

Wine Appreciation

A Comprehensive User's Guide
to the World's Wines and Vineyards



Richard P. Vine

WINE APPRECIATION
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to the World's Wines and Vineyards*

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Dedicated to:

*THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE
KNIGHTS OF THE VINE*

PER VITEM! AD VITAM!

WINE APPRECIATION:

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WINE APPRECIATION

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FOREWORD

To find an American author who can write creatively and authoritatively not only about the American wine scene, but about the world of wine itself, is as exciting as discovering a new and rare vintage.

Who more apt to plumb the depths of wine than a writer named Richard P. Vine? The name alone bespeaks a special orientation toward all things vinous. Head of grape and wine research at Mississippi State University, as well as author of another great wine book, *Commercial Winemaking*, Dr. Vine offers in the present volume a vast store of wine knowledge to all who thirst for it. This book can also be credited with several firsts.

Wine Appreciation is possibly the first major work by an American author to meet the needs and desires of contemporary wine consumers, those who are seeking greater refinement and pleasure and for whom wine is one more way to enhance their enjoyment of life. This is also the first wine appreciation book to present the facts about wine and human physiology. In addition, it is the first to tackle the difficult but important topic of wine-consuming responsibility.

American wine educators and enthusiasts will be especially delighted with the American slant, American tone, and American English of *Wine Appreciation*. Many of us are sated with the highly judgmental pronouncements of European wine authorities who dictate, usually in British English, how, when, where, and which wines to enjoy, and who won't touch any wine unless it comes from Europe. Dr. Vine tips the balance toward American wines and the needs of American wine drinkers, and he does it in precise American-accented prose.

Wine Appreciation also traces the history of wine and its parallels with the development of Christianity and Western civilization. Dr. Vine here succeeds in being both comprehensive and entertaining.

We Americans have just begun to scratch the surface of wine appreciation. For too long we have been blinded by the notion that truly civilized pleasures were obtainable only abroad and especially in Western Europe. No one would deny the excellence of European wines and cuisine, and the necessity of educating the palate to their subtlety and variety, but we must not forget the wonderful bounty of foods and wines coming out of America right now.

For many, the words *wine* and *gourmet* and the associations they conjure up are quite frightening, but there's really no need to be intimidated. Being a gourmet simply means being able to appreciate the artful transformation of fresh, natural products into lovely, well-prepared meals. Enjoying and knowing about wine is just another part of this appreciation. Americans at last are waking up to how wonderful and rewarding wine can be. Civilized dining with wine may be an art form, but it is an art that appeals immediately, directly, and simply to the senses of sight, smell, and taste. It is also an art that the stomach can readily accept.

This volume conveys the scope of wine appreciation—the traditions, romance, and customs that have long surrounded wine—as well as the facts about human physiology, wine composition, production, and taste. For this we are indebted to Dr. Vine and those who assisted him in putting together this delightful and definitive book.

Norman Gates

Grand Commander,
Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vine

INTRODUCTION

Modern anthropological discoveries indicate that humans have appreciated wine for at least 8000 years and probably much longer. This seems entirely plausible when one considers that wine is essentially a natural beverage that requires no brewing or processing. Wine will, literally, make itself. The first vintners may have been cave people who discovered the “magic” of fermentation when they left some crushed grapes in a crude container for a few days. Long before the Stone Age, yeast cells have existed naturally on the outside of grape skins. Once these skins are broken the yeasts convert the sugars inside the grape into alcohol and carbon dioxide gas—hence, the bubbling “magic” of fermentation.

Wine today remains one of our most natural and simple foods. Yet wine as a subject has spawned a vast and complex body of knowledge. During the eighty centuries or more that wine has developed alongside Western civilization, humans have applied nearly every major academic discipline to advance the state of the art of wine.

We cannot and need not inquire too closely into the quality of wines made and consumed prior to the nineteenth century. Such products were often cloudy if drunk sooner and vinegar if drunk later. Nevertheless, people drank them for their taste, for their nutritive value, and because they provided a substitute for fouled water. There exist differing opinions as to the roles that wine has played in regard to agriculture, economics, medicine, nutrition, sociology, and theology throughout the history of Western civilization, but most experts agree that wine has had a significant impact on civilization. Indeed, Plato wrote: “Nothing more excellent or valuable than wine was ever granted by the gods to man.”

In modern times wine growing has become a huge industry. Wine expert Hugh Johnson says that throughout the world one out of every one hundred persons is

either a winegrower, a winemaker, or a wine merchant, and of every 130 acres of cultivated land, 1 is a vineyard. There are more than 25 million acres of vineyards spread over the Earth, and the annual world wine harvest is sufficient to supply every adult in the world with about twelve bottles of wine per year. Although Americans now consume more wine than spirits, they still drink less than one-tenth the per capita wine consumption of the French—and the French trail behind the Italians.

From simple beginnings have come thousands of different wines, and the range expands with each new vintage and each new vintner. The scientific findings and romantic fancies about wine have produced an overwhelming literature on every conceivable aspect of the subject. Indeed, a collection of all the different wine dictionaries, wine encyclopedias, wine textbooks, wine cookbooks, and other manifestos would fill a large library. There are hundreds of works addressing the topic of wine geography alone. All this information can perplex even the connoisseur—and persuade the neophyte that acquiring a true appreciation of wine is an impossible feat in one lifetime. Nonetheless, assisting the reader to become an educated wine consumer is the primary purpose of this book.

The overwhelming majority of comprehensive wine appreciation books offered in the American market are written by European authors, who, naturally, have European biases. Despite the fact that three out of every four bottles of wine consumed in America are from grapes grown in this country, we find our wines slighted in European books and consigned to brief sections of back chapters. *Wine Appreciation* is written for Americans, by an American, with American biases, and it considers American wines first. Being a born and bred easterner, from the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, I may be guilty of giving eastern American grapes and wines more attention than their proportionate market shares would indicate. I accept such criticism without attempting to justify myself.

Alec Waugh, a noted English wine expert, recalls a time when a French lady asked him if he could tell the vintage year and district of a particular French wine by its taste. "Of course I can't," he replied, to which the woman retorted, "A Frenchman could." He politely responded with the tactful comment, "Some could, I know," although he did not add aloud what he was thinking, "but very few." A Frenchman may easily be able to recognize select vintages and/or vineyard sources in the wines that he tastes. A native Burgundian, for instance, may approach wine appreciation with blind passion (and even blinder prejudice) since wine is the very lifeblood of Burgundy. But while his expertise may be deep, it most likely will also be narrow. That same Frenchman would, in all likelihood, have great difficulty in making profound judgments upon wines from other countries. After studying this book carefully, the reader will still not be able to pick

up every glass of wine and identify its precise source and vintage—no person, not even the greatest of experts, can do that. The philosophy herein aims to lead the reader toward a comprehensive knowledge of the wines of the world.

Dr. George Gale, professor, philosopher, vintner, and friend, relates two very important principles to consider when approaching one's first study of wine:

Wine is an expression of the simple pleasures of geography, climate, winemaker's skill and, ultimately, the palate. But the wine snob typically uses it only as an expression of his or her wealth and supposed good taste. This is a perversion of one of the simple joys of our good green earth.

And wine snobs often miss out on good wines. The most famous wines are not necessarily the best ones The wine snob knows about wine labels but doesn't necessarily know about wine. The only way to gain knowledge about wine is to drink it, studying and observing its many qualities and features.

Fragments of wine knowledge and mystical wine lore have turned many a wine bibber into an arrogant pseudo-expert. Some of the most common symptoms of this condition are name-dropping the great growths while turning up the nose at common wines, the praising of only dry wines while faulting all that have any detectable degree of sweetness, and a predilection for pitting classic European wines against their domestic counterparts. Unfortunately, this syndrome can often intimidate the bona fide wine student. The only "cure" is to experience many different kinds of wine. The true quality of the great growths may often be disappointingly similar to less noble vineyards; many of the truly fine white wines of the world are sweet, not dry; and American wines often outdo European counterparts, even in European competitions.

While both the quantity and quality of wine education in America has taken quantum leaps during the past several decades, wine still retains a certain mystique. Some perceive wine as a beverage reserved for the aristocracy, others fear using wine lest they commit a blunder of etiquette, yet others cling to some of the many wine myths that seem to pervade our country.

Dr. G. Hamilton Mowbray, winner of the American Wine Society Award of Merit for wine education, has made a fascinating study of wine myths, which has been published in the *American Wine Society Journal*. Among the many falsehoods that Dr. Mowbray reveals is, "Good wines must be expensive, or, expensive wines must be good."

He quotes the dean of American wine educators, Dr. Maynard A. Amerine, from a column in *The Friends of Wine* magazine:

The concept that age per se is a guarantee of quality is unfortunately too common. It has led to some excessively inflated prices for old wines of ordinary quality. Perhaps in

many cases the high prices represent rarity, that is, the law of diminishing returns has been incorrectly applied.

Unfortunately, other such myths have somehow resisted debunking.

A significant share of the snobbery that continues to persist on the subject of wine has doubtless evolved from some of the more archaic literature. Prior to Pasteur writers traditionally adopted grandiose attitudes toward wine—perhaps understandably so—since wine answered so many human needs. The emergence of scientific explanations for the “magic” of wine, however, did less to curtail the flowery phraseology than one might have expected. It is, however, true that we hold wine in a reverence granted to no other human food. There are no international milk appreciation organizations, we do not have comparative tastings of orange juice, this year’s production of beer is not given any special regard over that of last year, we do not collect and store different colas in our cellar, and we would have difficulty finding a syndicated column on the subject of coffee appreciation. Because wine commands a special attention and involvement, we can forgive those who have succumbed to the fancier notions of wine culture and refinement.

This book intends to be straightforward in debunking the snobbery, myth, and obscurity surrounding the enjoyment of wines.

The late André Simon, a great British wine writer of many volumes, once remarked that “there are all sorts of wine, young and old, good and bad, still and sparkling. There are times, moods and occasions when young wine will give us greater pleasure than the old; others when we shall enjoy the company of the old far more than that of the young.” This thought establishes an ideal of wine appreciation—an understanding encompassing much more than just a casual list of acquired wine preferences, but, rather, one that is measured by the full extent of the pleasure with which wine rewards each individual.

It seems sensible to first define wine, and then explain how to classify and identify wines. Next comes the most important part of this work, the human physiological aspects of wine and wine enjoyment: How one selects, buys, stores, serves, and cooks with this remarkable beverage; how one goes about wine tasting and judging; and the tradition of wine toasts and sentiments. Then comes a full measure of wine history that not only sets roots deeply, but also “savoring a wine’s historical associations along with what’s in the glass can add even more to its interest,” to borrow from the words of wine writer and historian Desmond Seward. Finally, we direct attention to the major wine-growing districts, subdistricts, villages, cellars, and, in some instances, even the individual vineyards, within the major wine-growing countries that form the immense world of wine. The apprentice is then left to plumb further and more pleasurable depths of wine appreciation.

Having discussed the seeds of reasoning behind this volume, I can find no adequate expression of gratitude to the many learned people who have contributed to its fruition. I would like to acknowledge my personal obligation to some of these individuals:

Some of us need more encouragement in such projects than others—this writer being one of those who needs full measures of such motivation. Those who were particularly inspiring were Dr. Gale Ammerman, Dr. Lanny Bateman, Dr. John Boyle, Mr. William Clifford, Dr. Warren Couvillion, Dr. Rodney Foil, Mr. John Grisanti, Father Thomas Hayes, Dr. James Heitz, Mr. David Levin, Father Bill Richter, Dr. Donald Robin, Mr. Thomas Storey, Mr. James Verges, Dr. Louis Wise, and Dr. Donald Zacharias.

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The real work was performed by three wonderful ladies. Ms. Ruth Josey spent many hours, in addition to her regular duties as secretary, attending to the thousands of telephone calls and letters necessary in this project. Ms. Velma Jo Barham Miller contributed day after day on the keyboard, typing manuscript revisions. I lost track after we once counted up a total of 1,588 pages. Standing in for me in the classroom from time to time, and at meetings of the American Society for Enology and Viticulture, the American Wine Society, and for a number of other presentations that I could not attend personally, was Ms. Ellen Harkness, eno-microbiologist extraordinaire. Without these three remarkable women, this project could not have come to pass.

Most of all, there was the support from my family—each of whom, once more, sacrificed dearly in order that the time for this book could be provided. Thank you, wife Gaye, son Scott, and daughters Sabrina and Stacia. You are all terrific!

In vino veritas,

Richard P. Vine, Ph.D.

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