

Whereas Pigott makes his preference crystal clear, I am still occasionally conflicted as to which is the greater grape, Riesling or Pinot Noir. A brief conversation at the 2014 Passport to Pinot with Wynne Peterson-Nedry of Chehalem, a noted producer of marvelous wines from both, may eventually sway me in Pigott's direction. If we use the desert island test, she pointed out, Riesling would be more appropriate to accompany what we are likely to eat. Hmmm. A compelling argument, but I think I'll continue to study the question.

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MIKE VESETH: *Extreme Wine: Searching the World for the Best, the Worst, the Outrageously Cheap, the Insanely Overpriced and the Undiscovered*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2013, 233 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4422-1922-9, \$24.95 (cloth).

It is a very catchy title that makes you anticipate fabulous revelations, great secrets, and the solution to all the problems that may arise from bibulousness. If this is not quite the case, it is perhaps less the fault of the author than of the episodic nature of the subject matter. As the title promises, much of this volume deals with "extreme" wines or "extreme" aspects of wine, and it is not a priori clear what the best organizing principle might be for an approach like this. In any event, the discussion contains many interesting and some amusing factoids—I use the term to indicate that many of the assertions in the book rest on hearsay rather than on statistical evidence and that the provenance of the alleged facts is sometimes uncertain. But the author clearly intended to write not a scholarly book but one that would inform and, at the same time, entertain, which it does quite well.

The book reads a little bit like the author's blog on wine (available at <http://wineeconomist.com>): it is chock-full of facts, some well-known and some not at all, occasionally amusing, but somewhat disorganized, and for a reader who is well-versed in the tasting and the lore of wine, it is like a bunch of extra shakers of various spices to add to your meal so that you enjoy it more. It is interesting that the author insists, more than once in the book, that he does not make a habit of rating or recommending wines; this admirable self-restraint might well be practiced by other wine experts. So what is the ultimate aim of the book? This question is best answered in the author's own words:

A lot of *The wine economist's* are searching for the wine world's outer limits: "What is the best wine?" They ask. The best wine value? The best wine brand? The best wine magazine? ... Implicit in these queries, I think, is a certain anxiety. There are lots of wines out there and consumers are worried that they are choosing poorly, paying too much, or getting advice from biased or incompetent wine gurus. (pp. 11–12)

We are, in fact, treated to a discussion of the worst wines, as well as some of the best, in the context of ratings by Parker, Tanzer, and Jancis Robinson, closely followed by a discussion of the most famous, including the famous 1855 classification that elevated the “gang of four” (Veseth’s term) to exalted status. This is followed by some well-known examples of horrors, such as the Austrian antifreeze episode and the case of Thomas Jefferson’s 1787 Château Lafite. The oldest wines commercially available are Madeiras at the Herbfarm (<http://www.theherbfarm.com/dining/wine-cellar.html>); see, for example, the 1795 Companhia Vinicola do Madeira, Terrantez, which sells for \$10,000 a bottle. I should add that there is a nice discussion of Malbec wines, marred only by the absurd assertion that “most economists are more comfortable with theories than with facts.”

Quite logically, we proceed to a discussion of the most expensive wines, with special attention paid to the very special year 2009. A nice discussion of the Australian wine industry, with its booms and busts, is followed by historical remarks about the effects of Prohibition in the United States. We then turn to “extreme wine geeks” (Allen Meadows), “extreme wine importers” (Bobby Kacher), and many, many important people in the wine industry (James and David Lett, Drouhin, Mondavi, Catena, Angelo Gaja, Giuseppe Bologna and many others). Celebrity wines are discussed next, together with the myths surrounding them (that they are an American phenomenon, that they are bad, and that they are bad for the business). Yao Ming and Chinese wines are introduced, as is the “godfather” of California wine, Gustave Neibaum, leading to Inglenook and Francis Coppola. The author rightly bemoans the scarcity of good “wine movies.” New wine regions are discussed—mostly Brazil, China, India, and Russia, the last of which is bad, bad, bad, at least at the present time. There is a mention of the “Judgment of Princeton” in 2012, in which “wines from New Jersey reportedly bested both California and the French.” More accurately, the Judgment of Princeton pitted New Jersey wines against French wines only, and it would be an exaggeration to say that the New Jersey wines bested the French; rather, we could say that New Jersey performed to their credit. There are also some truly zany allegations in the book, although it is not clear how much the author believes them, such as the claim that wine tastes different depending on the type of music that is played in the background.

Much of this is amusing and informative. My guess is that it will make the neophyte reader eager for more and will enable the expert reader to fill gaps in his or her knowledge and understanding of wine.

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