

## Book Reviews

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STEPHEN BROOK: *The Finest Wines of California: A Regional Guide to the Best Producers and Their Wines*. The University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2011, 320 pp., ISBN 978-0-520-26658-2, \$34.95.

*The Finest Wines of California* is the fourth title in a series of “illustrated guides” to major wine regions developed by the team responsible *The World of Fine Wine*, a serious, ultra-glossy, “cultural journal” launched in 2004. The author is Stephen Brook, an accomplished UK-based writer on wine and related topics whose works include very good books on Sauternes, Pauillac and Germany interalia. More relevant in this context, he is also the author of a hefty, authoritative survey of California wines published in 1999 by Faber & Faber, which is now out of print. That Mr. Brook is both outsider to California and a student of its wines since the

1970s are assets: in both books he demonstrates an unusual ability to paint the California wine scene sympathetically, objectively, and in an implicitly global frame. That twelve years have passed since *The Wines of California* appeared in 1999 makes the new title especially welcome.

Like the series' sibling titles devoted to Champagne, Bordeaux and Tuscany, *The Finest Wines of California* is heavily and handsomely illustrated; I counted the equivalent of 110 (of 320) pages devoted to photos and label facsimiles. The text is split between overview information on the macro-region, its history, culture, vintages, wine styles and dominant varieties, and a large number of producer profiles organized by sub-regions. Each of the profiles is an engaging combination of essential history, human-interest material, some quite serious notes on viticulture and winemaking, brief reader service information, and nicely written tasting notes. Although any selection of "finest" producers will inevitably be subjective, Brook's choices seem appropriate and defensible overall. The text makes clear in most cases why he chose his targets, and he admits honestly that not all wines covered in the book should necessarily be counted among his personal favorites. I confess that by my lights Napa gets more than its fair share of attention – more than a third of the book's total page count – while regions like Mendocino, the true Sonoma Coast and the Santa Cruz Mountains seem underrepresented. (Is this because I am pinot-oriented, and not a heavy consumer of cabernet sauvignon?) One is inclined to miss Flowers, for example, the first modern winery in the true Sonoma Coast, and a virtual revolving door for extraordinary winemaking talent. Conversely, Brook's excellent and quite detailed profile of Kistler, the consequence of a rare and fortuitous interview with this winery's eremitic founder, is a welcome contribution to the available literature.

The seven introductory chapters seem an excellent survey of California's fine wine country, which is essentially the state's coastal valleys plus the western foothills of the Sierras. There is good attention here to the tension between terroir and winemaking, winemakers' interventionist practices, the importance of mesoclimates, the jumble of confusion that results from America's idiosyncratic approach to appellations, the impact of phylloxera and Prohibition on the California wine story, and the challenges associated with marketing wines from regions whose reputations are young. Occasionally, the differences drawn between American and European orientations seem a little stark. Why, for example, should nested appellations in California ("Green Valley" is an AVA within the Russian River Valley AVA . . . [p. 30]) be any more "confusing" than Llistrac inside Haut-Medoc inside Bordeaux? Nor have I noticed that most modern Bordelais vintners are much less infatuated with phenolic ripeness than their Napa Valley counterparts (p. 50.) Kudos are due for the currency of volatile information. Foxen's move to a new winery in 2009 is noted, as is Kosta Browne's sale to a private equity firm in the same year.

I confess to some discomfort with two pages of a short chapter on "Significant Others" headed "The Négociants" (pp. 306–7.) Of the ten non-estate producers

described briefly here, most are landless boutique operations with a significant stake in California pinot noir, including Arcadian, Capioux, Copain, Ojai, Patz & Hall, Radio Coteau, Siduri and Testarossa. (Oh dear, my pinot bias is showing again!) Mr. Brook explains that he decided to cover these producers as a group, rather than give them individual profiles, because their fruit sources “tend to fluctuate” and “present an ever-shifting pattern,” making them different from the non-estate producers he opted to cover individually. The “intention” of the latter, he writes, is “to maintain long-term contracts with those they buy from.” My reading of “owners’ intentions” may be different from Mr. Brook’s, but I cannot discern much difference between a non-estate producer like Testarossa (summarized as a *négociant*) and a non-estate producer like Kosta Browne, which earned a separate profile on pp. 224–5. There is ironic dissonance too: Copain, summarized as a *négociant*, actually does own 13 acres of vineyard, but does not use the fruit; currently they sell grapes to a handful of small producers; in the past buyers have even included Kosta Browne! More serious than the who-is-and-who-is-not problem, however, is that the quasi- parenthetical treatment given to *these* *négociants* understates the enormously important role that small, non-estate, winemaker-owned brands have played, at least since about 1985 (but arguably earlier, viz. Lee Stewart’s *Souverain* brand) at the qualitative pinnacle of the ultra-premium segment of California wine. Again and again, these brands have built the reputation of vineyards (like Hirsch and Pisoni) which, in due season, have spawned estate brands of their own. In some cases they have been essential to the reputation of entire regions – consider what vineyard-designated wines made by exogenous, landless brands like Littorai and Williams Selyem did for the establishment of Anderson Valley’s reputation for top-quality pinot noir. Conversely, consider the drag against reputation that has been displayed when a region’s large vineyards have sold exclusively to *large* *négociants*, leaving no fruit to satisfy local, boutique-sized non-estate players. Santa Barbara County until late in the 1980s is a case in point. Like Mr. Brook, I find estate producers easier to appreciate, easier to explain to non-specialists, easier to classify geographically and, well, more like Europe. And in a perfect world maybe all winemakers would be winegrowers, and all winegrowers would, like the Burgundian *vigneron*, work their own vines. But in this case one of California imperfections is also part of its special wine story and a critical part of its ultra-premium story. A bit tighter focus here might have been helpful, especially to those without much previous experience with California wine.

On balance, this is an extremely attractive, well-researched and well-written introduction to the best wines of the Golden State.

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