

AMERICAN

WINE

—A—
COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

REVISED EDITION with easy reference to all
the wine-producing regions of the United
States, including maps, winery profiles, tast-
ing notes and recommendations on over
5,000 individual American wines.



ANTHONY DIAS BLUE

AMERICAN WINE

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE

Revised Edition



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1817

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco
London, Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

To Gertrud Blue, who taught me
to work hard, love excellence,
and not take myself too seriously

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FIRST EDITION

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 88-45013

ISBN 0-06-015914-6

88 89 90 91 92 MPC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

AMERICAN WINE

Acknowledgments

The revised edition of *American Wine* represents a thorough reworking and updating of the first book. Although a great deal of data had been collected for the first edition, all of it was rechecked and reentered. Profiles were rewritten and thousands of new wines were catalogued, tasted, and annotated. New wineries were added and defunct ones deleted. Maps were organized and designed. It was an exhausting experience, but I think we have produced a book that is far superior to the first effort.

The coordinator of the project was hardworking assistant editor Jack Weiner, who directed all of the above with unflagging commitment and enthusiasm. Our close help-mate throughout the project was the amazing data management system DBASE III PLUS, which handled and processed the raw data and turned it into a coherent whole.

Editor Pat Brown was an inspiration to us all. She provided kindly encouragement in the darkest moments, expert advice and clever solutions along the way, and always a firm hand on the tiller. Pamela Mosher labored long hours making the manuscript readable and getting it set into type. She also worked closely with computer whiz William B. Smith, who created a space-age program for turning my scribblings and tasting notes into a book. Joseph Montebello was the guiding force behind the design of the book and shepherded it through the production process. Cartographer George Colbert was responsible for the handsome and useful maps. Thanks also to agent Don Cutler, whose advice and unobtrusive style kept everything on track.

I am particularly grateful to *Bon Appétit* magazine and *The Wine Spectator*, both of which furnished me with the organized tastings that are the core of this book. Special thanks to my fellow tasters, the fastest and best palates in the west: Scott Clemens, Art Damond, Jim Gordon, Mike Higgins, Jim Laube, Hank Rubin, Harvey Steiman, and Jean Wolfe Walzer. In addition, I appreciate the support of Bill Garry, Barbara Fairchild, and Laurie Buckle at *Bon Appétit*, and Marvin Shanken at the *Wine Spectator*. Thanks also to patient editors Stuart Dodds and Stan Arnold at Chronicle Features, Carolyn Snyder at the *San Jose Mercury News*, and Harvey Nagler and Bernie Gershon at WCBS Radio in New York.

There are a few more people and institutions that for one reason or another deserve my thanks: John Brady, Stan Bromley, Ray Bush, Mike Byrne, Bob Mondavi, Ed Schwartz, Alan Stillman, André Tchelistcheff, Ray Wellington, Diane Rossen Worthington, Roger Yaseen, Gerard Yvernault, the Sonoma County Harvest Fair, View from the Vineyards, the Napa Valley Wine Auction, and the California Wine Perspective.

Finally, thanks to my wife, Kathy, and my children, Caitlin, Toby, Jessica, and Amanda, for enduring yet another two years of craziness.



Introduction

Wine is very special.

It is one of the most delicious potables known to humanity, and also one of the most complex and variable. There are enormous differences among the many wine grape varieties, each of which responds dissimilarly to varying environmental factors, such as soil, weather, and viticultural techniques. Thus, each individual wine ends up as subtly unique as a snowflake or a human fingerprint. That's why there is a book like this about wine and not one about catsup or peanut butter.

In judging wines, I am strongly opinionated but generally objective. My judgments about wines are based on knowledge, long experience, a prodigious memory, and a good palate—but they should be taken with a grain of salt. Any assessment of wine, even by so-called experts, should be read with a skeptical eye. Criticism is never more than the opinion of one person—a person who may have different experiences, different sensory memories, and different tastes from yours.

Therefore, please think of this book as a guide, not as the final word. Aside from the idiosyncrasies of personal taste, wine criticism may be even less exact than other critical disciplines, because its subject is always changing. Unlike a movie, book, or play, wine, even after it's made and in the bottle, is constantly evolving; it is a work in progress, and wine criticism is just a signpost along the way.

I like to think that I have a consumer's palate. I have enjoyed my share of prestigious, well-aged Cabernets and lush, oaky Chardonnays, but I don't turn up my nose at a crisp and fruity White Zinfandel or a snappy Gamay Beaujolais. Over the past decade or so I have tasted and assessed the quality of thousands of wines. I have experienced the entire range of American wines from the loftiest reserve Cabernets to the lowliest "white table wine." As a result, you hold in your hand a comprehensive consumer's guide, appropriate for every wine drinker, not another elitist tome aimed at the precious few.

Each winery in the United States is a distinctive entity, guided and directed by dedicated and hard-working individuals. Over the last fifteen years or so I have gotten to know most of these people and grown to appreciate and admire the effort that goes into the work they do. In this book, I have tried to flesh out and humanize each winery and make it more than just a name on a bottle.

As far as my wine reviews are concerned, I have tried to unearth discoveries in every price range; I also haven't hesitated to point out wines that I think should be avoided. But don't take me too seriously. Don't run out and buy a case of a wine I recommend highly without trying one bottle first. If you don't taste for yourself, you may find your cellar filled with expensive disappointments.

I do not, however, want to minimize the usefulness of this volume (I'd be doing myself a disservice if I did). I love wine and I want to share my enthusiasm with you, in

the hope that those of you who are not yet convinced will find my ardor contagious. I approached every wine mentioned on these pages with a sense of anticipation and excitement. If my words can stimulate just a little of those sensations in you, I will have succeeded.

Wine is not crucial—entire lives can be lived without it. But this magical liquid can add so much pleasure, so much enrichment. I would like to provide the key to those experiences for you.

American Wines: Ready to Take On the World

On December 5, 1933, America emerged from the thirteen-year nightmare of Prohibition. A country that had learned to like “bathtub” gin was suddenly faced with developing and training its palate. It wasn’t so easy. As a result of the painfully slow nature of this process, the American wine industry did not spring into action immediately. After all, there was very little wine industry to speak of—the “noble experiment” had all but wiped it out—and Americans, unlike Europeans, had no real wine tradition to fall back on.

The story had been quite different before 1920. Wines from California and other states had been growing in volume and quality since the late 1800s. New techniques, new varieties, and a heightened sophistication were leading American wines to a surprising level of acceptance. Some California bottlings were reaching Europe and actually winning medals at important competitions.

But the Volstead Act, which made Prohibition the law of the land, put an end to this encouraging growth and practically finished off the American wine industry. A few producers were able to hold out by making “sacramental” or cooking wine, but essentially American wine ceased to exist. During this dark period, however, home winemaking was booming. When the repeal of Prohibition finally came, many of the new wine professionals had learned winemaking in their own basements.

The revived American wine business got off to a poor start as producers rushed badly made wines to market in December 1933. Bottles exploded because of unfinished fermentation, and wines tasted of mold, vinegar, and other more exotic spoilages; most wines coming from abroad were not much better. Consumers turned to gin and beer, and the American wine industry settled down to making dessert wines—port, sherry, muscatel, and other sweet wines fortified with brandy.

For twenty-five years very few people knew a serious American wine industry existed. But during that time great wines were being made—not many, but enough to indicate the enormous potential of American vineyards. At the Inglenook winery in the Napa Valley, fine Cabernet Sauvignons were produced throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Across the highway at Beaulieu Vineyard, under the guidance of Russian-born and French-trained André Tchelistcheff, great Cabernets and Pinot Noirs were commonplace. Many of the Inglenook and Beaulieu wines of this period are still very much alive and quite delicious; they have become much sought after and highly valued at wine auctions both here and in Europe.

Nevertheless, it took a dramatic event, a family feud, to get the American wine boom on track. In 1966 Robert Mondavi, co-owner of the Charles Krug Winery, left the winery because of a dispute with his younger brother, Peter. Robert, whose energy and determination are legendary, immediately built his own winery, the first major new facility in California since Prohibition.

Mondavi’s confidence in the future of the American wine industry was infectious.

Others took the cue, and wineries began springing up from Ukiah to Santa Cruz. Soon afterward premium vineyards were planted in Monterey, Paso Robles, and the Santa Ynez Valley.

In 1960 the Napa Valley had a total of twenty-five wineries, only twelve of which sold wine outside the county; by 1975 it had forty-five active wineries. (Today the count is getting close to two hundred.) The boom was on in earnest.

In the East, wineries began to appear around New York's Finger Lakes, on the banks of Lake Erie, and in Maryland, Virginia, and Ohio. Home winemakers in Oregon and Washington began converting their garages to commercial wineries.

But despite the talk and the "brave new world" attitude of these pioneer vintners, no one believed for a minute that their wines could be compared with the great bottlings of Europe, particularly France. After all, the French had been making great wines for hundreds of years; the burgeoning American wine industry didn't begin until the end of 1933.

After 1955 things began moving, slowly at first. Then between 1965 and 1975 great strides were made. The world-famous viticulture and enology department at the University of California at Davis began turning out talented winemakers and growers, tyros who had been thoroughly educated in how to avoid making the mistakes of the past. American wines were cleaner, more complex, and better made than ever before.

In addition, winemaking advances were being made regularly. In Modesto, the Gallo laboratories were scoring technical breakthroughs nearly every day, as was Mondavi in Napa. Meanwhile, Dr. Konstantin Frank and Charles Fournier were making great advances in the use of vinifera grapes in the cooler northeastern climate, and vineyards of new French-American hybrid grapes were appearing all over the country, thanks to research that had been undertaken by Philip Wagner in Maryland just after the repeal of Prohibition.

The word even reached Europe. Stephen Spurrier, an English wine merchant in Paris, knew California wines were good, but just how good he wasn't sure. In May 1976, Spurrier decided to put them to the test: He assembled four of California's best Chardonnays; four of the best Cabernet Sauvignons; four of France's best white Burgundies (wines that are made from the noble Chardonnay grape); and four Grand Cru Classé red Bordeaux wines, including such notables as Château Mouton-Rothschild (made from the elegant Cabernet Sauvignon grape).

Mr. Spurrier then brought together nine of the greatest wine palates in Paris, including top restaurateurs, wine stewards, wine journalists, château owners, and Pierre Brejoux, inspector general of the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, France's top wine judge. He masked the bottles so nobody knew which wines were from France and which were from California.

Those in attendance did know that they were tasting California wines as well as French wines, and as the tasting progressed their comments about the wines they identified as being from the United States became more and more cutting and patronizing. Imagine their surprise and chagrin when the wines were finally unmasked and they saw that the bottles they had guessed to be French were in fact mostly American, and those they had denigrated turned out to be mostly French. The tasters were mortified and wine history was made.

Before the unmasking, the French wine experts had been asked to rank the wines. When these rankings were tabulated, the wines from California won the day decisively. The judges preferred wines from two small and relatively new Napa Valley wineries. The winning Chardonnay was the 1973 vintage made by Mike Grgich at Château Montelena, a winery in Calistoga from which the first releases had been from the 1972 vintage. The

winning Cabernet Sauvignon was the 1973 vintage from Warren Winiarski's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, and it was also the winery's second release of this variety.

These resounding victories sent shock waves throughout the wine world. The news was carried by all the major television networks in the United States and featured in such national publications as *Time* magazine. The perception of California's wines was changed overnight and forever. Americans could now shed their feelings of enological inferiority and be confident that the best domestic wines were at least the equal of Europe's best.

The immediate result of this breakthrough was that American wine snobs, people who stocked their cellars with only fine French and German wines, began to think of America's products as more than just impertinent domestic plonk. Many of them actually tried California wine for the first time and came away believers. American wines became chic. Wine lovers who used to compare notes about the latest Bordeaux vintage now searched the marketplace for the latest releases of the newest and most obscure California "boutique" wineries—small wineries specializing in a few premium wines.

In competitions in the United States and abroad, this American triumph has been repeated, time and time again, since the Paris tasting. And international recognition has not been limited to California wines. Such Oregon and Washington wineries as the Eyrie Vineyards, Tualatin Vineyards, and Château St. Michelle have won many competitions and, more important, the respect of influential European palates.

Several years ago, price was something of a stumbling block in the acceptance of American wines. A strong dollar in comparison with European currencies, plus the substantial subsidies that foreign governments pay to support wine exports, gave European wines a definite price advantage in the marketplace. Imports were making strong inroads on the U.S. market and American wine exports were nonexistent. But even then, a careful comparison of wines in the same price range showed that the plucky Americans were able to hold their own.

Things have changed dramatically. In recent years, the dollar has plummeted in relationship to most foreign currencies. As a result, quality American wines have become a relative bargain. They dominate the domestic wine market, and exports, while still less than a flood, are growing substantially every year. Even as their quality continues to increase, American wines have become among the world's most reasonably priced.

The point of all this is that American wines are no longer taking a back seat to any other wines. Great wines are made in France, Germany, and Italy, but great wines are also made in California, New York, and Virginia—wines that are certainly in the same league as the finest Europe has to offer. And in homes and restaurants here and abroad, American wines have taken their place at the best tables. Not only are the wines of America acceptable in polite company, they are actually sought after, which is quite an accomplishment for an industry that is just a bit more than fifty years old.

What Is Wine?

No one knows when the first wine was made; its origins are lost in the mists of prehistory. We do know that wine played an important part in most ancient civilizations. The temperate zones, where people first came together in rudimentary social units, were also the areas where grapevines happened to originate.

I can just imagine that momentous event, the making of the first wine. Like many great discoveries, it was, I'm sure, an accident. Someone came across grapevines laden with ripe fruit. Overjoyed by his (or her) great fortune, he quickly picked the grapes, piled them into some rough container or sack, and triumphantly carried them home.

Upon arriving at the tribal cave or hut, he noticed that the weight of the fruit was

causing the bunches at the bottom of the pile to exude a delicious, sweet juice. Growing more excited, he crushed the rest of the grapes with a rock, his hands, or maybe his feet. Filling a number of open-topped containers with this sweet juice, our first enologist figured he had enough for his family to drink for many days.

The prehistoric abode, not exactly a model of hygiene, was loaded with all sorts of microbiological specimens. Among these was a colony of wild yeast spores that, freely floating through the air, came upon the open containers of grape juice.

The rest, as they say, is history. The yeast began devouring the sugar in the grape juice, turning it into alcohol. Imagine the surprise of our ancient friend when he returned to his grape juice and found that it had changed. Not only was it less sweet than it had been before, but it had a new, more interesting taste and a bite that hadn't been there before. Picture his delight when he discovered how good the grape juice made him feel. I'm sure that he and his family partook greedily of this strangely appealing drink, perhaps to excess. The next morning our hero awoke to find that he not only had invented wine but also had the first hangover.

Wine is still made by that simple, basic process. Grape juice combines with yeast, which converts its sugar to alcohol. The only difference today is that we have learned to control the process and to protect the final product so it doesn't have to be consumed immediately. But we still get a hangover if we drink too much.

In the fall of 1981 my son, Toby, and I made our own Chardonnay with the help of Beringer Vineyards. We went through all the steps taken by a full-sized commercial winery but only made a very small amount.

Toby and I began our adventure at 7:15 on a mid-September morning. The sun was just peeking through the fog as it rose over the Napa Mountains. Most commercial picking is done in these morning hours so the fruit can be delivered to the winery when it is still cool. The temperature at which grapes ferment is very important—the cooler the juice is to begin with, the slower and more gentle the process.

First, with the use of a refractometer, we tested the sugar level of the grapes. The juice of a ripe grape should be between 21 percent and 24 percent sugar, which allows the fermentation to convert the sugar to a desirable alcohol level. Generally the conversion rate is about 55 percent, which means that 22 percent sugar will result in a dry wine containing about 12 percent alcohol. (Sometimes, without warning or explanation, the conversion rate jumps to 60 or 65 percent, and winemakers find themselves with a wine much higher in alcohol than expected.) Wielding hook-bladed knives, we had picked fourteen lug-boxes of grapes by 10 A.M. We loaded our haul, about one third of a ton, into a truck. By the time the last heavy box was hoisted in, we were tired, blistered, and in awe of the efficient professional pickers we had seen speeding through a nearby block of Sauvignon Blanc.

We trucked the grapes back to the Beringer winery in St. Helena, a few miles from the vineyard, and unloaded them at the stemmer-crusher, a machine that removes the grapes from their stems and breaks their skins. We used a small machine that was identical to the big stainless steel stemmer-crusher the winery uses for large loads of fruit. The stems were collected in a basket, and the crushed grapes and free-run juice were collected in a vat.

The grape skins, pulp, and juice were then kept in contact with each other for ten hours. During this time the skins imparted varietal character and complexity to the juice. This is one of the many decisions the winemaker makes during the winemaking process: How much skin contact should the wine have? For other white varieties, such as Chenin Blanc or Riesling, the period is usually very short.

Another choice, especially when making Chardonnay, is whether to ferment the

wine in oak barrels or in stainless steel vats. Both ways are common; the choice depends on what style of wine the winemaker wants to make. Barrel fermentation gives the wine an earthy, rich, oaky flavor. Stainless steel fermentation generally results in a crisper, lighter wine. Some winemakers compromise by starting the fermentation in stainless and then transferring the still-fermenting juice to oak. Another method is to combine separate lots of barrel-fermented and stainless steel-fermented wines in the same blend. Toby and I chose to barrel-ferment our Chardonnay.

The next step was putting our grapes and juice into a press. The oldest style of press, called a basket press, consists of upright wooden slats that are filled with grapes, then pressed down by a ratchet and rod, compressing the grapes into a dense cake. The pressed juice flows out the bottom, through a funnel, and into a barrel. Most wineries have abandoned this rudimentary type of device in favor of big electric presses that use centrifugal force or gentle pressure to extract the juice.

The next decision is what kind of yeast to use. There are hundreds of different strains of yeast to choose from, and each imparts a particular character to the finished wine. Different yeasts are used for different varieties. Almost all modern wineries “inoculate” their wines with yeast rather than depend on wild yeasts, which allows the vintner greater control over the winemaking process.

We chose a French Champagne yeast, a type used by many American wineries in the making of Chardonnay. To “proof” the yeast, very much as in bread making, Toby mixed the dry, powdered yeast with a small amount of the grape juice. The yeast shows that it is active and alive by bubbling and foaming as it feeds on the sugar in the fresh grape juice.

We poured the bubbling liquid into our French oak barrel, and the fermentation process began in earnest. We inserted a glass fermentation valve in the bung hole of the barrel to allow the carbon dioxide that is produced in the chemical reaction to escape. (In the Champagne-making process the carbon dioxide is trapped within the bottle, creating those delightful bubbles.) In the cool winery, it takes several days for all of the sugar to be converted and the wine to become dry. When making Johannisberg Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Muscat, or Chenin Blanc wine, the stainless steel fermenting vat is usually equipped with a refrigeration jacket that can quickly cool its contents. This is how winemakers who want to leave a bit of residual sugar in their wines can stop the fermentation process when the desired sugar level is reached. At this point the new wine is “racked”—pumped out of the tank—and filtered so all the yeast is removed and further fermentation is impossible.

When fermentation of our Chardonnay was completed, we racked the new wine to separate it from the spent yeast and other solids that had dropped to the bottom of the barrel. Then the wine was returned to a clean barrel, where it aged undisturbed for several months. Once again there are decisions to be made by the winemaker: How long should the wine remain in oak? How new should the oak be? What kind of oak should it be? Each decision will have a profound effect on the flavor of the finished product.

The “Blue & Son” Chardonnay turned out quite well. In fact, it won a bronze medal at the 1983 California State Fair amateur winemaking competition. Next time I intend to pick my grapes when they are a little less ripe and take the wine out of the oak sooner. But then, most winemakers learn the fine points of their craft from experience.

The following year Toby, then twelve years old, and I tried our now-seasoned hands at making red wine. We helped John Buehler of Buehler Vineyards in Napa to make his 1982 Cabernet Sauvignon. The differences between making red and white are fairly simple. Red wines are allowed much longer skin contact so the wine will extract the full measure of color, tannin, and other character complexities from the skin. The grapes are

crushed perhaps a bit more forcefully than when making whites, and they are eventually fermented with the skins still in contact with the juice. After fermentation the grape skins and pulp fall to the bottom of the fermenter and the clear wine is drawn off. Reds, except Beaujolais-style wines, are almost always aged in oak barrels. The wines can spend a year or two in barrels followed by a year or two in bottles before being released. Because of their greater complexity and their harsh tannins when young, reds require considerably more aging before they are drinkable.

Making sparkling wine may be the most complicated process of all. There are three ways to make wine with bubbles: the original Champagne method, the transfer method, and the *Charmat* or bulk process. In the *méthode champenoise*, a still wine is made and bottled. To this young wine some sugar and yeast are added. Then the bottle is capped, and a secondary fermentation takes place in the bottle. The carbon dioxide bubbles, trapped in the bottle, go into solution and appear only when the wine is finally opened and consumed.

The most complicated part of the Champagne method is removing the residue of spent yeast after the secondary fermentation is completed. This is accomplished by gradually tilting the bottle, over a period of several days or weeks, until the sediment is resting next to the cork. (This procedure is called *remuage*.) The neck of the bottle is then quickly frozen, the ice plug containing the yeast removed, and the bottle recorked. (This process is called *degorgement*.) American wines made in this painstaking way are usually labeled “Naturally fermented in *this* bottle.”

In the transfer method, the wines are cooled after the secondary fermentation and emptied from the bottles into a tank. Kept under pressure, the wine is filtered and returned to clean bottles. These wines are labeled “Naturally fermented in *the* bottle.” In the bulk process, the secondary fermentation takes place in large vats, and the wine is then bottled under pressure.

There is yet another kind of wine that has, in the past few years, become very popular. Blanc de Noirs are “white” wines made from red grapes. They represent a creative solution by American vintners for disposing of surplus red grapes. This was particularly useful in the midst of the now-slowing white wine boom that has dominated the American wine market for a decade. Some cynics suggest that Blanc de Noirs, or “Blush” wines, are just rosés that have been renamed, sort of the emperor’s new clothes of wine.

To make Blush wines, the most popular of which is White Zinfandel, the grapes are gently crushed and the juice is quickly removed from contact with the grape skins, which hold the pigment that tints the wine red. Sometimes these wines look like white wines, but most of the time a little color slips in, giving them a slightly pink cast.

Actually, even at their ruddiest, Blanc de Noir wines are lighter in color than most rosé wines. The classic method for making rosé calls for the wine to ferment for a day or so in contact with the skins. Once the optimum amount of color has been absorbed, the wine is drawn off, completing its fermentation away from the skins. Some cheap rosés are actually made by combining red and white wines.

There are other winemaking methods and an infinite number of variations and nuances that are learned at the University of California at Davis or at Fresno State University, in wine labs, or in the home winemaker’s basement. Although we’ve come a long way toward perfecting the techniques of winemaking, most of what has been discovered in the past few thousand years has just been fine-tuning. Our prehistoric friend might be befuddled by all the shiny stainless steel, pumps, centrifuges, and bottling lines in the modern winery, but the basic process is still the same one he discovered on that great day when he took his first sip of that appealingly transformed grape juice.

Why This Book?

The idea of this book is simple: to help you get as much enjoyment from American wines as possible.

Buying American wine can be a hit-or-miss affair. Although the government requires certain information to appear on each wine label, there still is no sure way for the consumer to know about the quality of the wine. In Europe there are certain estates that have long-standing reputations for making superior wines. Most American wineries, on the other hand, haven't been around long enough to have established such a track record.

The American wine industry is young and still quite volatile; a great Chardonnay from a particular winery one year doesn't guarantee an equally delicious effort the next year. With established French or Italian wines, the differences between bottlings from different years are mainly attributable to variations of weather. But in the United States, even if the climate remains the same, the winery may have changed winemakers, purchased its grapes from a different source, or just made its wine in a different style. In each case the wine will taste different. Consequently, the purpose of this book is to take the unpleasant surprises out of your wine buying.

Why Trust Me?

Over the past year or two I have tasted and rated more than 5,000 wines. Although I was unable—as much as I may have wished otherwise—to taste absolutely everything on the market, I would guess that the wines rated in this book represent more than 90 percent of the American wines you are likely to encounter at your local wine shop.

I tasted the vast majority of wines “blind”—with the label hidden—and I tasted most of them more than once. Twice every week I meet with a small group of wine professionals to taste between thirty and fifty wines. These intensive exercises, carried out under the aegis of *Bon Appétit* magazine and *The Wine Spectator*, allow me to keep up with the continuous flow of new releases.

In addition, I have judged a host of comprehensive wine events in California and elsewhere. I also attend many industry wine tastings, and I constantly sample wines at home, where my wife is not at all delighted with the half-empty wine bottles that are always cluttering up the kitchen.

So I've tasted many wines—what qualifies me to judge them? I can tell you that I have an excellent, well-trained palate, and I can spot volatile acidity or mercaptans at fifty paces. But that's not enough. I am also extremely consistent. When I hold a wine up to a standard set of criteria, I come away with a judgment that complements all the judgments that have gone before. I have tested myself frequently by tasting the same wine at several different times and comparing the notes recorded at each tasting, and there is almost never a serious disparity in my ratings.

It is these tasting notes that set this book apart from most other wine books that have come before it. They represent my personal opinions, but they are thorough, informed, carefully achieved, and consistent. So if you agree with me on one or two wines, you will probably agree with me on most of them.

How the Book Is Organized

In the first edition of this book, the wineries were listed alphabetically. This meant that a winery from Arkansas might find itself next to a winery from Connecticut or Southern

California. This time around, I decided to group the wineries in fourteen distinct geographic regions.

I feel strongly that American wines are beginning to develop clear regional characteristics. A Texas Chardonnay tastes different than one from Virginia, which, in turn, is very different from a Chardonnay from Oregon. This regional approach groups wineries that are physically close to each other and whose wines have similar characteristics. It allows me to comment on the various regions and it provides the opportunity to have maps that pinpoint the location of each winery.

If you are looking for an individual winery but you don't know its region, there is a complete alphabetical index, including second labels, on page 000.

I begin with California because the wines of that state are the ones most likely to be found in the greatest number of wine shops around the country. The path starts in the Napa Valley, then snakes its way through the state, and then moves across the country from north to south and west to east.

How I Judge Wines

Every professional taster agrees that there are certain characteristics that make some wines unacceptable. Oxidation (spoilage due to excessive exposure to oxygen), volatile acidity (sour, vinegary acid), and dirtiness or bacterial spoilage (the result of sloppy winemaking) are some of the most noticeable problems. Luckily not many wines are so blatantly flawed, so most wines are not so clearly classifiable.

Too many people who taste wine will break a wine down into its various components—clarity, aroma, balance, mouth feel, sweetness, varietal character, finish, aging potential—but will neglect to form an impression of the wine as a whole. Many winemakers and enology professors will criticize a wine that has a minor flaw, despite the fact that it may be delicious and quite enjoyable to drink.

For me, the bottom line in wine judging is “Does it taste good?” I like to think that I have a consumer's palate; I steer clear of technical terminology and pretentious pronouncements. In my tasting notes, I haven't tried to reach dizzying literary heights. In fact, you'll find the notes fairly repetitive, because I use the same words to describe the same characteristics. Here are some of the most frequently used descriptives:

Big: Robust, intense, full-bodied, usually with high alcohol. Synonym: *Fat*.

Body: The richness and viscosity of a wine, usually tied closely to the amount of alcohol in the wine.

Buttery: Having the taste of butter. Actually, the compound, called phenacetyl, that gives wine a buttery taste is the same that is found in butter.

Clean: This is one of the most important characteristics of good wine. Modern technology has made it possible to avoid the dirt and spoilage that used to plague the winemaking process. Well-made wines should always be clean.

Coarse: Crude, simple, lacking finesse.

Complex: Having depth, intricacy, and subtlety of flavor.

Crisp: Having fresh, fruity acidity, which is a highly desirable quality, especially for white wines. Synonyms: *Snappy*, *tart*, *brisk*.

Dull: Flat, lifeless, lacking crispness.

Elegant: Having complexity and finesse without being aggressive or heavy.

Fruity: Having the taste of fresh fruit (apples, pears, cherries, grapefruit, and, especially, grapes). Fruitiness is a characteristic of well-made young wines.

Grassy: Having a herbaceous flavor that is often characteristic of Sauvignon Blanc. Grassy flavor is attractive as a part of a whole but overbearing when too pronounced.

Herbaceous: Having subtle herbal flavors, desirable in small quantity. Herbal flavors are associated with Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.

Long: Having the characteristic of the flavors' lasting a prolonged time in the mouth after the wine has been tasted.

Oaky: Having the flavors of wood, toast, and vanilla that come from good oak barrels.

Oxidized: Exhibiting a spoilage condition caused by excessive exposure to oxygen. Oxidation causes a wine to lose its fruitiness and freshness.

Raisiny: Having the dried grape flavor that appears in wines made from overripe fruit.

Residual sugar: Unfermented sugar that remains in a finished wine. A small amount rounds out the flavors of a wine. More than half a percent (by weight) will begin to make the wine taste sweet.

Silky: Smooth and light in texture and mouth feel.

Soft: Lacking harshness; smoothly textured.

Structure: A very important element of any wine, especially reds. A good Cabernet Sauvignon, for instance, should have a firm backbone of acidity, upon which all of its other characteristics hang. This backbone gives the wine definition and dimension and indicates that it will age well. Without structure a wine is flabby, shapeless, lacking in promise, and ultimately flawed.

Tannic: Having an astringent, puckery feeling in the mouth. Tannin is characteristic of young red wines and can be a product of the grape or of the oak in which the wine is stored. Eventually—in the ideal scenario—the tannin softens and allows the fruit and varietal character of the wine to show through.

Varietal character: The particular flavor of the grape variety used in making the wine. Definitely a desirable characteristic.

Velvety: Soft, thick, and smooth on the palate.

Vegetal: Smelling and/or tasting of vegetables. This could manifest itself in a number of ways, all of them unattractive. Some of the more common vegetable likenesses are bell peppers, asparagus, and broccoli.

Vinous: Having a heavy, sometimes oily quality that tastes more of leaves and stems than fruit.

Volatile acidity: A vinegary taste brought about by the presence of acetic acid and ethyl acetate. Acceptable in small amounts but very undesirable in large quantities.

The rest of my descriptive terms should be easily understandable, but a few technical terms need defining. They are:

Botrytis: Short for *botrytis cinerea*, the Latin name for a mold that attacks grapes on the vine and dehydrates them, thereby intensifying their sugar content. Wines made from these grapes are sweet and rich. In the United States such wines are usually designated as "late harvest."

Carbonic maceration: The technique used most frequently in France's Beaujolais district, in which whole uncrushed clusters of grapes are put into the fermenting tank. The resulting wine is fruity and ready to drink when quite young.

Solera: A stack of barrels used in making sherry. The young wine is placed in the top barrels, which are exposed to the heat of the sun, thus giving the wine its nutty flavor. As

the wine ages, it is transferred to lower barrels in the solera until it reaches the bottom level, from which it is bottled.

What About Cellaring?

In my comments about some Cabernets and a few other wines I have tried to project when the better ones will reach their optimum drinkability. When I say “drink 1991” I don’t mean 1991 is the only year in which the wine should be consumed. If a good wine reaches its maturity in 1991, it should stay at that level for at least three or four years, maybe more. Obviously, these wines are in the market now and will be difficult to find, as well as more costly, when they have reached optimum maturity. They should be purchased now and stored on their sides in a cool, dark area that maintains a consistent temperature within the range of 55 to 65 degrees. If, like me, you prefer wine on the youthful side, you should probably shave a year or two off the ready date; if you like them well aged, hold them for a year or two after the date given.

Special Designations

I have tried to identify each wine as fully as possible. In most cases you will find the year, the variety, the vineyard, the appellation (the geographic place of origin), the price, and any special designations that are recorded on the label. These distinctions are important because many wineries produce a number of wines of the same variety in the same year. When you pair a wine with a rating in the book, be sure to pay attention to all designations.

There are a few of these that require some explanation:

Barrel fermented: This refers to the procedure of allowing the fermentation process to take place in the barrel instead of in a stainless steel fermenter (see *What Is Wine?*, pages xiv-xvii). This is done mainly with Chardonnay, but some wineries are also doing it with Sauvignon Blanc and other white varieties.

Estate bottled: This means, simply, that the wine was made from grapes grown in vineyards owned by the winery. Usually these vines are contiguous to the winery, but not always.

Late harvest: This indicates a wine that was, literally, harvested late in the season. Harvesting late means that the grapes are richer in sugar and usually yield a very sweet wine. Often these Late Harvest wines have been affected by botrytis (see page xx).

Non-vintage: Some wines, usually less expensive ones, do not list a vintage date on their labels. This is not necessarily a negative. Often blends of two or more vintages can give a wine complexity and balance. But sometimes a certain batch of a non-vintage wine will get a good rating and a subsequent version may not deserve such high praise. I suggest that consumers be particularly cautious with these wines. To be vintage dated a wine must be 95 percent from that vintage; most are 100 percent.

Reserve: Historically, this signifies a wine that has been held back or reserved for the winery owners. In practice, it has been abused by American vintners to the point that it is next to meaningless. Some wineries use “Reserve” to indicate a wine that has spent more time in oak (the correct usage), some use it to indicate stylistic differences in wines, and some use it on every wine.

Price

Price is the most inexact of the book's designations. I have tried to list the suggested retail price, which is usually the price charged in the winery tasting room. But in the highly competitive wine market, very few retail establishments actually take the full markup, which means you are likely to find many of the wines at prices 10 to 25 percent below those listed in the book. If you live in or near a large metropolitan area, you are more likely to be able to buy wines at discounted prices. If you are unfortunate enough to live in a state where wine sales are still controlled by the state, the prices may very well be higher.

The Rating System

In this book I have used six different ratings:

“☆☆☆☆,” “☆☆☆,” “☆☆,” “☆,” no stars, and “○.” Let me explain each of these:

- ☆☆☆☆ This is the top rating, given to only a very few “outstanding” or “extraordinary” wines. Some of these show great aging potential, but most of them are wines that will provide you with a superb, world-class drinking experience right now. For those who are familiar with the twenty-point rating system, these four-star wines would correspond to those rated eighteen points or better. In the 100-point system they would be 90 points or better. (Of 5,172 wines rated, 335 were awarded ☆☆☆. This represents 6.5 percent of all wines rated.)
- ☆☆☆ These are wines I have rated “excellent,” among the very best wines in the marketplace. These are wines for special occasions, wines for cellaring. Most three-star wines finished close to the top in their tastings. Three stars corresponds to sixteen or seventeen points on the twenty-point scale, 80 points or better on the 100 point scale. (1,912 wines were awarded ☆☆☆. This represents 37 percent of all wines rated.)
- ☆☆ These are wines that I have judged to be “very good.” Two-star wines are appealing, everyday wines with no serious faults. These are luncheon wines, pizza wines, picnic wines, casual wines that are quite pleasant without demanding a great deal of attention. Two stars corresponds to fifteen points on the twenty-point scale, or better than 70 on the 100-point scale. (1,571 wines were awarded ☆☆, which represents 30.3 percent of all wines rated.)
- ☆ These are wines that I have rated “good.” One-star wines are drinkable but lack depth, charm, style, or a combination of these traits. These wines are not repugnant, but they offer little more than liquid refreshment. One star corresponds to fourteen points on the 20-point scale or 60 points (“acceptable”) on the 100-point scale. (775 wines were awarded ☆. This represents 15 percent of all wines rated.)
- No Stars. These are wines that I have rated “fair”—marginal wines that suffer from one, two, or a combination of flaws. These wines should be avoided if possible. No stars corresponds to 13 points on the 20-point scale, or 50 on the 100-point scale. (459 wines were awarded no stars, which represents 8.9 percent of all wines rated.)
- These are wines that I have judged to be “poor,” seriously flawed wines that should be avoided at all costs. They have characteristics that render them undrinkable. This rating corresponds to less than 13 points on the 20-point