

read in more depth, and perhaps even pursue some questions I had never before considered in my own research.

A Natural History of Beer is fantastic reading for anyone who loves beer but seeks to understand *why*. It helps to explain beer's place in the world and discusses the positive economic and social impacts of beer and brewing with an even hand, along with some of the beverage's potential downsides. I encourage *JWE* readers to get their hands on this book, read it in whatever chapter order they like, and get in touch with me about what topics it made exciting for you.

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ANNA MARIA PONZI: *Pinot Girl: A Family. A Region. An Industry*. Bristol Press, Sherwood, Oregon, 2020, 372 pp., ISBN: 978-1-7345788-0-5 (paperback), \$17.95.

Unlike previous accounts of what it was like to be there at the beginning of the wine industry in the Willamette Valley, Maria Ponzi's memoir is from the point of view of a child. Works such as those by Susan Sokol Blosser (2006, 2017) tell the story from the perspective of the adults who made the decision to relocate to Oregon to grow grapes and make wine in a region deemed inhospitable for this crop as opposed to someone who was swept along. When the success of the region began to be recognized, stories of the pioneers became the subject of several books from an outsider's perspective written by industry observers including Vivian Perry and John Vincent (2013), and Cila Warncke (2015). As the first generation of the industry founders retire, the issue of succession was being resolved in different ways, with a few of the original wineries passing to the second generation. Ponzi's well told tale recounts her initial resentment toward being expected to work from an early age, her brief foray into a different industry, and finally, her return to embrace the family business wholeheartedly and assume its leadership.

Ponzi acknowledges in the introduction: "At first glance, a young girl born into the wine business may seem like she has a charmed life. While the romance has slowly evolved, it was far from that in my early years" (p. xi). Her story is told in two parts, each comprised of short chapters. Part One, by far the longer, covers the

period from her birth in California through her marriage in 1995, about four years after her return to Oregon. Events of the past couple of decades are very briefly summarized in Part Two. The one-page epilogue is a snapshot of the current state of Ponzi Winery and the Oregon wine industry. A black and white photo album of the family from 1968 to 2019 adds a valuable visual dimension to the history.

Born in 1965 in Los Gatos, California, the same year as David Lett, known as Papa Pinot, planted the first *vitis vinifera* vines in the Willamette Valley, Ponzi had a front row seat during the entire birth and growth of the wine industry. Her parents Dick and Nancy Ponzi, are among the venerated dozen or so first families who took the leap to make wine where few thought it possible and succeeded beyond their expectations.

In 1967, during a trip to visit his older brother in Iceland, Dick tasted a homemade wine fermented from a vegetable. Dick and his brother reminisced about their father's winemaking, which was done without protecting against oxidation. Ponzi reported, "This conversation and the delicious celery wine sparked something in my father that night. He left the island inspired" (p. 13). Back home in California, Dick began making wine from grapes he picked at the Novitiate Winery. Two-year old Maria and her four-year old brother, Michel, participated in the harvest and crushed along with their pregnant mother. Luisa Ponzi, destined to become the winemaker of the family business, was born two months later.

The family moved to Oregon the following year after a visit to Nancy's parents, who had retired to the Willamette Valley. During that trip, Dick met Charles Coury, who, along with Lett, is credited with bringing Pinot Noir to the valley in the late 1960s with plantings that produce to this day. Ponzi stated, "It was after that meeting in Forest Grove when everything seemed to fall into place for my parents" (p. 23).

Moving his family into a 700 square foot shack on a strawberry farm in Scholls, Dick traded his engineering career in California for the life of a winegrower and farmer. To fund his enterprise, Dick taught mechanical engineering at Portland Community College while Nancy ran the household. Taking cues from the neighboring farmers, the Ponzis figured out when to plant. "Instead of taking classes to learn this stuff, they'd just pick up another book and read," (p. 38) revealed Ponzi. Though their dreams were met with derision and disapproval, the entire family proceeded undeterred to plant their first vineyard in the spring of 1970. Soon after, crops were planted and animals were brought in to provide food for the family. And as if there was not enough on his plate, Dick built a house while Nancy tended the vineyard. Ponzi recalls, "Each day they'd put in long hours, pushing themselves until... the darkness would...force them to put down their tools...We rarely had dinner before nine-thirty..." (p. 95).

During the 1970s, the vineyard and farm matured, the first grapes were harvested and made into wine, the house and winery were completed, and the children began school. Maria coped with the difficulty of fitting in with classmates who echoed their

parents' opinion of the hippies from California trying to grow grapes. It was also the time the "Pinot Obsessed," as Ponzi calls the first winemakers to plant the finicky grape in the Willamette Valley, came together. Myron Redford, Dick Erath, Coury, and Lett were part of "the group of young winemakers [who shared] a mutual love for the Pinot Noir grape and [dreamt] of what could be" (p. 111). In addition to sharing insights, tools, labor, and resources, some members lobbied the Oregon legislature to pass laws to protect the budding wine industry.

Since money was short in the early days, trading wine for goods and services provided relief. Ponzi boasted, "The five of us were well cared for by a local dentist for years through several cases of Riesling" (p. 222).

Recognition of the quality of Oregon Pinot Noir, in general, and Ponzi's in particular, came quickly. The 1975 Eyrie Vineyard South Block Reserve made by David Lett placed second among Pinot Noirs and above all but one Burgundy in the 1979 Gault-Millau Wine Olympics. The 1977 Ponzi Pinot Noir impressed Frank Prial of the *New York Times*. "Not only did he write about it, but he *loved* it!" (p. 230) effused Ponzi.

Tensions with her mother increased when Ponzi entered high school. Nancy disapproved of any activities, including cheerleading and typing, that ran counter to her feminist perspective. Ponzi explained, "Instead, she encouraged my interests in writing and politics" (p. 231). At the same time, she gained acceptance by her classmates. Still, she was expected to help around the vineyard and "did [her] best to sneak out of work" (p. 234). "When I did complain, reminding Mom that 'I didn't ask for this life,' her standard response was 'Well, this is what we're doing, and that's the way it is,'" (p. 235) Ponzi laments.

After college, Ponzi took a job in advertising in Boston. From the East coast, she learned of the latest praise for her father's winemaking. After three years, she was offered a big promotion at the same time as the news from home was intriguing her. "I was curious about the newcomers to the valley and suddenly felt territorial. I realized I missed my parents and the bustling family activities" (p. 280). "I yearned for something more. I felt perhaps the 'grown-up' winery could provide that for me." (p. 281). She returned to Oregon in 1991 and dove into marketing.

Twenty years are covered in the 19-page Part Two. Significant events include the birth of her children, the continued recognition of Dick Ponzi in the wine press and by his peers, the ascendance of Pinot Noir in the wake of the movie *Sideways*, and the construction of a new winery.

I found just a couple of minor discrepancies. On p. 35, we read: "In 1965, Lett planted the valley's first nursery in McMinnville..." yet according to the winery's website (<https://eyrievineyards.com/envisioning.shtml>): "In February 1965, David rented a temporary nursery plot near Corvallis, and planted the 3000 vinifera grape cuttings he gathered from UC Davis and selected growers and brought with

him to Oregon. This was the first planting of Pinot noir and Chardonnay in the Willamette Valley, and the first ‘New World’ Pinot gris.” Also, there may be conflicting information. On p. 149, we are told: “By 1975, there were fourteen wineries in Oregon,” but on p. 200, “By now there were nearly ten wineries in the state.” Since the story unfolds chronologically, this gives the impression that the industry was contracting. Was it?

Ponzi’s narrative is interwoven with many quotations either attributed to herself or recalled by her. This is remarkable given that she was as young as two-years old when the events she describes were taking place. As in the last movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 4, when the soprano sings *Das himmlische Leben*, it seems like we are hearing the voice of a child at times, although it certainly was not recounting a heavenly life. “[This intimate tale] draws almost entirely from childhood memories, keen eavesdropping, and lengthy tableside conversations” (p. xi) asserts Ponzi. She also interviewed some of the pioneers and did additional research but “most of this story draws from my recollections...Like a child’s view, it is intimate, honest, and pure” (p. xii). In later chapters and in Part Two, it also seems that the tone of the writing matures along with Ponzi.

With the release timed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Ponzi Vineyards, *Pinot Girl* is a valuable addition to the literature recounting the birth of one of the most exciting wine regions in the world less than 60 years ago. Ponzi’s deeply personal and detailed account offers insights into the evolution of her attitude toward the family business at each stage of its development that is distinctive from those of the first generation and of wine writers and journalists. It is also a window into how one person came to embrace her destiny to become part of the second-generation leadership in one of the first wineries in the Willamette Valley. Read it.

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