And despite some trials and tribulations among others with the Gestapo (secret state police), August Rieger survived the war in Vienna. In 1949, Winzergenossenschaft Krems and Robitschek settled the sale for a final payment of 600,000 Austrian schillings, and the story was forgotten thereafter.

Aside from the fact that The Wine of Oblivion is a captivating read from the first page to the last, it also provides an excellent and detailed account of an aryanization process in the wine industry; a topic that has received little or no attention. In addition, without this book, nobody would have remembered—and all would have been forgotten. Instead, Winzer Krems Sandgrube 13 wants to find out more about its own roots and commissioned three historians, including Herrman and Streibel, to compile all relevant historical documents.

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References


Sometime in the mid-1970s, I opened a bottle of inexpensive claret that had been stored in the living room closet of my apartment in graduate housing. It smelled of damp basement and wet newspaper. I thought that perhaps being stored with winter coats had somehow introduced these unfortunate aromas into the wine. Had a book like Flawless been available, I would have discovered that the bottle
was afflicted with cork taint. On the other hand, “Although the wine industry was aware of musty taints from affected corks for a long time, it wasn’t until the early 1980s that Swiss scientist Hans Tanner and his team published research that identified [2,4,6-trichloroanisole] TCA as the main culprit in cork taint” (p. 123). The good news is that while not everything about wine flaws is known, much is and research continues to discover more.

Dr. Jamie Goode, who holds a Ph.D. in plant biology and is an award winning wine writer, has authored an important guide to what can go wrong with wine, how to recognize problems, and if anything can be done about them. While the title is oxymoronic, Goode defends it in the first chapter, “Introduction,” by explaining “I deliberately chose the title—Flawless—to emphasize the positive. The absence of flaws may not actually be a positive quality in itself... Sometimes, small levels of what might at higher levels be fault compounds can help beauty express itself...” (p. 2). He invokes “the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi...the idea that flaws can bring out beauty, or that flaws are in fact part of beauty” (p. 5).

Goode acknowledges that defining fault is difficult since there is a subjective aspect; one taster’s flaw is another’s nuance. Nevertheless, he contends that a “somewhat more objective definition [can be] based on an ‘average’ taster—one with average sensitivity to all potential fault compounds, along with the educated ability to recognize them... [This is] how we tend to operate in the wine trade and in wine competitions” (p. 9).

The second chapter, “The Chronology of Wine Faults,” summarizes what can go wrong at each phase from wine grape growing, starting with planting and managing a vineyard through harvest, production, bottling, transporting, and storage of the wine. This sets the stage for the next 13 chapters which cover the faults in more detail. The wine faults examined in these chapters—”Brettanomyces,” “Oxidation,” “Volatile Acidity,” “Reduction and Volatile Sulfur Compounds,” “Misty Taints: Cork Taint and Its Relatives,” “Smoke Taint,” “Geosmin,” “Eucalyptus Taint,” “Light Damage,” “Heat Damage,” “Greenness in Wine and Ladybug Taint,” “Mousiness,” and “Faults of Malolactic Fermentation”—are reminiscent of the ten plagues recited during the Passover Seder while spilling a drop of wine from a cup onto a plate. But if one encounters any of these faults, especially if it is pronounced, or even worse, multiple faults, which is certainly possible, he or she is more likely to dump the entire bottle instead of a few drops.

Chapters 3 through 15 each begin with six questions and answers about the flaw: What is it? What is the flavor impact? What causes it? Is it always bad? How can it be prevented? How common is it? These can serve as a reference when a taster is trying to quickly identify a problem. A more in depth discussion follows with a brief summary paragraph at the end. Because some of the chapters are short, Goode’s adherence to the “tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them” format occasionally leads to repetition of some of the same phrases even within a page.
Chapter 3 is about Brettanomyces or brett as it is commonly known. This common flaw caused by a yeast, *Brettanomyces bruxellensis*, manifests itself in many, though not always unpleasant ways. Goode notes that “Some bretty wines show more earthy and spicy; others are more at the fecal/barnyard end of the spectrum” (p. 23). He concludes with “Brett is such an interesting topic. It’s a fault, yet it’s an accepted element of some fine wine, particularly those with age. It’s a superb example of why we should take a more nuanced view of wine faults, rather than a binary ‘fault or no fault’ view” (p. 41). An example of an appealing bretty wine that I recently tasted is the 2013 White Rose Estate Nysa Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Dundee Hills in Oregon. The obvious but restrained barnyard aroma added to the complexity of this whole cluster fermented wine from a challenging vintage.

Goode contends “that oxygen management is probably the most important factor in wine quality” (p. 41) and spends 35 pages making the case in Chapter 4. Oxidation is another fault that does not always yield an unacceptable result and, in fact, is an essential component of several wines including tawny port. We learn that there are two types of oxidation: (1) enzymic and (2) nonenzymic or chemical. The former causes the browning of fruit. The latter involves complex interactions among oxygen, iron, and phenolics, which are flavor chemicals in red wine.

Chapter 5, “Volatile Acidity” (VA), another common flaw that gives a wine the smell of nail polish remover, is one that I have noticed in many wines that I have tasted lately. Goode writes, “At low levels, volatile acidity can add a bit of a lift to the nose of wines and can be positive” (p. 77). The lower the level, the better, I would say. At the same length as the previous chapter, Chapter 6, “Reduction and Volatile Sulfur Compounds” (VSCs), extensively examines “one of the most complicated and intriguing of all wine faults” (p. 87) that in most cases is truly repulsive—think of the rotten smell of hydrogen sulfide—yet is a “fundamental component of wine aroma in some varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc” (p. 86). Goode mentions that some experts have heard of flavors from VSCs being attributed to terroir.

Goode explains that “reduction, chemically speaking, is the opposite of oxidation” (p. 87). As with brett, yeasts are the culprits but reduction can also happen after bottling if the closure does not transmit enough oxygen as was the case with the screw tops early on. The problem was addressed by creating liners that are more permeable but Goode notes that it is too soon to tell if these will bring the problem under control.

Chapter 7, “Musty Taints: Cork Taint and Its Relatives,” is about a type of flaw that is always bad and the one that I had noticed in the claret. It is caused by the interaction of chlorine with microbes. While TCA is the main source, there are other compounds that cause these problems. At the winery where I work, I have witnessed diametrically opposite reactions to a corked bottle, one clearly suggestive of an allergic reaction, albeit short-lived, but nonetheless temporarily incapacitating, and the other anosmic. In the latter case, the individual unleashed a stream of adjectives and nouns grandiloquently extolling the aromatic virtues of a wine so clearly corked that the rest of us sat in utter disbelief. I wondered if there was such a thing as an X-ray nose!
Chapter 8, “Smoke Taint,” covers a hot topic in the western United States which suffered record breaking wildfires during the growing seasons of 2017 and 2018. It is an insidious problem because the effects may not be obvious until the wine has aged in bottle for a while. Although Goode deems smoke taint always bad, the Biscuit Fire in the Siskiyou National Forest in southern Oregon yielded examples of wines that some found attractive. For example, the 2002 Troon Biscuit Fire Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon became a collector’s item that sold for $700 a bottle (Eastman, 2009).

“Geosmin” (Chapter 9), is another flaw caused by microbes and, like TCA with which it has been confused, deemed irredeemably bad. “Eucalyptus Taint” (Chapter 10) is appealing to some and can bring out fruit notes. “Light Damage” (Chapter 11) and “Heat Damage” (Chapter 12) are both always bad but completely avoidable if the wine is handled properly. “Greenness in Wine and Ladybug Taint” (Chapter 13) can be caused by picking the grapes too soon or by ladybugs in the clusters. If resulting from the former, a little greenness might be acceptable. If it is caused by ladybugs, it is too intense.

“Mousiness” (Chapter 14), which can be caused by lactic acid bacteria, is admittedly one that I had never experienced possibly because you cannot smell it but must wait until it is in your mouth to detect it. But it can be even more deceptive. Goode states, “Up to a third of the population aren’t able to spot it at all. So, some wine-makers may be bottling wines that they think are fine, while two-thirds of their customers find them unacceptable” (pp. 180–181).

“Faults of Malolactic Fermentation” (Chapter 15) can result when malic acid is converted by bacteria to softer lactic acid. The results are favored by some and disliked by others, especially when the wine becomes too buttery.

Chapter 16 is a very short look at “Laboratory Testing for Wine Faults.” Because of the high cost of equipment needed to run some tests on samples, many wineries rely on commercial operations such as ETS Laboratories to do it for them. But Goode also recognizes “that technologies that were previously available through expensive third-party laboratories are now in reach of winery labs...[and] can do away with the need for defensive winemaking” (p. 201).

Chapter 17, “Conclusions,” shares Goode’s observations based on his experience in charge of monitoring flaws for the International Wine Challenge (IWC). He claims, “Wine faults seem to be less common than they used to be...More common than clear-cut faults are wines in which quality has been lost through the presence of fault compounds at levels that detract from the wine” (p. 202).

Quotations from experts in the area of wine flaws Goode interviewed lend credibility to the discussions as well as insights into the current research. The book includes references to the technical literature and an adequate index of four two-column pages. A glossary of terms and an acronym list would have been helpful additions.
Someone without a background in chemistry is likely to find the chapters on individual flaws difficult reading. Goode does not hold back on the technical details or the use of long names of chemical compounds. Amusingly, though, after the challenging discussion of brett, he realizes in the next chapter on oxidation that he has likely left some readers behind: “You probably won’t be pleased to hear that the mechanisms of chemical oxidation are really complicated. That’s the bad news. The good news is that I will try to explain them clearly in ways that won’t make you fall asleep, keeping the chemical jargon to a minimum” (pp. 47–48). He is successful only briefly before reverting to the jargon.

The intended audience for this book is unclear though there are some clues. In addition to his attempt to keep the lay audience awake, Goode also seems to be speaking directly to winemakers when he writes “depending on which country you are working in…” (p. 192). The emphasis on the detailed chemistry of the faults could be helpful to those involved in wine production. Oenophiles without the technical background will gain important insight into how their beverage of choice might be compromised and what signs of problems to look for when tasting.

Because of his scientific background and well-honed writing abilities, Goode serves as an able and dispassionate link to the experts and active researchers in the field of wine faults. Flawless, while not flawless itself, is an important contribution at whatever level of understanding a reader might require. I am certainly happy to have this reference to turn to now whenever I experience something unseemly in my glass.

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Reference


In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definitions of dummy that could refer to a potential reader of this book are most unflattering: “a dumb person” and “a dolt, blockhead.” And yet, since the first book in the For Dummies series appeared in