

Book Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Bianca Bosker <i>Cork Dork</i>	Richard E. Quandt
Kelli A. White <i>Napa Valley Then and Now</i>	Orley Ashenfelter
Gisela H. Kreglinger <i>The Spirituality of Wine</i>	Kenneth G. Elzinga

BIANCA BOSKER: *Cork Dork: A Wine-Fueled Adventure among the Obsessive Sommeliers, Big Bottle Hunters, and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me to Live for Taste*. Penguin Books, New York, 2017, 352 pp., ISBN 9780143128090 (paperback), \$17.00.

I have read many “wine books,” some casual, some pedantic, and many happily informative. But Bianca Bosker’s book stands out as being spectacularly successful in teaching us about wine, in making us love wine, and in presenting a tone of unflinching good humor. It is cast in the form of an autobiography over a period of one year in which she decides to learn about wine, taste, and especially smell and which ends with her passing her examination to become a *certified sommelier* and finally getting employed as one.

There is no tasting without smelling. It is fair to say that olfaction is “in,” as shown by some recent attention from canine ethologists (see Alexandra Horowitz, *Being a Dog: Following the Dog into a World of Smell*, Scribner, New York, 2016, 336 pp., ISBN 978-1-4767-9599-7 [hardback], \$27.00). In fact, dogs’ noses are so much more sensitive than ours (with a few hundred million olfactory bulbs versus our just a few million) that I have wondered whether they could be trained to distinguish in blind tastings between, say, Château Latour and Château Lafite.

Bosker starts her career as a “cellar rat,” continues with tastings, trails established sommeliers in famous restaurants, gets endless advice from friends and other aspirants to wine greatness, visits experts from California to Dresden, gets periodically bawled out by bosses, and (assisted by a thousand flashcards) crams endlessly for the forthcoming three-part exam consisting of blind tastings, the theory of wine, and service. Service is crucial; you must be dressed just right and follow specific rules:

Don't pour men before women, don't pour the host before the guests, don't pour more for one person than another. And God help you if you drip. Don't pick up the glasses to pour, and don't take more than two pours to fill one glass. Don't empty the bottle the first go-around. Don't forget to wipe the bottle's lip on each pour, and before you pour. Don't ever block the label with your hand. Don't look awkward. Don't fidget. Don't pour from the left. Don't walk clockwise. Don't ever swear. Don't make the guest ask you the vintage. Don't look so eager. Don't look so serious—you don't want to be a funeral director, do you? Don't be so shy. Don't say "um." And for the love of God don't look so nervous. (p. 80)

In one of her early exposures to the "real thing," a droplet of Madeira rolls down the stem of the glass she has just poured: "It was like a turd smeared on a wedding gown" (p. 79).

Most importantly, perhaps, Bosker trains her nose with a 54-sample kit (*Le Nez du Vin*) of fragrance essences that she sniffs daily. Interestingly, Horowitz (of canine fame) also religiously sniffs *Le Nez du Vin* and agrees with Bosker that one must verbalize the smells to retain them in the brain; however, she seems to be less successful than Bosker, learning the smells of essences in the kit but not distinguishing wines more successfully as a result. Bosker takes issue with the frequently held view that humans' olfactory bulbs have shrunk and hence animals have a stronger sense of smell, because in humans, the brain provides a strong assist in smelling. But dogs are special, because their noses have a vomeral cavity, a second smelling organ that humans lack. There are some minor disagreements between Bosker and Horowitz: the former maintains that pheromones may be important in bringing humans together (p. 97), whereas the latter states that people do not seem to detect pheromones at all (p. 88).

Part of the sommelier's job is to sell wine, and to do that, she needs to know what the guest wants. There is clearly an art to figuring out what the guest *really* wants, and Bosker's description of how sommeliers see through guests is almost scary, making the reader think that when one goes to a restaurant, it is akin to unwittingly landing on a psychiatrist's couch; at a minimum, guests are subject to keen observations ("She wore ... a ring the size of a shi tzu" [p. 152]). She provides good advice that amateurs can benefit from, such as how to tell alcohol or acid or sugar content in a wine and what makes a quality wine (or a bad wine), although some of her colleagues would prefer to preserve some of the mystery in wine by leaving these questions unanswered.

She describes the research lab of Treasury Wine Estates, with its philosophy that wine should be developed like fast food with market research, tasting panels, focus groups, and the like. That poses an interesting question: what have you really accomplished if you manage to create a laboratory-designed wine that tastes just like Château Margaux? As Bosker puts it, "But for wineries that want to keep prices low and production high, nature no longer gets the final say on flavor" (p. 187). Laboratory-created wines may well fool people, just as "A Portrait of Gentleman," putatively by Frans Hals, fooled art lovers (for a while); but as soon as it becomes known that such a work is not the real thing, its price will drop. As in art, we

need authenticity, which is one good reason why the Rudy Kurniawans of this world will not replace the real McCoy.

Has Bosker been able to train herself (that is, her brain) to recognize and identify wines? There is really only one way to tell—medical technology. Functional MRI (fMRI) is used in a variety of circumstances to examine changes in the brain under various stimuli. Dogs have been subjected to fMRI to identify the changes that occur in their brains when they are exposed to their beloved masters (Gregory Berns, *How Dogs Love Us: A Neuroscientist and His Adopted Dog Decode the Canine Brain*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 272 pp. [hardcover], ISBN 978-0-544-11451-7, \$25.00). That study was difficult to carry out, because dogs in the experiment had to be trained to lie absolutely still in the MRI machine, despite its substantial noise output. Bosker, in turn, sips some wines through a tube in the MRI machine and concentrates on identifying them. Sure enough, the fMRI shows her brain responding in the predicted manner, proving conclusively that her yearlong sniffing practice has altered her brain and that trained sommeliers are not just blowing hot air but really have knowledge that the rest of us lack.

As Bosker's year of learning and apprenticing comes to an end, she has her examination, which elicits moments of tension, nerves, and fear. In the blind-tasting part of the exam, she has to identify two wines; a white, which she calls a Chablis (1–3 years old), and a red, which she identifies as a California Cabernet (1–3 years old). She nails it. The other parts of the examination go equally well, leading to her designation as a Certified Sommelier. The final chapter deals with her getting a job from Paul Grieco as sommelier in his wine bar, Terroir, which had been named the World's Best Wine Bar. It is a worthy, richly deserved culmination of her anxiety- and work-filled year.

It is amazing just how much “stuff” this book contains about wines, tastes, smells, production, service, tastings, sommeliers, customs and wine lore, successes and screw-ups, and much, much more. Most importantly, Bosker communicates to the reader on every page the abiding love she has for wine and for the activities that wine professionals undertake. It is a “must-read” for everybody who loves wine or would like to reach that point.

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KELLI A. WHITE: *Napa Valley Then and Now*. Rudd Press, Oakville, California, 2015, 1254 pp., ISBN 978-0-692-47780-9 (hardcover), \$95.00.

Much has been made of the massive scale of this book, which reviews the origins and wines of nearly one hundred of Napa Valley's several hundred wineries. Printed in