Parker's exaggerated palate, though, their revealed behavior of replication shows there to be supermajority support for his points methodology. Parker points were first imagined, in the spirit of Ralph Nader, as the guerilla ammunition for the consumers camping out in the vineyards, their last line of defense against wine bullshit. The funny thing is that the vision of independence from producers that originally inspired *Wine Advocate* seems to have been completely lost on the modern copycat magazines, many of which display full-page ads from the same producers whose wines are rated. Some even solicit application fees to be considered for wine awards. (Ashenfelter et al., 2010). *Decanter*, for instance, charges up to £103.70 or US\$156 per bottle.

Meanwhile, to his great credit, Parker has more or less maintained his independence. He still doesn't accept ads from wineries, and he still makes his money by selling subscriptions and books. Although, inexplicably, he doesn't always taste blind—and although he was recently embarrassed by a lavish junket bestowed by the Argentine wine industry lobby (later documented by wine writer Tyler Colman) upon his right-hand man, Jay Miller—Parker's core principles appear to be almost as unique in the industry as they were when first introduced 30 years ago.

Why, then, has he left behind his points system in his newest book and first foray into the world of inexpensive wine authorship, *Parker's Wine Bargains*, a 512-page tome whose mission is to reveal “the world's best wine values under \$25”?

The proximate answer might lie in the fact that the book doesn't mention specific vintages but instead reviews each bottle in general terms. Readers are referred to the “Vintage Smarts” section at the beginning of each chapter for more specific guidance. But why not at least attach each wine to a point *range*, as Parker has often done with barrel tastings?

Are inexpensive wines simply not worthy of Parker points?

Or, perhaps, is the omission of vintages and scores, along with burying “Vintage Smarts” in the less-read introductory text, connected with the decision not to year-stamp the book's cover, which, in turn, is a response by Simon & Schuster to the troubled bookstore industry's current preoccupation with reducing inventory risk, one of its few levers of cost-cutting?

Another possibility, and a more sympathetic one, I think, is that Parker wanted his inexpensive wine guide to be more accessible to everyday wine shoppers, not just the sort of wine geeks that subscribe to his website and buy his 1,536-page *Parker's Wine Buyer's*

*Guide No. 7*. Perhaps he saw the potential for the specificity of his 100-point scale (and maybe even his discussion of individual vintages) to be off-putting to the average consumer who is less in search of a wine priced in the hundreds of dollars that needs to be cellared for a decade, and more in search of a good, affordable bottle to drink with tonight's meal—in other words, probably about 99% of wine drinkers.

Whatever the reasons behind the decision to leave out Parker points, I think it fair to assume that *Parker's Wine Bargains* aims to be more accessible and useful to the everyday wine consumer than one of his monster tomes. The back cover calls the book a “handy guide to low-priced wines for both everyday drinking and special occasions.” It's exciting, the prospect of the world's most famous wine critic reaching out, for the first time, to an audience of unprecedented breadth. To what extent does the book achieve these aims?

Taken as a book to be read, not as a guide with which to buy wine, *Parker's Wine Bargains* is an impressive tour through the landscape. More than 3,000 wines appear in the book, each with a short review of a sentence or two. That's quite a number, and it makes for good browsing. So do the concise, helpful introductions to each region, most of which seem aimed at a very general audience, showing welcome restraint. If you know Parker and the critics that work for him, then you know more or less what to expect from the review writing: it's always confident, often of a certain sternness, and generally laden with fruit and vegetable adjectives, some obscure, some not.

As for the coverage, although 178 pages of the reviews in *Parker's Wine Bargains*—almost 40%—come from France, that's to be expected. This is Parker, after all. I admire the fact that Argentina (29 pages), Germany (24 pages), Austria (18 pages), Portugal (13 pages), and Greece (7 pages) are given the treatment they deserve: not as passing novelties, but as regions to be taken seriously, especially in the realm of under-\$25 wines. Washington State gets a surprising 11 pages, almost half as many as California's 24; Oregon gets only three.

Spain is the most slighted region, with a disappointing 20 pages that include just six red wines from Rioja. I consider Rioja reds to be some of the best values in all of the Old World, particularly when it comes to bottle aging before release. It's common to find five-year-old (or, in practice, even six- or seven-year-old) Gran Reservas under \$25. Of course, is well established that Rioja is hardly Parker's style. When he visited Logroño in November 2009 for the Wine Future-Rioja conference—the first time he set foot in Spain since 1972, according to his biographer, Elin McCoy—he chose to hold a tasting of 18 Grenache-based wines (only five of them Spanish), instead of the local Tempranillo for which Rioja is famous. McCoy wrote that this choice “angered local winemakers” so much that “some boycotted the event.”

While a preference for intense, heavy styles is to be expected from a Parker book, the marginalization of dry rosé cannot be overlooked in a guide to inexpensive wine. Even finding a rosé wine in *Parker's Wine Bargains* is a major challenge; so far as I can tell, there is no index or list of them, and in one of the book's several major organizational flaws,

you're stuck flipping through 512 pages and keeping your eye out for pink shading (as opposed to red or gray) in the tiny glass schematic next to the wine name.

Three-quarters of wine produced in Provence is rosé, so that chapter, written by David Schildknecht, might seem a natural place to start. But Provençal rosé is dismissed wholesale by Schildknecht as an “ocean of pink plonk,” whose “existence” is blamed largely on the “uncritical comportment” of the “tourists who flock there” (although the “natives” share some blame as well). As a result, only the “small upper echelon” of rosés is “interesting.” How ignorant, those vacationers on the seaside who gaze out at the waves and simply *enjoy* the refreshing local wine with their grilled seafood instead of complaining about how *uninteresting* it is!

Of the more than 1,000 French wines under \$25 recommended in the book, just seven are rosés from Provence, and even these seem chosen for their un-rosé-like qualities: one displays a “white-wine-like personality”; one has “carnal undertones...impressively concentrated”; another is “meaty.” One wonders whether Schildknecht has sworn off bread and salad as “plonk,” too, and eats only boar and venison, even at the beach. It would behoove Parker to assign Provence to a critic who actually enjoys the region’s archetypal style: not “carnal” rosé, but rather crisp, thirst-quenching, *rosé*-like rosé, the savior of many a summer afternoon for the fishermen of Marseille, for the billionaires of Antibes, for the vacationing winemakers of Bordeaux and Burgundy. To everything, there is a season.

That principle is better embodied by one of Parker’s other critics, Mark Squires, who covers Portugal and Greece. Parker, like any good businessman tackling growth, has been delegating much of his work to an expanding cast of characters, and each of them writes differently. One of the benefits of this approach is the work of Squires, whose open-minded palate and minimalist prose turn out to be the most appropriate of anyone’s, including Parker’s, for a nonvintage guide to inexpensive wine.

Not only is Squires’ chapter on Portuguese wines versatile—for instance, rightly lauding both the complex concentration of Alentejo and the refreshing acidity of vinho verde—but it’s also relentlessly accessible. In 99 reviews, Squires cites only five specific fruit flavors (blueberry, grape, plum, lemon, and lime), focusing instead on basic properties like acidity, tannin, oak, and sweetness. Given that the review is supposed to be generalizing about several different vintages, this choice makes a lot of sense. Instead of communicating the details of his *own* experience of a given wine, Squires predicts what the *reader’s* experience of the wine is likely to be, even if the reader tastes a vintage that Squires hasn’t, and even if the reader doesn’t speak wine-speak. He writes, in other words, with the book’s purpose and constraints in mind.

Just as importantly, he also knows when to stop writing. Squires’ reviews average about 15 words, roughly half the book’s norm. Behold his entire review of Quinta do Ameal Loureiro: “Bright, somewhat mouthwatering, and delicate, as most Loureiros are.” Too obvious? Only to a real snob. Helpful, even to a wine geek? Absolutely.

Immediately following Portugal is South Africa, where Schildknecht surpasses Squires' chapter-long specific-adjective count in a single review, his fourth of the chapter, which describes Backsberg's Klein Babylons Toren as having a "rich, polished, barrel-enhanced mélange of tobacco, sealing wax, plum, blackberry, humus, iodine, underbrush, and sweetly floral notes, all suggesting a Bordeaux wine that would cost at least three times its price." Ah yes, that unmistakable sealing wax-underbrush-iodine profile of Bordeaux costing at least \$63. Maybe that's what those ignorant tourists in Provence should be yearning for.

By the end of Schildknecht's eighth South Africa review—we're still only on the second page of the chapter—he has also mentioned quince, wet wool, lime zest, mulberries, sage, fresh green beans, apple, nuts, lemon, rose hip, more flowers, saddle leather, licorice, "smoky black tea," vanilla, "lightly cooked blackberry and blueberry," mint (twice), tobacco (twice), black pepper, sap, "dried black currants," tar, (just plain) tea, baking spices, black olives, acacia, peach, cress, and white pepper. Later in the chapter, he identifies such pomposities as "salted grapefruit," grapefruit rind, winter pear, "restrained gooseberry," milk chocolate, roasted red peppers, "smoky Latakia tobacco," beef jerky, soy, baked apple, tangerine zest, "salt-tinged nuts and grains," and "tomato foliage."

If the small size, friendly cover, and omission of vintages and point scores in *Parker's Wine Bargains* invites in a new audience of everyday wine drinkers, then adjectives like that cast them right back out again. This spotty but persistent out-of-touchness with the mainstream audience is the central tension of *Parker's Wine Bargains*. Consider, for instance, how little attention is paid to dry sparkling wine, a category much sought out by American consumers, whether as a dinner-party apéritif or for one of the "special occasions" mentioned on the book's back cover. The past few years have seen an explosion of widely available *méthode traditionnelle* wines under \$25 from Spain, California, and Washington State. Yet of the 3,000 bottles listed in *Parker's Wine Bargains*, only 19 (0.6%) are dry sparkling wines, of which only three are Spanish Cavas and *none* are American.

But that's not the worst of the out-of-touchness. Inclusions and exclusions are always debatable in a wine guide, but the disorganization and poor indexing of *Parker's Wine Bargains* harm the book's usefulness to almost any reader. Wines are categorized only by region, and within region, they're alphabetized by producer. Nowhere are they indexed or listed by style or color, whether red, white, or rosé; by intensity or sweetness; or by any other metric of choice, other than one (puny) list of sparkling wines. These gaps would be problematic even in a book of 100 wines, but in a book of 3,000, they're disastrous. Whether you're shopping for wine to drink with oysters, grilled fish, steak, or dessert, it's not clear how or where you should begin your search.

The natural thing to do might be to flip to the brief "Best of the Best" section, which appears at the book's conclusion. But there, the editing is sloppy (Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay appears as one of the best "medium-bodied red wines"), and the holes in coverage are baffling enough to transcend the facially defensible subjectivity of the undertaking. For instance: although the Mâcon region is described as "effectively the world

capital...of Chardonnay and arguably home to the world's greatest values from that grape," apparently that's not good enough—not a single Burgundy, white or red, makes the “Best of the Best.” Of the eight Pinot Noirs in the section, one is French, but it's from Aude, in the Languedoc, and seven are from the New World (mostly New Zealand).

No Beaujolais—neither village nor cru—makes it into the “Best of the Best” either, even though in that chapter's introduction, Schildknecht writes (now inexplicably sounding like an Italian translating his native language into English) of the region's “sensational quality-price rapport.” In fact, the only two red subdivisions of “Best of the Best” are “medium-bodied” and “full-bodied.” Here, as in Provence, the message is clear: light-bodied just doesn't cut it, and the best bang for your buck comes not from the styles and regions that are naturally inexpensive—Provençal rosé, red Beaujolais—but rather from New World imitations of more expensive, concentrated styles of wine. Squires' dissident voice is lost in the chorus, and the “Best of the Best” is plagued by imbalance.

The sloppy editing of that section points toward a broader sloppiness throughout the book. For example, one wine—the Cuvée Alexandre Apalta Vineyard Merlot from Casa Lapostolle, a well-known Chilean producer—is accidentally listed in *Parker's Wine Bargains* twice, once in the Chile chapter and once in the Argentina chapter, with two completely different reviews. It's described on page 84 (Chile) as having an “expressive bouquet of smoke, pencil lead, spice box, black cherry, and black currant,” while it's described on page 14 (Argentina) as having “an attractive nose of black currant, blueberry, vanilla, and clove.” Only the black currant appears to have made the trip over the Andes.

Certainly it's puzzling how Jay Miller, author of both of these chapters and an expert on both regions, could not have caught this mistake. But rather than overreacting to that fact, we should focus instead on the larger implications of the differences between the two reviews: not only is the whole business of attaching fruit adjectives (never mind point scores) to wines problematic in the *intersubjective* sense (i.e. what you smell and taste might be unrelated to what I smell and taste from the same wine), it's even problematic in the *limited subjective* sense: the same person—even a renowned wine expert like Jay Miller—smells and tastes different things in the same wine from one day to the next (Goldstein et al., 2008). This is a problem whose treatment is insufficient in all of Parker's literature, and indeed, in most wine literature. Richard Quandt's “On Wine Bullshit” and Raffi Khatchadourian's fascinating *New Yorker* article on commercial flavor factories, “The Taste Makers,” are both important pieces of reading for anyone who still takes most of these fruit adjectives seriously.

But the biggest flaw in *Parker's Wine Bargains* lies not in its poor organization or arbitrary adjectives, but rather in the fact that many of the wines reviewed in the book are unavailable in the marketplace. It's not clear whether or not there's a production or breadth-of-distribution minimum for inclusion—none is mentioned in the introduction—but a good portion of the recommendations turn out to be practically useless, even to the savviest of Internet-ordering readers. Take, for instance, the listing of Veldenzer

Grafschafter-Sonnenberg feinherb, a Riesling from a Mosel producer named Günther Steinmetz. If this wine is currently available for sale at any store in the United States, this reader, at least, was unable to locate it after an exhaustive search, which included a lot of time on Google and an inquiry with *Mosel Wine Merchant*, Steinmetz's importer, who told me that 2007 was its last imported vintage, of which only 21 cases were distributed, all of them in Oregon and Washington State.

Some of the 100-point cult wines in *Parker's Wine Buyer's Guide No. 7* may be famously elusive, but if wines recommended in *Parker's Wine Bargains*, whose stated mission is to recommend bargain wines for "everyday drinking," are impossible to find, even in America's largest cities, it brings the book's central function into question. What is Parker's purpose, exactly?

Certainly his longstanding success does not derive from his ability to catalog the current inventory of your local supermarket, nor does it derive his ability to pick out blackberry or tobacco from a wine's bouquet. It does not derive from the consistency of his observations, from his stated purpose of sorting out the good wine from the bad, or from any other of kind consumer advocacy. It comes, rather, from Parker's talent for escapism, from his confident use of superlatives to capture the sensory imagination.

For most readers, flipping through an issue of *Wine Advocate* and reading about 100-point wines is like flipping through an issue of *Motor Trend* and looking at pictures of a Lamborghini: it's an act somewhere between aspiration and entertainment. You're not really considering whether the Diablo's 5992 cc of displacement would be sufficient to get you where you're going quickly and comfortably. You're not even looking to buy a car. You're reading the magazine because imagining yourself behind the wheel of a Lamborghini recreates the seventh-grade psyche of perfect possibility that is still buried somewhere in your weary folds of cortical memory.

Teenagers feel immortal, people always say. They think the finish really lasts forever.

It is the mix of idolatry and attainability that make Parker's prose so compelling: these wines that win 100 points are described as Platonic forms, yet they're also physical objects with real molecular structures; they're liquids that can, at least in theory, come into contact with your mouth. Your local wine store doesn't have the object of worship, and you couldn't afford it anyway, but that's hardly the point. It's the ontology that matters: the idea that some wines really *do* win 100, that it is concretely possible to taste perfection, is irresistible. The very thing that invalidates Parker's writing as nonfiction is what redeems it as fiction: his topic isn't wine. It's human contact with the divine.

Many of the people within the wine world that have become increasingly disgusted with so-called "Parkerization"—the tinkering with a style of winemaking to bring out more fruit, more oak, and more alcohol in hopes of improving a Parker score—would paint the celebrated critic as a power-hungry dictator with designs on reshaping the wine world just to please his palate and fortify his wealth. But to adopt that view is to misunderstand the fundamental human mechanics of Parker's vast appeal. Winemakers may feel obliged to

please him, but consumers are under no obligation to follow him. If you want to understand Parker, look in the mirror.

Robert Parker is no dictator. He is a storyteller. The magnetism of his prose is that of J.K. Rowling's, too: you're first presented with a set of familiar facts and situations, and then, slowly, you're seduced into suspending reason and believing in the perfectly impossible. Escape into a Parker review, and for a few sentences, there you are, back in junior high, the great critic's palate—and yours, too—cured of its nagging mortality. In this counterfactual place, there is no perceptual bias, just perception. There is no confidence interval, just confidence. Parker's 100-point wine is Gatsby's green light, the orgiastic ghost of taste's future, the tongue a sudden lattice of infinite resolution, the nose a sudden instrument of preternatural whiff.

Take away the Parker points—a slight disturbance that might at some point have seemed merely cosmetic to the book's editors, like a font change—and that alternate reality suddenly slips away, like the memory of a dream in the seconds after you awaken. All that's left in the sober morning light is an iterating network of fruit-adjective configurations in black and red type violating 512 sheets of white paper.

It's not easy to be a wine writer after Parker. This fact, even Parker must face.

Robin Goldstein  
Fearless Critic Media

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