

spicy flavors is available. The boom of interest in new varieties and flavors saw them conquer the wine world and beyond; in 1992, asteroid #4934 was named “Rhôneranger” in honor of the subversive Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Winery (p. 116).

This boom was not to last, and the author describes current winemaking and -selling challenges in later chapters. The mavericks are underdogs who valiantly have made their way in the shadow of Napa Cabernet and growing corporatization, yet the book does not pay much attention to the Rhône underdogs of today. In his latest article for *Wine & Spirits Magazine*,² Comiskey looks at Vermentino, Grenache Blanc, and Picpoul. This examination would have brought the narrative full circle, especially given the current demand for light, dry white wines. It may have also provided a sunnier element to the conclusion of the book, which does not enthrall the reader about thoughts of following in the Rangers’ footsteps.

While writing these few lines we could not resist pouring ourselves a native Rhône and a Californian with similar blend. Our humble international tasting panel (with no French or American member) came up with some tasting notes that seem to fit the stereotypes. The Lirac (2014 Vignoble Abeille; Chateau Mont-Redon in Chateauneuf-du-Pape, 14.5% ABV) keeps its balance and offers a sincere mixture of red fruits without being too bombastic. The Cotes du Crow’s 2014 Morgan (Monterey, Morgan Winery Salinas, 14.2% ABV) delivers a more vanilla/chocolate experience. Although it is a fine product, its initial splashes of cherries and oak are unable to hide a certain platitude. Does this ridiculously small sample confirm the clichés regarding American/French palates? More tastings are needed, surely. Plenty of material for sequels exists, so this Canadian/Australian pair look forward to another quaffable and entertaining read from the author.

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HUGH JOHNSON: *Hugh Johnson on Wine: Good Bits from 55 Years of Scribbling*. Mitchell Beazley, London, 2017, 288 pp., ISBN: 9781784722623 (hardback), \$24.99.

It is a journey through five-and-a-half decades recorded contemporaneously, one can fancy, by your favorite old English uncle by marriage, during which the world of fine wine expanded from a handful of European countries to the entire globe. With wit, wisdom, and warmth, Johnson chronicles these changes in an annotated collection

²<http://www.wineandspiritsmagazine.com/news/entry/the-little-three>

of his columns, excerpts from books, and even something found in his desk drawer, written between 1960 and 2016. Refreshingly, his approach to wine is at variance with what he claims is his nation's forte: "Britain is right in front ... in critical authority" (p. 162). He eschews, however, the label of critic: "Critics are obliged to be objective in their assessments. ... Which is why 'critic' is a term I have never accepted. 'Commentator,' certainly" (p. 189).

Our commentator began writing about wine in December 1960 for *Vogue*. The section on the 1960s opens with his first column, "Old Money" (p. 12), which wrestles with the issue of what to drink with turkey. "Unless you have a strong preference for white wines with all food – and there is no earthly reason why you shouldn't – you will probably find that red is more suited to the rich meat" (p. 12). Wine economists should enjoy the prices for the venerable burgundies and clarets listed at the end of the piece. In "The Case for White" (p. 274), first published in *Decanter* 54 years later, Johnson elaborates on his unusual de facto bias hinted at in his first article: "This is a curious household. We open more bottles of white wine than red. ... [P]erhaps most of all we ... drink more white because we eat quantities of fish and seafood ... , the whole healthy and so-called Mediterranean diet" (p. 274).

During his early years, he wrote columns for various periodicals, including the *Sunday Times* under aliases Giles and John Congreve to avoid the wrath of his employer, Condé Nast, which did not want its employees contributing to any publications they did not own. The introduction of his first book, *Wine*, published in 1966, is included in this section (pp. 20–21), the first of many "tastings" of his longer works and of his prefaces to those of others that appear throughout the book.

The introduction to Johnson's *The World Atlas of Wine* begins the section on the 1970s. Unwaveringly true to his Albion origins, his annotation justifies the premature inclusion of England and Wales: "In 1971 this was pretty optimistic; I was being patriotic, I suppose" (p. 31). In 1973, the *Sunday Times* Wine Club was formed, and Johnson became what is turning out to be President for Life. This and all subsequent sections contain many selections from its newsletter, *Wine Times*. Another milestone during this decade was the publication of the first *Pocket Wine Book* in 1977. The foreword (or Agenda, as he started labeling it in 2002) to this and several subsequent versions, including the 40th anniversary 2017 edition, appear in the appropriate decade's section. Each gives a glimpse at the proliferation of regions producing noteworthy wines.

In the section devoted to the 1980s, Johnson is already proclaiming "the Golden Age of one of life's great pleasures. ... There never was a time when more good wine, and more different kinds of wine, were being made" (p. 54). And while he admires the progress being made in the New World, he remains unequivocally British in his preferences.

"Vintage Port" (pp. 71–72), first published in *Wine Times* in 1985, is four paragraphs that pay homage to the isles' quintessential postprandial moistener with

Britishisms, humor, guilty iconoclasm, and concision – the distilled essence of Johnson’s style. The section ends with an eye to the next decade, “Into the Nineties: A Spot of Prophecy” (pp. 94–99). It is a gutsy piece that forecasts with parlous specificity: “Pinot Noir will become the flagship wine of Oregon in the north-west” (p. 98). So far so good. “But it is in the state of Washington that it will blossom” (p. 98). Whoops. How does Johnson think he did overall? He awards himself a somewhat generous score of 8 out of 10.

In the section on the 1990s, Johnson takes on Robert Parker in a review of his *The Wine Buyer’s Guide* (pp. 112–113). Here is one of the barbs: “Its [*sic*] funny, isn’t it, that the man who invented the world’s fastest wine-measuring system is so insensitive to overwriting” (p. 112). He continues his attack in “And the Score Is ...” (pp. 129–130): “(In Parker’s scale ... , 0 = 50 and vice versa. Jonathan Swift would have based a whole fantasy kingdom on it.)” (p. 129). He offers instead the Johnson System “that reflects with inescapable honesty the enjoyment (or lack of it) that each wine offered at the time it was tasted or drunk” (p. 130). It rates the wine by how much one is willing to consume, ranging from one sniff to the whole vineyard. He exhorts us to “[l]ove them for themselves; don’t give them marks out of a hundred” (p. 170).

When he was 84, 62 years Johnson’s senior, André Simon became his patron and mentor. His life is sketched in “By Request” (pp. 140–143), which first appeared in *Wine & Food* in 1998: “When he chose, described and explained wine it was the same: directness, no more than was necessary” (p. 142). Johnson learned well and even went beyond. The elegance of his writing is not sacrificed to an economy of expression.

The 2000s is the longest section, made so by numerous articles from *Wine Times*, *Decanter*, *The World of Fine Wines*, and Agendas from most of the decade’s editions of Johnson’s *Pocket Wine Book*. About one-fifth comprises a sampling of Johnson’s memoirs, *Wine: A Life Uncorked*, which appeared in 2005 (pp. 186–206). The topics are contemporary and nostalgic. Australia’s output is admired, while old Bordeaux and Burgundies are venerated.

Although a lover of claret, Johnson is realistic about the dramatic increase in the prices of classified growths, especially since the beginning of this century, which has left them unaffordable by all but the wealthiest. “[D]oes my Château Batailley or Cantemerle (£240 a case each) ... taste any less deliciously satisfying because there are sleeker models with more horsepower on the road” (p. 246), he asks.

The 2010s section begins with a plea to reconsider Riesling and ends with the Agenda from the 2017 edition of the *Pocket Wine Book*. Best to stop here lest I further deny the reader the pleasure of discovery.

Because the Table of Contents only lists the major sections, the reader must rely on the three-column, five-page index to navigate the book. Unfortunately, not each entry captures all appearances. For example, the entry for Oregon only lists page 98, omitting pages 16, 138, and 266.

Throughout this charming compilation, Johnson's palate exhibits characteristic British "tasteoir": "If there's a more conservative wine-drinker than I am, I'd like to taste from his decanter" (p. 232), he admits. He loves Champagne, his favorite, but also port, claret, and sherry. His go-to white is Chablis. But he also sings the praises of Napa Valley Cabernet and bottlings from Australia and New Zealand. Reversing a comment he made about traveling to the latter (p. 227), reading this compendium is like going all around the Old World and eventually finding yourself in the New.

Johnson's selection of subjects reflects quaintness dappled with the realization that the world has moved beyond just port and claret. Even the contemporary binding to which a burgundy (or is it claret?) ribbon bookmark is attached manifests an earlier sensibility. So do the pencil drawings by the late Paul Hogarth that grace the beginning and end of every section. Each is an understated yet complete thought, like the text it adorns.

Johnson reminds us that in his country, "[m]ore wine books and better magazines are published here than are in all the rest of the world" (p. 162). *On Wine* is a delicious way to sample the works of this commentator, one of the most prolific and archetypical contributors to that impressive output. It is also compelling evidence that on matters vinous, we should drink broadish but read British.

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