

Book Reviews

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ALICE FEIRING: *For the Love of Wine: My Odyssey through the World's Most Ancient Wine Culture*. Potomac Books, Lincoln, Nebraska, Imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2016, xvi, 171 pp., ISBN 978-1-61234-764-6 (cloth), \$24.95.

Alice Feiring, who has published several other books on wine, records in this volume her travels through Georgia—not where Atlanta is, but the country of Georgia. Most readers will not be familiar with the wines of Georgia, except perhaps for the more or less apocryphal lore that it is the place from which Stalin's favorite wine hailed. Georgia and the Georgian wine industry have had a checkered history, punctuated by periodic invasions from the south by Turkey, whose armies would rip out the vines, which the wine-loving Georgians would promptly replant after the invading forces went home. In 2013, Georgia was the 25th largest producer of wine, with 105,000 metric tons (see www.wineinstitute.org). To acquire Georgian wines in the United States takes some (minor) effort; two sources (which may not ship to all

states) are Potomac Wines and Spirits (<http://www.potomacwines.com>; 800-333-2829) and Wine Anthology (<http://www.wineanthology.com>; 888-238-2251).

The book is written in a pleasant conversational style and recounts the author's travels, mostly in the company of an American expatriate friend who himself is a winemaker, to the various wine regions of Georgia. We meet lots of Georgian winemakers and their families, some other travelers who attach themselves to her group, plus some Western "wine experts" whom she uniformly describes with profound contempt. We learn a lot about Georgian history and local practices and customs, among them that Georgia has 525 indigenous grape varieties and that wine is fermented in large earthenware containers called *qvevri*, which are typically sunk in the earth. Another salient fact is that white wines (which I think from the text are deemed more important than reds) are typically fermented with long-term contact with skins, which, she claims, explains the amber color of the white wines. She describes their taste as "beeswax and orange blossom water and strawberry tea in addition to the wine's bitter and savory power, (p. 2). I have tasted only one white, which is a blend of 55% Rkatsiteli and 45% Mtsvane grapes, and it was neither amber colored nor did it taste of orange blossom water or strawberry tea, but it definitely had a bitter tinge with quite a long finish. Of course, I acquired it in the United States, and there is no guarantee that the wine was organic, *qvevri* fermented, and so forth. I also tasted a red called Mukuzani 2013, made of the Saperavi grape (14% alcohol), which is described as tasting of cherries, dark chocolate, and hints of vanilla. It was very tannic and tasted somewhat like a very young Cabernet, and I thought it definitely had some potential for enjoyment a few years down the road. It should be noted that the word *mtsvane* simply means "green" in Georgian and that the Mtsvane label without place name modifier is not really meaningful (see Rob Tebeau's blog *Fringe Wine*; <http://fringewine.blogspot.com/search/label/Georgia>). Tebeau also says that it has been some time since he was able to find an interesting Georgian grape, contrary, I think, to the author and most Georgians who seem to like pretty much all Georgian wines. There are some potential reasons for this fact. First, I wonder if the *qvevri*, being made of earthenware, is to any extent porous and admits any air, which might cause oxidation. Second, it appears that the Georgians drink an enormous amount: it is claimed that they consume 2 liters (2 and 1/3 bottles) per day, and after that amount of wine consumption, it would not be unusual if one's ability to judge were impaired. (For a wedding party, Georgians budget 3 liters per person.) Furthermore, there are 11 separate mentions of smoking that I noticed, which must also have a distinct influence on the palate. In addition, Georgian cooking seems to be highly seasoned: on page 135, the author says that she ate a plum sauce "so garlicky that I knew it would kill not only a vampire, but also my palate." I would be surprised if this fact did not affect one's ability to judge the quality of wines.

The fundamental objective of the book is to promote "natural" or organic wine making that eschews additives of any sort, particularly added yeast, sulfites, tartaric acid, and so forth. I think Feiring would condemn fining and filtration, pH control,

and many additives and procedures that are common in most Western wine making. The emphasis is on “honest wines” and keeping to tradition, and the arguments for organic wines are almost religious in their fervor; yielding to Western methods or technologies is at a minimum considered unpatriotic. Some of these attitudes undoubtedly derive from Ilia Chavchavadze, the nineteenth-century national hero of Georgia: “Our people disdain very much the addition of anything but grape juice into the wine. If now and then someone, somewhere has dared to do it, he should try very hard to hide it because all of us consider it a shame and a sin to profane the sacred juice of grapes that nature has given us with additions and interferences ... [success] can only be achieved if we stand up to European fake wines by having [people] taste our true wine” (p. 129).

The volume is marred by a few careless errors and inconsistencies. On page 46, 1,000 square meters is claimed to be about half a hectare; in fact, a hectare is exactly 10,000 square meters. On page 92, the text states that “the east-facing window [of a church] seemed to look directly toward Jerusalem”; in fact, Israel is situated southwest of Georgia, and there is no way in which an east-looking window can look toward Jerusalem. There is also a claim that Georgian wines are served at the Noma restaurant in Copenhagen—arguably one of the finest in the world. I looked through the 41-page wine list of Noma online but could not find a Georgian wine. At one point, the author tastes a Muscat-Mtshvane blend and finds it *pétillant*, which she attributes to sloppy wine making; however, if you cannot do anything to the wine on principle, how can it be sloppy wine making? The worst offense—and this clearly betrays my academic background—is that there is no index or bibliography, which makes the volume less user friendly than it could have been. Nevertheless, it is chock-full of facts, and I welcomed the opportunity to learn about the wine industry in a country of which I had known nothing. The people are amiable and devoted, and their wine industry survived the Soviet regime, during which the number of permitted grape varieties was severely reduced.

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WILLIAM BOSTWICK: *The Brewer's Tale: A History of the World According to Beer*. W. W. Norton, New York, 2015, 305 pp., ISBN 978-0393351996 (paperback), \$16.95.

The beer industry has had a spate of informative books appear since the start of the new century. Several represent portrayals of particular firms. These include Dan Baum, *Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty* (2000); Julie MacIntosh, *Dethroning the King: The Hostile Takeover of Anheuser-Busch, an American Icon* (2011); Bill