

Katherine Cole: *Sparkling Wine Anytime: The Best Bottles to Pop for Every Occasion*

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Neal D. Hulkower

Independent Scholar, McMinnville, OR, USA

Email: nhulkower@yahoo.com

I like books for grown-ups that are not only a pleasure to read and learn from but also have color pictures and a larger sans serif font. Here is one.

In her fifth book, Katherine Cole, the Portland, Oregon-based wine writer, author, and James Beard award-winning podcaster, asserts, “Sparkling wine’s greatest asset may be its image, but sparkling wine’s biggest liability is...its image. That image has been, until recently, one of danger and glamour, exclusivity and impossibility” (p. 5). Her response is this bright, multi-hued, amply illustrated, reader-friendly volume that strives for inclusiveness while not dumbing down the material. “I have tried to keep the technical terminology to a minimum. But there are some words and phrases that just come up a lot in regard to sparkling wine” (p. 11), she concedes.

Cole’s exploration opens with an introduction, followed by nine chapters and a glossary. An online buying guide, a bibliography, and a four-page two-column index cap off the work. “Life, Bubbly, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” as the introduction is titled, contains an overview of the world of sparkling wine, suggested, “Occasions and Food Matches,” which concludes with “Oh, forget all that and drink sparkling wine, anytime, with anything” (p. 8), and a legend that equates the number of dollar signs with a range of prices, all as insets. Cole acknowledges her lack of omniscience and her way of getting around it: “I know I have blind spots. That’s why I asked a group of the experts I admire most...to spill on some of their favorites in each chapter” (p. 10). This approach is one of the strengths of her exposition.

Chapter 1, “Instructions for Achieving Effervescence,” starts with: “You are not required to read this chapter” (p. 13). Well, maybe if you are just focused on finding new sources of well-priced sparkling wine. But you would be missing as good an explanation as I have read of the path grapes take from vineyard to flute and the various types of bubbly wines there are.

“Frothing Plot Points in History,” the second chapter, intersperses a recipe for Champagne Cocktail, champagne¹ expert Peter Liem’s recommendation of two prestige cuvées, a rant against canned bubbles, and instructions on sabering a bottle, with brief vignettes about sparkling wine from the earliest records to the end of WWII. Among the latter is the story of the invention of the champagne bottle in England and the real reason for its punt.

¹We adopt Liem’s (2017) naming convention of calling the region Champagne and the wine champagne.

Of course, Champagne merits its own chapter before any of the other regions. Chapter 3 starts with a recipe for Kir Royale and the story behind this mixture of crème de cassis and champagne then gets more serious as we tour the main subregions. For each, Cole provides recommendations of bottles to try. She also assigns producers to Team Submarine if the base wine was made in a steel tank, resulting in a crisper mouthfeel, or to Team Galleon for a mellower fermentation in wood. Think of this chapter as Liem (2017)-lite, but more than likely to satisfy all but the geekiest.

In my review of Liem's masterwork, I noted one distraction that also pertains to Cole's: "While Liem's writing makes the reading comfortable, the layout of the book can be sidetracking with single and multi-page inserts covering special topics breaking up the flow of the text sometimes in mid-sentence" (Hulkower, 2018, p. 361). In both cases, this can be excused as an excess of virtue. The subject is so diverse and multidimensional that the authors want to get everything in as best they can.

Cole claims that "...it is impossible to find quality [champagne] for less than \$35" (p. 61). This should have been qualified with "mostly" since Caveau Selections, a source she includes in her online shopping guide, featured a Caveau Extra-Brut for \$32, sourced from the estate of noted grower champagne producer Sophie Cossy in a July 2021 offering.

Another exaggerated claim is that "More than any other French region (OK, other than Bordeaux), aficionados select Champagne based on the producer name first, and the village or vineyard name second..." (p. 63). I would contend that more so than Bordeaux or even champagne, the producer is the single most important criterion for selecting a Burgundy.

Chapter 4 covers "The Rest of France," followed by "Italy" (Chapter 5), "Iberophone Nations" (Chapter 6), "Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East" (Chapter 7), "USA" (Chapter 8), and "More Anglophone Nations" (Chapter 9). Each contains contributions from regional specialists and recommendations for specific bottlings, many of which are affordable and should be available in the United States, a criterion for inclusion. The chapters are liberally illustrated with maps and whimsical drawings by Mercedes Leon that strike me as suggestive of Guy Buffet, but leaner and more angular. Chapters 3 through 8 each conclude with what Cole calls "Bottle Shop" spreads: two pages of photographs of two dozen recommended bottles, captioned with the name of the producer, the region, and the dollar symbol.

There is so much that Cole shares about the sparkling wine produced outside of Champagne that I had not known. For example, I was aware that there are producers of Cava, the Spanish sparkling wine, in Catalonia that adopted an unofficial designation, "Corpinnat," for wines that are made from organically grown grapes that are mostly estate-grown indigenous varieties and that are aged in bottles for at least 18 months, twice as long as Cava. What I did not know was what bottles to look for with this designation. Cole includes two. Throughout the book, there are scores of recommendations for bottles at all price points, most of which I was not familiar with, making it a valuable reference when going shopping.

While the inclusion of a glossary is always appreciated, I found some holes that a future edition should plug. Admittedly, there are only so many descriptors available,

making repetition unavoidable when reviewing scores of similar wines. By and large, Cole performs well above average in keeping things varied, interesting, and occasionally amusing. However, in keeping with the vinous verbal zeitgeist, Cole frequently uses “minerality” in her tasting notes. As there is no consensus on what exactly this means (Parr et al., 2018), an entry into the glossary giving her definition would be welcome. Another term that should be included in the glossary as well as the index is *remuage* (riddling in English), used on page 195 in notes on a sekt. It is described on page 20 of the chapter that Cole says is not required reading.

Cole “tasted hundreds upon hundreds [of sparkling wines] during [her] nine frantic months of research and writing” (p. 10). The result is part personal assessment with other experts’ opinions deftly infused and part reportage from a master of both. Cheeky, breezy, and fun to read, Cole’s latest is loaded with up-to-date information about the burgeoning world of wine bubbles that everyone can learn from. And Cole’s quips help the more arcane material go down in the most delightful way. Plus it has so many lovely pictures!

References

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Jamie Goode: *The Science of Wine from Vine to Glass*, 3rd Edition

University of California Press, Oakland, 2021, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-520-37950-3 (hardback), \$39.95.

Neal D. Hulkower

Independent Scholar, McMinnville, OR, USA

Email: nhulkower@yahoo.com

As evidenced by *I Taste Red: The Science of Tasting Wine* (Goode, 2016), *Flawless: Understanding Faults in Wine* (Goode, 2018), and now the third edition of *The Science of Wine from Vine to Glass*, Jamie Goode is a master author of wine books that occupy the space between popular and technical expositions. “This is not meant to be a textbook, covering the whole of wine science in a methodical manner. ... I have set out to tell wine science stories in a way that would engage people who