Book Reviews

Author, Title                                                                 Reviewer

Rod Phillips
Wine: A Social and Cultural History of the Drink That Changed Our Lives  Kevin Goldberg

Bernhard Herrman and Robert Streibel
Der Wein des Vergessens  Karl Storchmann

Jamie Goode
Flawless: Understanding Faults in Wine  Neal D. Hulkower

Ed McCarthy and Mary Ewing-Mulligan
Wine for Dummies  Neal D. Hulkower

Tim Patterson and John Buechsenstein
Wine and Place: A Terroir Reader  Tony Lima


Rod Phillips has been busy of late. In the span of five years, Phillips has written several important books, including 2016’s French Wine: A History (University of California Press). His industriousness has been our gain, as Phillip’s most recent book, Wine: A Social and Cultural History of the Drink That Changed Our Lives, may be his best work yet. In Wine, Phillips, a Professor of History at Carleton University in Ottawa, locates that elusive balance between structure and expressiveness; while we find surety in the hands of an objective historian, we revel in knowing that Phillips—who also writes for GuildSomm.com—is a great wine enthusiast.

Wine is organized thematically rather than chronologically. In each of the book’s eight chapters, wine is paired with a broad, topical accompaniment, including religion, war, and crime. This multivalent approach keeps the content from becoming flat and allows Phillips to demonstrate his mastery of the secondary literature. Subtopics within each chapter are dense enough to whet the appetite of the reader.

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I tallied a list of almost two dozen topics that I want to read more about), but, at the same time, the content never reaches the point of oversaturation.

The first three chapters tread on fairly well-trammeled ground, exploring wine’s relationship to bodily health, gender, and religion. While the experienced reader of wine books will have encountered much of this material elsewhere, I am hard pressed to think of a better introduction to these central themes for the undergraduate or educated reader. “Wine and Wellness” traces wine’s relationship to the body from the ancient period to the present, and includes a description of Galen’s humoral theory and the infamous French Paradox. “Wine, Women, and Men” explores the place of wine in the construction of gender roles by analyzing, among other topics, ritualistic drinking, drunkenness, and the temperance movement. The most conventional chapter in the book may be “Wine and Religion,” which offers a straightforward (but nevertheless useful) introduction to wine’s position in the classic monotheistic texts and the Christian church.

While the first three chapters could appeal to social and cultural historians who have only a marginal interest in wine, Chapters 4–6 hone in on cultural categories that cater more to the wine scholar; terroir, tasting descriptions, and food and dining. In “Wine and Landscape,” Phillips provides a contemplative glimpse into the quarrel about whether or not (or how much) soil, climate, and other environmental factors shape the profile of a wine. The goal for Phillips is not to settle the matter, but rather to articulate some of the many previous attempts to do so. “Wine and Words” offers a similarly captivating look at how wine has been judged and described. From Pliny the Elder to Robert Parker, Phillips treats the wine enthusiast to a grand tour of the many styles and techniques meant to convey the nuanced differences between growths. Unfortunately, Phillips misses out on the foremost taste-shapers of our own period, that is, the global, digital voices that drive websites like Cellartracker.com and WineBerserkers.com. “Wine and the Table” engrosses the reader in wine’s connection to food, which, it seems, was not always viewed as seriously as it is now. Phillips thinks carefully about how wine and food pairings intersect with other facets of life, including one’s social class and personal health. Despite this attention to detail, an otherwise intriguing section on representations of wine and food in painting loses some of its punch because very few of the described images are reproduced in the text.

The book closes on a high note with chapters on war and crime. As in the rest of the book, Phillips makes good use of the secondary literature to inform and entertain, in addition to punctuating the text with historiographical points (the Norman conquerors of England carried their own wine in barrels rather than relying only on captured stock, as is sometimes thought) and humor (Phillips refers to this as an early example of BYOB). Phillips does more than show how wine facilitated a fighting spirit among soldiers (from the ancient period through WWII). He demonstrates how war affected growers and the trade, and even helped shift paradigms of regional taste. In “Wine and Crime,” Phillips takes on vinous misconduct, including adulteration, which oftentimes was more fluid in its (il)-legality than would seem to be the case today. For example,
chaptalization and de-acidification, now fairly routine practices around the world, were once seen as insidious forms of manipulation. Less controversial but no less important are the more recent cases of fraud committed by Rudy Kurniawan and Hardy Rodenstock, both of whom Phillips discussed in the context of contemporary wine crime.

Wine is an eminently worthwhile book. Just as Hugh Johnson’s The World Atlas of Wine (2013) is the go-to reference for vineyard geography, I would make the case that Phillips’s new book may be the best general introduction to the social and cultural history and historiography of wine. While I often found myself excitedly looking ahead to see where Phillips was leading, I was just as frequently drawn to the material on the current page, mentally wandering off into ruminations about wine and landscape, words, crime, etc. Thankfully, the book’s thematic format invites jumping around with limited opportunity cost. This is truly a thought-provoking book.

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Reference


Der Wein des Vergessens (The Wine of Oblivion), written in German, may be the first book published that deals with the wine industry in Nazi Austria. In general, there is only scant literature about the German and Austrian wine industry during the Nazi regime, 1933–1945. Only in recent years have a few authors shed some light on various aspects of the Third Reich’s wine policies, particularly on the role of the German-Jewish wine trade. Daniel Deckers, editor of the daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, was one of the first, who, in his outstanding German language book Im Zeichen des Traubenadlers. Eine Geschichte des deutschen Weins (Deckers, 2010), devotes more than 40 of 220 pages to the wine industry in Nazi Germany.1 From the book, as well as from a few subsequent articles (Deckers, 2012, 2017), we learn that up to 60% of the German wine trade, particularly the wine export,

1 Kevin Goldberg reviewed the abbreviated English language version of Deckers’ book for the Journal of Wine Economics (Deckers, 2018; Goldberg, 2018).