

Book Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Isabelle Saporta <i>Vino Business. The Cloudy World of French Wine</i>	Karl Storchmann
Vivian Perry and John Vincent <i>Winemakers of the Willamette Valley: Pioneering Vintners from Oregon's Wine Country</i>	Neal D. Hulkower
Cila Warncke <i>Oregon Wine Pioneers</i>	Neal D. Hulkower

ISABELLE SAPORTA: *Vino Business: The Cloudy World of French Wine*. Grove Press, 2015, pp. 256, ISBN 978-0802124036 (hardcopy). \$26.

A colleague at KEDGE Business School in Bordeaux first recommended *Vino Business* by Isabelle Saporta to me back in May of 2014. *Vino Business* had just been published, in French, and was already surrounded by controversy. Half of my French wine friends and wine economics colleagues were raving about this book, the other half was seriously upset. Most have strong opinions about *Vino Business*. In fact, in March of 2014, Isabelle Saporta was sued for defamation by Hubert de Boüard de Laforest, the owner of Château Angélu.

Isabelle Saporta's book has been translated into English and was published in the U.S. in November 2015. Isabella Saporta is an investigative journalist who specializes in topics related to agriculture. Before *Vino Business* she published a few books on agriculture, food, and the environment, notably "Le livre noir de l'agriculture" (The Black Book of Agriculture), but nothing specific to wine.

Vino Business is 256 total pages consisting of 25 short chapters, almost all of which are set in Bordeaux, particularly the right bank. Although the chapters can be read independently, there is a thread that goes through some of them, particularly the first 11, which are the core of the book. Here, Saporta introduces us to the protagonist and symbolic figure of the entire book, Hubert de Boüard, the owner of Château Angélu, and sheds light on his role in the 2012 re-classification of Saint-Emilion properties.

The French system of vineyard classification has a long history. Contrary to what some wine enthusiasts may think, vineyards were not originally classified by wine

critics to guide consumers in their wine purchasing decisions, but were based on economic criteria. Vineyard land was classified and ranked according to its value and profitability. Examples of this include the 1855 Bordeaux Classification covering wines from Médoc and Graves, the French Mosel Classification of 1801 and others dating back to the 17th century (see, e.g., Ashenfelter and Storchmann, 2010). These ratings sometimes even served as a basis for a “fair” profit-oriented land taxation.

In contrast to the left bank of the Garonne, the right bank was not classified in the 19th century. The first Saint-Emilion classification was established in 1955 and has been updated every 10 years. Saporta tells us about the 2012 update, in which Hubert de Boüard and his Château Angélu play a central role. Before 2012, Château Angélu was only a Premier Grand Cru Classé B, not the best of the best. After 2012, however, Château Angélu was upgraded to the top tier. According to Saporta, this is why.

First, in contrast to past classifications, the Saint-Emilion classification does not draw on objective data such as land values or wine prices. Instead, it is based on a complex system of points that need to be accumulated by the applicant chateau. For Premiers Grand Cru Classés these points are weighted as follows: wine tasting 30%, the chateau’s reputation 35%, estate and terroirs 30%, estate practices 5% (Conseil des Vins de Saint-Emilion, 2015). Under ‘estate and terroirs,’ “the classification criteria would also wisely allow some points for the size of the visitors’ parking lot” (p. 32). A seminar room is worth some extra points as well (p. 32). In contrast, Château Ausone was criticized by the commission for the lack of indirect lighting in its historic cellar. The classification standards also penalize winemakers that get involved in tours, possibly leading the tours themselves (e.g., Château Croque-Michotte). Who came up with these rules?

The regulating body in charge of instituting these criteria is the *Conseil des Vins de Saint-Emilion* (*Saint-Emilion Wine Council*), of which Hubert de Boüard was the president from 1999 until 2008. “His right-hand man, Jean-François Quenin, succeeded him.” (p. 32). Saporta suggests that Quenin and de Boüard devised the classification criteria to suit Château Angélu and to eventually lift it to the top echelon. However, these rules needed to be confirmed by the INAO (*Institut National des Appellations d’Origine*), the French organization in charge of regulating agricultural products. Saporta does not hold INAO in high esteem. In Chapter 5, entitled, “With a Bogus Authority, the INAO,” she reports that Hubert de Boüard “is a member of both INAO’s Regional Committee and its National committee” and “... now holds all the cards and let it be known.” (p. 53). INAO confirms the classification criteria and Château Angélu is promoted. Saporta takes issue with both the apparent conflict of interest and the fact that the classification rules add more weight to non-wine criteria, such as parking lots, than to the wine itself.

The ensuing chapters cover similar “injustices,” such as the role of Robert Parker and his influence on wine and wine business, the “land grab” by the Mieux family (who owns Château Pétrus) in Pomerol, the use of pesticides in grape growing and the

disregard for organic winemaking, the sales of Bordeaux wine and real estate to China, the rule of technocrats over winemakers, and the redefinition of the Champagne AOC.

The tenor of *Vino Business* can be summarized in three sentences. Wine is ruled by corrupt big business that is detached from their product. Large firms set the rules at the expense of small winemakers. Organic winemaking is disrespected.

The book is an easy read, entertaining, and filled with valuable information, but Saporta makes no effort to be neutral. Almost everything is suggestive and often she offers her own interpretation – even of facial expressions. For instance, when citing Michel Rolland talking about Chinese buyers “... it’s quite good business,’ jokes the winemaker, a greedy look in his eyes.” (p. 16). About 15% of the text consists of citations, many of them anonymous (e.g., “Why should they bite the hand that feeds them?” a great winemaker adds cruelly and scornfully” (p. 84) or “Michel Rolland has a thing in Argentina... It’s a jackpot. You can make €150,000 for an international contract. ... you have a lot less hassle for way more cash!’ an expert who prefers to stay in Bordeaux summarizes with a smile.” (p. 63)).

The book reminded me of the movie *Mondovino* (see the review by Lima and Schroder, 2009), which also fights for the small winemaker and down-to-earth winemaking. The book is as chauvinistic as the movie. While the book recommends not to sell wine and property to the Chinese, in the movie we learn why vineyard land in Aniane/Languedoc should be sold to French actor Gérard Depardieu instead to the American Mondavi family. Ironically, Depardieu has been less loyal to France and moved to Russia to evade French taxation in 2013.

No doubt, and despite my criticism above, *Vino Business* is an important wine book and should be read by every serious wine friend. It provides a trove of information about the business and politics of wine, particularly in Bordeaux, much of which is virtually unknown to the general public. But I think Saporta would have served her cause better with greater distance and neutrality and a less suggestive style.

References

- Ashenfelter, O., and Storchmann, K. (2010). Using hedonic models of solar radiation and weather to assess the economic effect of climate change: The case of Mosel valley vineyards. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 92(2), 333–349.
- Conseil des Vins de Saint-Emilion (2015). Press Kit 2012 Classification of Saint-Emilion Wines. Online: <http://www.vins-saint-emilion.com/sites/default/files/complete-press-kit-2012-classification-of-saint-emilion-wines.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2015)
- Lima, T., and Schroder, N. (2009). Film Review of Jonathan Nossiter (Director): *Mondovino*. *Journal of Wine Economics*, 4(1), 119–121.

Karl Storchmann
New York University
karl.storchmann@nyu.edu
doi:10.1017/jwe.2015.36