

Book and Film Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Alice Feiring <i>The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization</i>	Stephen Chaikind
Benjamin Wallace <i>The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine</i>	Orley Ashenfelter
Tyler Colman <i>Wine Politics: How Governments, Environmentalists, Mobsters and Critics Influence the Wines We Drink</i>	Michael Veseth
Randall Miller (director) <i>Bottle Shock</i> (screenplay by Jody Savin and Randall Miller)	Rob Valletta
Tadashi Agi (writer) and Shu Okimoto (illustrator) <i>Kami no Shizuku: Les Gouttes de Dieu</i>	Peter Musolf
Fritz Allhoff (editor) <i>Wine & Philosophy: A Symposium on Thinking and Drinking</i>	Joshua Hall

ALICE FEIRING: *The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization*. Harcourt, Orlando, 2008, 271 pp., ISBN 978-0-15-101286-2, \$23.00.

After reading this book, many people may not be able to look a bottle of wine in the face the same way again. Does this matter for the enjoyment of wine? Maybe. Or maybe not. But for those doing research on the economics of wine, *The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization* by Alice Feiring provides important insights that will inform one's perspectives about wine and the wine business.

Feiring, a wine writer and reviewer, laments the growing number of wines that taste the same to her—a taste that she dislikes immensely. For Feiring, wines must exhibit finesse,

a sense of place, of terroir. Such wines, she claims, were being replaced by a rash of “standardized” wines that were all “(b)oring fruit, fruit, fruit and oak, oak, oak. The kinds of wines I drank were disappearing like wild horses into the sunset.” And, she wondered, “...what the hell was strawberry-vanilla jam—like some Body Shop concoction—doing in my Nuits St. George?” (pp. 23–24) A preponderance of wines appearing on the market, it seems to Feiring, are geared to satisfy the tastes of reviewer Robert Parker (and to a lesser extent, those of other reviewers) in order to achieve higher scores in his *Wine Advocate* newsletter. Consumers rush to buy these higher scoring wines, increasing prices and driving profits for winemakers. As a result, an entire industry has developed to help produce wines that better meet Parker’s perceived tastes.

Feiring thus embarks on a quest to discover the exceptions to this trend. Her breezy journeys in search of wines that allow nature to take its course—the getting back to basics, natural, organic and/or biodynamically produced wines—allow us to visit the Rhone, Burgundy, Champagne, Piedmont, Rioja and other wine growing regions of Europe, as well as listen in on provocative conversations with several professors at the renowned School of Enology and Viticulture at the University of California, Davis. Along the way, we meet winemakers, vineyard owners, importers and others in the business, learning about their production philosophies and methods. The narrative is also enlivened throughout the book by amusing situations Feiring and her chums encounter on the road. While most of the wineries and winemakers are discussed using their real identities, Feiring’s companions are often referred to by more colorful monikers, such as The Skinny Food Writer, Honey-Sugar, Owl Man, Mr. Bow Tie, and Miss Knish, among others, which helps readers keep who’s who straight.

One of the best parts of the book, where Feiring finally slows her inherent but often humorous whining about the state of wine (no pun intended) and life, is towards the end when she goes out into the field despite her many ailments (repetitive stress pains from writing, an odd leg flare up) and helps pick a vintage’s grapes at Clos Roche Blanche in the Loire Valley. Here, Feiring drives home the point—an idea that is really an underlying theme throughout this book, that wine is first and primarily an agricultural product. As an agricultural product, the quality of wine is directly related to the weather, the soil, and the farming techniques used. The combination of these factors variously makes for a good, not-so-good or exceptional vintage, and thus has a significant impact on wine quality and price. (For an econometric approach to this, see Ashenfelter, 2008.¹)

Growing grapes and making (good) wine out of them, to be sure, is an art and a passion, as Feiring ably shows. However it is also a business, and Feiring’s journey seeks out many vintners who despise the duality that the business end imposes on the winemaking end. At the same time, selected evidence is cited, and names are named, of producers who have altered or are suspected of altering their techniques, both in farming and in the

¹ Several of the sources in this review are cited from a special volume of *The Economic Journal*, published in June 2008. It should be mentioned that all of the papers cited from *The Economic Journal* appeared previously as AAWE working papers.

vinification of the grapes to produce more Parker-friendly wines. Feiring rants about these and the technologies they use to manufacture wines that are the antithesis of her preferred “authentically” produced wines.

Feiring’s villains, as depicted in the book, include the consultants, technologies, machines, and production methodologies, etc. geared to guide output towards Parker’s tastes. These include, for example, using non-indigenous “designer” yeasts, oak chips, enzymes and other additives, micro-oxygenation and/or reverse osmosis that unnaturally alter the winemaking process or the wine’s composition. One particularly disconcerting example of such manipulation is shown in her description of reverse osmosis: “This [reverse osmosis] machine is a torture chamber that deconstructs the wine into water, alcohol, and sludge. The machine can also concentrate wine, reduce alcohol, restart a stopped fermentation..., and eliminate mold.” (p. 35) According to one of the machines’ distributors, these machines are now used to “...adjust alcohol on about 45 percent of the premium wine California produces.” (p. 38)

A question arises as to where to draw the line between centuries-old techniques and modern, sometimes machine-driven technologies that enable producers to develop a particular style and taste in wine. Obviously reverse osmosis is an extreme technological application. But Gergaud and Ginsburgh (2008) define technology in a much broader sense. To them, only the components of terroir are not technological. Terroir, they note, is all of the natural and non-transferable endowments that “...influence in a measurable way both the quality and the taste of a wine: soil, subsoil, slopes and exposure of vineyards.” (p. F144) This is for sure one of Feiring’s ideas of what a good wine should reflect. Everything else to Gergaud and Ginsburgh is technology, including many of the processes that are now or might have been considered traditional or authentic winemaking techniques in the past. “All the other elements [other than terroir] are either not quantifiable (the influence of social relations, for example) or can be reproduced elsewhere, taking into account adjustments due to local conditions. Clearly not all grapes grow in every region because of soil, slopes and climate but enough experimentation exists and winemakers know how this should be handled. All the rest, including the choice of grapes, is technological.” (p. F144) So what to some is natural—such as manual picking, the type of barrels used, the age of the vines and even the grapes allowed in a wine, are, for others, technological. But many of these methods are also part of the art of winemaking, and Feiring would likely approve of a number of these controllable applications as natural and authentic. Is using one method or technology to make a wine that meets mass taste better or worse than another? Where does “natural” end and “unnatural” begin? (For the record, Gergaud and Ginsburgh show that their broader definition of technology econometrically accounts for more of a wine’s quality than do natural endowments.)

In the same vein, there is considerable debate as to what natural and organic mean, and in the efficacy of biodynamic production techniques. While there are organizations that certify organically grown produce, their standards may allow a degree of chemicals or other manipulation that Feiring (a vegetarian, by the way) may not commiserate with. If

a chemist tells you that the resulting composition of two wines, one produced mostly organically and the other with a heavy dose of additives such as oak chips and designer yeasts, are exactly the same, and they taste the same, is this acceptable—or even noticeable—to the average wine consumer (or critic)? Will the knowledgeable wine drinker be able to discern any difference in blind tastings? These and other aspects of natural, organic and biodynamic science as applied to wines provide the basis for a spirited debate between Feiring and the UC Davis professors, but a somewhat less than intense exchange with Robert Parker later in the book.

A substantial economic literature now exists showing that Parker and other critics influence wine prices (see Ali et al., 2008, for a good review of this literature). At some juncture, then, when reading *The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization*, one begins to ask why Parker and others have the influence they do. Wine is often an intimidating product for consumers, with a mystique and language of its own. There is limited information available to guide consumers. Parker, as well as other scorers and good wine merchants, take away some of the mystery and randomness in buying wine. Parker's innovative (and subsequently copied) easy to understand 100 point scale is familiar to most people from grade school on, saving consumers time in making a selection (even though Parker urges his readers to read his verbal descriptions of each wine as well). The fact that the *Wine Advocate* accepts no advertising may further encourage Parker's cache. (See McCoy, 2005, for greater detail on Parker's influence.) But one must wonder—do wine reviewers establish consumer taste, or do they reflect consumer taste. For an economist, the question is, for example, do Parker's ratings establish consumer demand, or merely inform consumers of which wines will most likely satisfy demand that already exists? Since wine is an "experience good" whose characteristics cannot usually be determined before consumption, and an often expensive one at that, critics provide guidance that consumers can depend on, but only if over time the tastes of consumers and critics are indeed correlated. (See Ali, 2007, for more detailed discussion of the pricing of wine as an experience good.) If, for example, individuals buy several different 95 point Parker wines (at likely relatively high prices) and dislike them, will they continue to follow the points, or find other sources of information that more closely reflect their tastes? You can fool the consumer once in awhile, but not forever, and certainly not over the decades that Parker has been gaining prominence.

But what about Parker's influence on wine produced to more closely match his supposed preferences. Notice that this is not to say that Parker influences the quality of wine so much as to say he may influence the characteristics of wine—it's taste, density, color, fruitiness, oakiness, and so on. While some critics may dislike some or all of these characteristics, others may not. This does not mean that the wines are good or bad, but just that they satisfy different tastes. And, although Feiring seems to know this, she makes the case for her types of wines, and scantily acknowledges that other tastes may not be the disaster she makes them out to be.

So what does Alice Feiring have to be happy about? Well, for one thing, she seems to have found a new suitor—the search for and tribulations surrounding this aspect of her life play a small but recurring role throughout this book (and hence the book’s full title). As for the other love of her life, her style of “unparkerized” wines, they continue to be available, and, because they are not as deeply embedded on either the critics’ nor the public’s radar, they are also likely to be cheaper. Market demand for her types of more subtle, “natural” wines is apparently comparatively low, albeit with a concurrent decline in the number of producers and more limited availability, as well as implied lower profits for their producers. (An analysis of the supply and quality adjusted price for wine, differentiating between utility maximizing and profit maximizing producers is given in Morton and Podolny, 2002. It would be interesting to see if utility maximizers who continue to supply “natural” and probably more labor-intensive wines do so at higher quality adjusted prices than do more technologically-intensive profit maximizers, and if, as implied in Morton and Podolny’s paper, the more long-lived traditional producers of these more natural wines have lower marginal costs and hence lower prices—with possibly higher profits.)

This review has attempted to highlight some, but certainly not all, of the thought-provoking economic ideas that are suggested in *The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization*. Many of these same ideas appear similarly in Kermit Lynch’s 1988 book *Adventures on the Wine Route* and in the movie *Mondovino*. But it is important not to lose sight that Alice Feiring’s adventures are also fun to read, and make this book enjoyable and illuminating.

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