

ANTHONY DIAS BLUE

**BUYER'S GUIDE
TO
AMERICAN
WINES**



**The Right Wine
For The Right Price**



**Authoritative Ratings Of
More Than 5,000 Currently
Available Wines From
America's Foremost Expert**



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Praise for Anthony Dias Blues

American Wine: A Comprehensive Guide (the hardcover book on which this guide is based):

"Bravo for a voluminous, courageous undertaking. A most informative and interesting reference work on American wines for everyone's vinous bookshelf."

—Alexis Lichine

"I doubt there's anyone in this country who knows more about American wines than Anthony Dias Blue. For years I've admired his unique insights on the subject, his ability to simplify a very complex topic . . . and, to be sure, his keen palate."

—James Villas, Food & Wine Editor,
Town & Country

"A preliminary investment in *American Wine* could easily save many times the price of the book by avoiding inappropriate choices."

—*The Plain Dealer*, Cleveland

"I doubt if anyone has tasted as many American wines as Andy Blue, and I know no one has assembled so many clean, unpretentious, and pungent tasting notes."

—Harvey Steiman, Managing Editor,
The Wine Spectator

"The wine event of the year! . . . the most complete, comprehensive volume currently available . . . entertaining and in-depth report . . . an incomparable star-system rating . . . an invaluable survey. . . . It may be the most important book on American wine ever written."

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"It's a dandy. . . . Don't go into a wine store again without a copy of *American Wine* under your arm. . . . The first and only book on wine I'd put my money on. Besides being an excellent resource, it makes good reading."

—Kit Snedaker, Food Editor,
Los Angeles Herald Examiner

"A lively and very handsome volume."

—Frank Prial, *The New York Times*

"Should be on the shelf of all wine drinkers."

—Larry Walker, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"An impressive work . . . a corker."

—Jack Schreibman, Associated Press

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Acknowledgments

Juggling thousands of tiny bits of data and keeping everything straight is a difficult job. The coordinator of this project was hardworking assistant editor Jack Weiner, who confirmed every wine fact and figure in the book. His close helpmate was the amazing data management system DBASE III PLUS, which handled and processed all the raw data and turned it into a coherent whole.

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Thanks also to *Bon Appétit* magazine and *The Wine Spectator*, whose organized tastings have been so important in helping me assemble the judgments contained in this book. Finally, I want to thank my family for cheerfully enduring my ongoing tasting ordeal.



Introduction

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

Buying American wines can be a hit-or-miss affair. Although the government requires that certain information appear on each wine label, there still is no sure way for the consumer to know about the quality of the wine inside the bottle. Among European wines, there are certain estates that have established 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 over the different years, the winery may have changed winemakers, purchased its grapes from a different source, or just made its wine in a different style. In each circumstance 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—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 the 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 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 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.

A Wine Taster's Lexicon

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

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: This refers to 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: The taste of fresh fruit (apples, pears, cherries, grapefruit and, especially, grapes). This is a characteristic of well-made young wines.

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

Herbaceous: A characteristic which is desirable in small quantity. Subtle herbal flavors are associated with Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc.

Long: This refers to a wine's flavors lasting a prolonged time in the mouth after the wine has been tasted.

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

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

Raisiny: 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 of residual sugar rounds the flavor of a wine. More than half a percent of residual sugar (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 structure and indicates that it will age well. Without structure a wine is flabby, shapeless, lacking in promise, and ultimately flawed.

Tannic: Characteristic of young red wines, tannin manifests itself as an astringent, puckery feeling in the mouth. It 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 that show up are bell peppers, asparagus, and broccoli.

Vinous: 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 that is 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 wines age, they are transferred to lower barrels in the solera until they reach the bottom level, from which they are bottled.

Personal Prejudices

I must confess some preferences and prejudices. Everyone can look back at magical moments, crucial events that changed the direction of their lives. I like to think about the summer of 1952, when at age eleven I was dragged kicking and screaming to France. My parents wanted me to get some culture; I wanted to stay home and play baseball with my friends.

One of our stops was Beaune because my father was particularly fond of the wines of the Burgundy region. I remember one morning in particular: We drove to Pommard, where we visited the cellar of a small producer. The place was dark and rank. The farmer, a fellow with wide suspenders and a two-day growth of beard, offered me a taste of wine in a chipped and dirty glass. Before my parents could object I put the glass to my lips and drank.

Then came the thunderclap, the drum roll. This glorious wine from the 1949 vintage jolted me like nothing I had experienced before. In an instant I was transformed from a reluctant traveler into a wine lover. I'll never forget that velvety, rich, explosive flavor; it has stood as a model for all the other wine experiences of my life.

Aside from its dramatic aspects, this event made me a lover of Pinot Noir and an appreciator of French wines. Even

today, thirty-six years later, I am a great fancier of Pinot Noir, and I also tend to like wines that are French in style—which means I generally prefer wines with good, firm acidity.

I am very sensitive to the vegetal qualities that show up in many American Cabernet Sauvignons and Merlots. I like my wines on the young side—one to three years old for whites, two to five years old for reds—and I appreciate the judicious use of oak barrels in the making of wine.

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. 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, such as “Reserve” or “Late Harvest,” 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 want to pair a wine up with a rating in the book, be sure to pay attention to all of these.

Price

Price is the most inexact of the book’s elements. 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 5,534 wines rated, 258 were awarded ☆☆☆☆. This represents 4.7 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. (2,019 wines were awarded ☆☆☆. This represents 36.5 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. (1,846 wines were awarded ☆☆, which represents 33.4 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 twenty-point scale or 60 points (“acceptable”) on the 100-point scale. (847 wines were awarded ☆. This represents 15.3 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 thirteen points on the twenty-point scale, or 50 or better on the 100-point scale. (456 wines were awarded no stars, which represents 8.2 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 thirteen points on the twenty-point scale, or less than 50 points on the 100-point scale. (107 wines were rated "O," representing 1.9 percent of all wines rated.)

Good Value Wines

In addition to these ratings, I have occasionally designated a wine as a "good value." Good-value wines are the entries in red. There are no set rules for these wines except that they impressed me as being good or very good wines that were definitely underpriced. For this reason a good-value Chenin Blanc might have to be less than \$4 while a good-value Chardonnay could easily cost \$8.

Many wines are released without a vintage date. These non-vintage wines are denoted by the letters "NV."

The American Way

As I worked on this book and got to know the people who make up our domestic wine industry, I was struck by the differences between American winemakers and those I have encountered in Europe. Unlike the vintners of France and Italy, who come out of an agricultural tradition that goes back hundreds of years and many generations, most American winemakers are new to wine and have made a conscious commitment to winemaking as a career. For many, being in the wine business is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. American vintners are a dedicated band of individualists who are in the business by choice. They do what they do because they love it, not because they have to or because they think they are going to get rich. (One of the favorite quips among winemakers in California is "Do you know how to make a small fortune in the wine business? Start with a big fortune.")

I have been very impressed by the generally high quality of the wines that are being produced in the United States. Fine wines are being made in California, New York, Oregon, and Washington—that we know. But they are also beginning to appear with regularity from such places as Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, Idaho, and Texas.

Although there are a substantial number of "fair" and "poor" ratings in the book, there are also a remarkable number of "very good" and "excellent" wines. I have subjected all these wines to tough, uncompromising scrutiny; there has been no room for chauvinism. In fact, many of the tastings at which these judgments were made were not limited to American wines. Foreign wines were judged along with the products of domestic wineries.

American wines easily hold their own when judged against wines from abroad. And especially now, with the dollar low against European currencies, the best American wines represent a remarkable value by comparison. Among inexpensive wines there is no contest—American jug wines offer considerably more consistency and depth than the ordinary plonk that is exported to the United States from abroad. Among premium wines, America's best bottlings are now just as good (if not better) as the best from abroad, and at current prices they are nothing less than amazing bargains.

The American wine industry has arrived. It offers endless variety as well as excellent quality. I hope this book helps maximize your enjoyment of the many enological delights that await you.

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