

Book and Film Reviews

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Ray Walker <i>The Road to Burgundy: The Unlikely Story of an American Making Wine and a New Life in France</i>	William H. Friedland
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RAY WALKER: *The Road to Burgundy: The Unlikely Story of an American Making Wine and a New Life in France*. Gotham/Penguin, New York, 2013, 320 pp., ISBN: 978-1592408122, \$26.00 (cloth).

“Listen, Virginia. I don’t want to argue with you about whether Santa Claus is alive; I’ve got a better hard-to-believe true story.”

“I know you hang out with a vinous gang so you should like this Horatio Alger all-American boy story. He drinks beer, thinks wine is for snooty people, goes to Europe with his girlfriend, they go out to dinner in Florence, a house wine is brought that is great. They happen to sit next to a young French couple, get into a friendly conversation that joins the two tables together. A fabulous evening, and our hero has finally had his first wine epiphany, a drinkable wine.”

“They go back to the States and he begins his search, finding that the ‘best’ wines come from Bordeaux, starts with some medium-priced Bordeaux wines which he hates. Wondering whether he should just pay the fantastic price of the top Bordeaux wines, his wife suggests going to a Bordeaux tasting at a local wine shop. When they learn the Bordeaux tasting was a week ago and that they will be tasting Burgundy wines tonight, he’s ready to leave but they decide to have a taste and, bingo, he has his second wine epiphany. Now he wants, not just to drink Burgundian wine, but to go to Burgundy, and make his own wine! He and his family now live in Burgundy where he’s making wine, and when he started this, he didn’t even speak French.”

This story is so incredible that, on the book's dust cover, Anthony Bourdain, the writerly restaurant chef, calls the story "extraordinary" and "unbelievable," and Rex Pickett, author of *Sideways*, remarks that it "will convince anyone that their dreams, no matter how harebrained, can be realized." And while I accept that Ray Walker's story is true, I must admit that I still wonder.

Ray Walker has worked for seven years in his family's real estate business, become disenchanted, and then become a trainee at Merrill Lynch, where the money is good but the job isn't him. After three years at Merrill, disliking the job and reading whatever he can find on Burgundy, he decides that he needs to work in a winery. Even though he admits to his wife that the pay is lousy, she supports his idea. His initial job search produces nothing, largely because he openly admits that he doesn't drink California wines. So he pours out his heart on an Internet network from which he's been getting wine information and gets thousands of envious visitors and people who encourage him. Ultimately, he gets a cellar rat's part-time job cleaning tanks at a San Francisco urban winery.

Part-time work turns into full-time employment as harvest preparation gets under way. Ray develops an urge that others working in wineries and at harvest also experience: he wants to make his own wine. Where can he buy a ton of pinot noir grapes? It can't be Chardonnay, a Burgundian white grape; it has to be a red Pinot. Nobody knows where he can buy a ton of grapes, so, finally, a co-worker suggests that he substitute Petite Sirah grapes, but even these are impossible to buy. So he talks it over with his wife who learns he wants only Pinot Noir grapes, so maybe he has to buy his grapes in Burgundy.

This starts a series of international phone calls to wine *courtiers* in Bourgogne asking, in his pitiful French, whether they have a ton of pinot noir grapes to sell. Most can't understand his French and hang up; a few, who persevere, find his request ridiculous: what is he going to do with a ton of grapes in Burgundy? Back to his sensible wife, who suggests that, if he wants to make a trip to Burgundy to look for grapes, she'll agree if they toss in Paris. Thus agreed, they plan a trip to France with their infant daughter.

Wait! This story gets better.

By the time they arrive in Paris the next winter, Ray's French has improved considerably because he's been studying like crazy, he knows that his grapes have to be not only Pinot Noir but also at the *village* level—that is, the third level of quality, for which he has sufficient money and for the level of quality for which he is willing to go. He really wants *grand cru* or *cru* grapes but knows that those are impossible for a stranger to obtain as well as being beyond his financial means. He also now knows the hierarchy of *village*-level grapes and can therefore aim for the best, knowing that he will probably have to sacrifice if he can obtain mid-level *village* grapes.

He has no contacts in Burgundy and is going in cold, but he's determined to get the best grapes possible for his wine.

Ray really has a terrible addiction!

Within a few days, the attraction of Parisian bread and croissants and the freshness of fruits and vegetables at the markets put similar foods in San Francisco to shame. After two weeks in Paris, he, his wife, Christian, and daughter, Bella, drive two hours to Reims, capital of the Champagne district. Ray admits that Champagne wine is great, but he really isn't interested—it has to be Burgundy. Christian loves Burgundy, even with snow on the ground.

Soon enough, they are in the land of his obsession, where the land is “alive.” After checking into a hotel, they leave immediately to drive through Burgundian villages. Wow! He loves them. The next day, after more driving around, they see a hotel in Puligny-Montrachet and then stop and run into its owner, Olivier Leflaive, who, upon hearing who they are and why they are in Burgundy, and what their budget is, adjusts his €350 high season rate in his completely empty hotel to fit the family's budget.

A few days later, Olivier invites the family in for an inquisition: why are they in Burgundy in the wintertime? Ray tells him about his addiction, and Olivier agrees to help him find grapes, pointing out—despite his lifetime of experience in Burgundy with wine and winemakers—that he has to taste and taste if he doesn't want to get cheated. Eventually, through a series of accidents, Ray is introduced to the son of a wine *courtier*, who, asking a bunch of questions, discovers that this brash American knows practically nothing, has no experience fermenting grapes, has no facilities and only a few thousand dollars to make wine in Burgundy, speaks practically no French, and wants to buy *village*-level grapes. Nevertheless, he agrees to look for grapes not for next summer—those grapes are already contracted for—but the following year.

Back goes the family to the United States, where he starts more seriously to learn French.

After getting a \$20,000 investment as a result of a 15-minute phone conversation so that he will have adequate funds to make wine in Burgundy, he gets a phone call from the Burgundian *courtier* about buying grapes.

I won't continue the details, the accidents, and contingencies that arise, but before you know it, he is making wine in Burgundy with *grand cru* grapes. The impossible has become possible because of all the accidents, he and wife and daughter have made a lovely family, and because he seems almost like an idiot child the community has taken to its heart, everyone who hears his story helps out, and he has only one negative experience.

While still seemingly impossible, this story is well written, remarkably engaging, and occasionally painful when he honestly presents himself as the idiot child, but he

ends up fulfilling his addiction making wine with his family in Burgundy, where they now all live.

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CHARLES L. SULLIVAN: *Sonoma Wine and the Story of Buena Vista*. Wine Appreciation Guild, San Francisco, 2013, 359 pp., ISBN: 978-1935879848, \$24.00 (cloth).

Charles L. Sullivan's latest book solidifies his already firm position at the head of the California wine table (Sullivan, 1998, 2003). In *Sonoma Wine and the Story of Buena Vista*, Sullivan is at his colloquial best. His passion for Bay Area wine history jumps off each of the 300+ pages as the reader is showered with compelling tales and fine historical detail. What the book lacks in penetrating interpretive analysis (and there is much to quibble about in this regard), it more than makes up for in its attempt to leave no stone unturned in the complex development of Sonoma. Sullivan has indeed put together a book about Sonoma wine history—largely through the lens of its most famous estate—for many generations to come.

To be sure, this is no economic tract. In fact, while scholars of wine and California will find some sections of use, the book is better positioned to reach a leisured audience with a personal or perhaps professional connection to the subject. There is, however, an almost subconscious thread of historical economics that underpins the entire narrative. The history of Sonoma wine, from its founding to the present, was marked simultaneously by the decisions of its pioneers and entrepreneurs as well as by socioeconomic factors acting upon Sonoma's tastemakers; immigration, rail travel, economic busts and booms, phylloxera, and the more recent transformation of California wine into a global brand. Sonoma, and Buena Vista, made history and were made by history.

The book's twenty chapters are filled with lustrous images, newspaper reproductions, maps, and antique photographs. In addition to aiding the story, these lend the book a collectable and luxurious feel. Fifteen of the twenty chronologically ordered chapters set the narrative before World War I, including eleven chapters focusing on the short period 1850–1900, a circumstance that often has the reader “running in place” (coincidentally, the title of Chapter 10). The remaining five chapters subsequently deal with post–World War II history at too brisk a pace.

Chapters 1 and 2 review the relatively well-known history of California wine before 1850, though in Sullivan's hands the events seem to come alive. The highlights here include the secularization of Mexican/Californian missions,