

TYLER COLMAN: *Wine Politics: How Governments, Environmentalists, Mobsters and Critics Influence the Wines We Drink*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008, 208 pp., ISBN 978-0-52-0255210, \$27.50.

The French have a word for it: *assemblage*. It is the act of blending wine from different barrels and when it works the result is full and round, delicious. Tyler Colman (a.k.a. the internet's Dr. Vino at www.drvinoc.com) has assembled stories about the social forces that affect wine in order to round out our understanding and appreciation of this glorious product. It is a very readable revision of Colman's Ph.D. dissertation on the politics of wine and I think it's a blend that will appeal to a lot of wine enthusiasts and wine economists.

The contrasts between the Old World (France, especially Bordeaux) and the New World (California, especially Napa Valley) form the book's main axis. Alexis de Tocqueville famously noted that a distinguishing characteristic of the young United States was the unexpected vitality of its voluntary associations. Americans didn't look always to the state, he wrote, they worked together to solve collective problems. Nothing like it in France, with its strong state controls, he said.

But wine is different, Colman explains. Regional wine associations (like the groups behind the *appellation d'origine contrôlée* system) play a strong role in France while the heavy hand of the state (the French call it *dirigisme*) is seen in America's rigid regulation of wine (and alcoholic beverages in general) and the complex and cumbersome three-tier distribution system that makes it all but impossible for some wine enthusiasts to legally purchase products that are readily available just across the state line. Colman's history of the political process that brought us to this situation makes good reading.

Green power politics is part of the blend, too, as Colman contrasts the influence of environmentalists in California with the biodynamic movement in Europe. The politics of the palate—and the influence of wine multinationals and critics like Robert Parker (and Dr. Vino himself?)—rounds out the final product, Colman concludes on a upbeat note: the relationship between wine and society here in the United States is complicated, a mixture of politics and economics, wealth and power, science, tradition, religion and environmentalism and there are a lot of problems to be solved, but he's optimistic—we have more and better choices and a growing wine boom to push the process along.

It's not really surprising that I would like this book. It's called *Wine Politics* but there's a lot of wine economics here, too. The broad themes are relevant and there are plenty of interesting historical tidbits that you can work into conversation at your next wine tasting party.

Now, for example, I know why Two Buck Chuck (TBC), which costs \$1.99 in California, sells for about a dollar more here in Washington State. The complexity of the three-tier distribution system (which treats wine as an alcoholic controlled substance) is to blame. Bronco Wines, which makes TBC, can self-distribute it to Trader Joe's stores in California but has to

sell it to middlemen elsewhere. The extra distributional layer adds about a buck to Chuck's price. If you ever need a simple example to explain why the three-tier system matters, here it is.

Wine Politics is a welcome addition to the wine economist bookshelf for several reasons. First, of course, because it is interesting and informative and takes economic forces seriously as a factor in the world of wine. It is the kind of book a wine economist would want to read and gift as a gift to friends. A second reason is that this volume might signal the welcome emergence of a more serious popular wine literature, one that goes beyond personalities, ratings, and "sniff and swirl" anecdotes. The University of California Press, which published Colman's book, seems committed to serious wine books and I would like to encourage them. They recently published another book that wine economists should appreciate, *Bordeaux/Burgundy: A Vintage Rivalry* by Jean-Robert Pitte. Pitte's book presents a serious analysis of how differing domestic and international wine market forces have contributed to the differential development of these two great French wine regions. I hope there are more such volumes in the pipeline.

But it would be a mistake to think that all wine book publishers are as enlightened as UC Press. Colman's second book recently hit the bookstores. It isn't a book of wine economics or politics, however. It's called *A Year of Wine: Perfect Pairings, Great Buys and What to Sip for Each Season* and, if the book blurbs are accurate, falls more clearly into the wine book mainstream than the (hopefully) emerging wine economics fringe.

Thinking critically about *Wine Politics*, I would have appreciated a bit more depth on some of the topics (many of the chapters are strings of short blog-length entries) and I wish that there was a stronger central theme. Yes, wine is affected by many social forces. Well, so what? I think there may be deeper insights that can be mined from this vein. A long memorable finish is something I look for in a wine ... and a wine book.

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