

Book Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
Allen D. Meadows and Douglas E. Barzelay <i>Burgundy Vintages: A History from 1845</i>	Peter Hellman
Lisa Granik MW <i>The Wines of Georgia</i>	Kym Anderson

ALLEN D. MEADOWS and DOUGLAS E. BARZELAY: *Burgundy Vintages: A History from 1845*. Burghound Books, Tarzana, CA, 2018, 583 pp., ISBN 978-0-692-19412-6, \$79.99.

Even Burgundy wine enthusiasts, when confronted with a heavy tome called “Burgundy Vintages: A History from 1845,” may take a deep breath. The book’s authors, former banker Allen Meadows and retired lawyer Douglas Barzelay, both not merely enthusiasts but obsessives, have disgorged thousands of personal tasting notes for almost every one of those 175 vintages. The earliest, an 1845 Clos de Vougeot, was on the vine in the year that Texas entered the Union as a slave state. Most of the entries carry detailed impressions from both authors, often based on tastings of multiple bottles of the same wine. Meadows (a.k.a. Burghound, publisher of an eponymous wine-rating periodical) tends to be the tougher grader. As an example, Barzelay highly praises Domaine Ponsot’s 1961 Clos de la Roche as a “brilliant wine, the essence of Clos de la Roche” (p. 255). He awards it 98 points on the 100-point scale. Meadows will have none of it: “I confess to being disappointed, as I had expected great things, particularly given how taken Doug is with this wine. Perhaps one day” (p. 255). His score: 88.

That divergence of opinion over the same wine (if not the same bottle), even when tasters are ultra-experienced and respectful of each other, goes to the heart of what keeps us interested in wine: It is a liquid that whispers its intimacies to each of us differently.

It would seem to be a no-brainer that even the best bottles of Burgundy’s pinot noir, typically lighter in color and tannin than the Medoc’s best cabernet sauvignon, are doomed to lose out on longevity. That notion is put to rest in these tasting notes. “I couldn’t get over just how spectacular the mouthfeel and unreal complexity were

and even at almost 160 years of age, this is cruising along like it will live forever,” enthuses Meadows over Bouchard Pere & Fils’ 1958—oops, I meant to type 1858—Chambolle Musigny (p. 33). Here, the authors did find common ground; Barzelay judged the same wine to be “both powerful and elegant, with great harmony and still a lot of power on the finish” (p. 33).

Astonishingly, the authors discover that it is not only 19th century red burgundy that can dally with immortality. So can white burgundy. The scent of the 1865 Bouchard Pere & Fils Meursault Charmes, Barzelay found, “was spicy, with orange mousse, toast, gingerbread and mineral notes, and it kept expanding in the glass” (p. 45). In the mouth, this white awed Meadows with its “terrific intensity and fantastic length” (p. 45). What an irony that modern white burgundies from esteemed producers have too frequently been beset by dreaded “premoxy” (premature oxidation) whose cause has yet to be nailed down. Even bottles that have never left their birth site are not spared. At the 300th anniversary dinner of renowned Domaine Leflaive, Meadows reports that three bottles of 1995 Bâtard-Montrachet were opened and “unfortunately, all were premoxy” (p. 437).

Tasting notes for long-ago vintages in Burgundy are, even for limitless wine budgets, for daydreaming only. To take an over-the-moon example, you may wish you could source a bottle of 1945 Romanée-Conti, but you will wish in vain. That first post-war vintage of France’s most venerated wine was also the last from its pre-phylloxera vineyard. The time had come for the exhausted vines to be grubbed up prior to replanting. But those old vines produced the single rarest and greatest 20th century burgundy. “The ’45 is a complete wine, capable of speaking to the soul, great but not flashy, sexy but not vulgar, regal but not austere, a living monument to the past yet serving as a model for future...the greatest wine I have ever drunk,” writes Meadows. Barzelay: “It would be hopeless to catalog [its] kaleidoscope of flavors; more important was the shape of the wine, its density, its perfect harmony. A long, brilliant spherical finish kept on going: just as it seemed to end, it restarted” (p. 186).

That 1945 was the centerpiece of a 70-vintage Romanée-Conti tasting held at New York restaurant Per Se in 2007. Barzelay had spent more than a decade tracking down all the bottles. But the 1945 eluded him. Into the breach came wine world rock star Rudy Kurniawan, who would later be convicted of being a master wine counterfeiter. Among his favorite wines to fake was this one. Yet both authors concluded, based on the glory of what they had tasted at Per Se, that somehow, somewhere, Kurniawan had located a single authentic example of this rarest of rarities. (Elsewhere, the authors do report tasting a scattering of wines in which they detect the hand of the counterfeiter at work.)

Tasting notes for vintages the authors judge to be superb, such as 1867, 1910, 1928, 1945, and 1971, make for happy reading. This being Burgundy, with its iffy climate (or so it once was), these knockout vintages are relatively few. What about vintages that are mediocre? Is there pleasure or utility in learning, for example,

about “incessantly rainy and all but sunless” 1960, a vintage whose wines are pronounced to be “fully in decline?” (p. 251) Still, the authors pull up the small anecdote that makes us feel the misery, as when winemaker Henri Boillot remembers trying to rescue his inundated Volnay vines in 1965, a vintage even wetter than 1960 and “there was so much water that it came up over the top of my boots” (p. 270).

About the limitation of massed tasting notes: It is inevitable that descriptors become repetitious—in particular, “*sous-bois*,” a term that is more a favorite of Meadows than Barzelay. Both authors are judicious in composing their notes—perhaps too much so. I found myself longing for a bit of flash and sass, as one finds in the two volumes of tasting notes by Michael Broadbent, founder of Christie’s post-war wine department. Broadbent, for example, slaps down a Nuits-St-Georges as smelling like an “institutional kitchen (unclean)” (*The Great Vintage Wine Book*, 1980, p. 201) And, after giving an initial pass to an old Vosne Romanée Malconsorts on first tasting, he dismisses it two years later, having decided that he had “caught it ascending on the third day, for it was [now] well and truly dead” (*The Great Vintage Wine Book*, p. 200) And there are the lively notes of Acker Merrall & Condit auctioneer John Kapon, online and in his book “The Compendium.” If there’s a way to combine wine and funky sexual allusion, Kapon will find it.

Tasting notes bulk up “Burgundy Vintages,” but a bonus woven into these nearly 600 pages is a rich, occasionally quirky, anecdotal history of Burgundy that takes us deep into the texture of this unique region. The authors have dug up from who knows what dusty archive, for example, a protest letter to the mayor of Beaune penned by Maurice Drouhin, then head of his distinguished family wine house, on the eve of the 1936 harvest. In this instance, Drouhin was wearing his cap as head of the local hunting society. His complaint was that the “bureaucrats of the Department of the Côte d’Or” had decreed the end of the autumn partridge hunt to be November 1. That date was just one day after Beaune’s mayor had proposed opening the same hunt—“clearly not enough time to decimate the entire partridge population, even if a few stray vigneron got in the way” as the authors dryly put it (p. 163). Thanks to Drouhin’s influence, the hunt was reset to open five days earlier, on October 25th.

More obscure facts and odd anecdotes abound. We learn, for example, that wartime bottles had a blue tint due to the unavailability of chromium, which gives the glass its familiar green tint.

And if not for a dearth of copper sulfate to stave off vineyard maladies in those years, Romanée-Conti’s ancient vines might have been continued on life support a while longer. It turns out that there was one benefit from the occupation: the invention of the raised, inverted U-shaped tractor called an *enjambeur*, which could navigate narrow vineyard rows. The authors give credit for this adaptation from standard tractors to a mechanic and his partner who “fabricated elements taken from a destroyed motorized German regiment near Auxey-Duresses in 1944” (p. 174).

Especially rewarding, co-existing with this volume's multitudinous tasting notes, is a panoramic survey of the long struggle over the creation of *appellation contrôlée* laws, in which the "bad guys" are not always whom you would expect. On one side were the powerful negociants; on the other, the *vignerons*, or growers. For a very long time, their commercial arrangement made sense: the growers, most of them small, sold their latest vintage to the negociants. The negociants then blended the wines to create taste profiles familiar to their customers, and never mind the precise origin of the grapes. Chambertin was not expected to taste like Volnay, and the negociants made sure that it did not. If, in a dilute vintage year, the Chambertin needed to be darkened up with, say an infusion of ripe Midi grapes, so be it.

From the other side, beginning in the early 1930s, a few well-off growers began to assert their right to bottle their own wines and put their names, as well as true appellations, on the label. Leading the charge were Marquis d'Angerville in Volnay, Henri Gouges in Nuits-St.-Georges, and Charles Rousseau in Gevrey-Chambertin. Looking back now, appellation control laws, guaranteeing the origin of each bottle, would seem to be a no-brainer. But, as the authors explain, it was not necessarily so. Suppose a negociant was accustomed to bottling a wine labeled as famed Pommard but did not hesitate to plump it up with grapes purchased from growers in nearby, unfamous, Auxey-Duresses. Under the new laws, those growers would be abandoned—or at least, no longer be paid for contributing to Pommard. Such minor league growing areas were known as villages *disinheritees*. They could ill afford to lose their negociant income.

The battle over strict appellation controlee legislation, finally won in the mid-1930s, was carried out even as Burgundians had next to no market for their wines. Charles Rousseau, the late luminary of Gevrey Chambertin, who would live to see his wines sell for thousands of dollars per bottle, told Meadows that in the 1950s he embarked on a trip to London where he "tried hard to sell his wines but was forced to return to Gevrey without having sold even one bottle!" (p. 115)

Aubert de Villaine, co-proprietor of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, once described Burgundy as a place "bound up with centuries of human input into and around our vineyards. It has led to a winegrowing landscape that's been divided into parcels and hierarchies almost to excess." And the winemakers themselves can be neurotic, even nutty, in pursuit of their beliefs. I once listened to a rant by a Burgundian winemaker, as he stood over a barrel of wine in his cellar, about how other winemakers stirred the lees in the wrong way. He was as combative about lees stirring technique as we Americans currently are about politics.

That Burgundian obsession with micro-dividing their vineyard landscape and cellar practices would be stillborn without people who are equally obsessive on the consumer side. Happily, there is no lack of Burgundy true believers, even if they must pay painfully for the most sought-after labels. Meadows and Barzelay have gone a step further. They have transformed their own obsession with Burgundian

wine—its history and culture, its wisdom and quirks, into this marvelous book—truly a work of love and erudition.

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LISA GRANIK, MW: *The Wines of Georgia*. Infinite Ideas, London, 2019, 322 pp., ISBN 978-1-913022-00-6 (paperback), \$39.95.

Any wine lover with even the slightest interest in wines from the country of Georgia would be familiar with such words as “cradle of wine,” “8000 vintages,” “qvevri,” and “supra.” This tiny country—the size of Tasmania and only slightly larger than West Virginia—arguably has the longest history of winemaking from grapes, and is one of the most grapewine-focused countries in the world. It shares with Portugal the honor of having the world’s largest share of national crop area under vines (almost 10%) but has a heritage of producing wine for four times as many centuries as Western Europe. It shares with Croatia the highest unit value among east European countries and former Soviet republics for its wine exports. Moreover, it claims to have more than 400 (possibly 500) native *Vitis Vinifera* winegrape varieties (Ketskhoveli, Ramishvili, and Tabidze, 2012), thus exceeding even Italy (D’Agata, 2014)—and many of those grape varieties are not grown elsewhere. So even though Georgia produces barely 0.5% of the world’s wine production, it is certainly worthy of being the subject of a volume in the Infinite Ideas Classic Wine Library.

The author of this book, Lisa Granik, is highly qualified. She became a Master of Wine in 2006, having previously earned a BS and MS in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, a J.D. from Georgetown, and an LLM and JSD from Yale Law School. She first visited the Soviet Union as a law professor on a Fulbright Scholarship (1990–1991), but a side visit to Georgia piqued her interest in the newly independent country and in wine. Currently, she serves on the governing council of the Institute of Masters of Wine, and the advisory board of the Women in Wine Leadership Symposium, and was a board member of the Institute of Masters of Wine (North America) from 2007 to 2018. During 2013–2015 she was a professor of wine at the New York Institute of Technology, but is now a private consultant and wine writer and continues to frequently visit Georgia.

The book begins by briefly exploring the extremely long history of the country and its wine industry, its fascinatingly complex geology, and its traditional winemaking methods. Many archaeologists dream of working in the region, the most famous westerner being the University of Pennsylvania Museum’s Patrick McGovern (2003, 2009; McGovern et al., 2017). In the most-recent two centuries, the country’s