

These minor quibbles should not detract from what is otherwise a thoughtful, academically driven piece of research. The book speaks to a broad range of academicians, including economists and political scientists, although it may appeal less to wine-trade participants who do not have an interest in the scholastic side of their livelihoods. Whether the concept of *structured contingency* will have any enduring impact outside the wine trade, or within it, remains to be seen.

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**PATRICK COMISKEY:** *American Rhône: How Maverick Winemakers Changed the Way Americans Drink*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2016, 352 pp. ISBN: 9780520256668 (hardback), \$34.95.

In an interview with the *Santa Barbara Independent*,<sup>1</sup> Comiskey describes how he set out in 2007 to compose a guide to US Rhône wines and producers. The purpose of the book shifted after he became enthralled by the outlandish histories of the Rhône Rangers, and how they came to make the wines that define them. There is a certain parallel here with how many of the key characters in the book become similarly enthralled by the Rhône varieties, often by unintended and fortuitous means, but then choose to make them their lives' work. The approach taken by the Rangers reinforces the perception of them as mavericks, from ignoring the disdain for the simple idea of imitating French wines in the United States to the illicit importation of cuttings. A sense of the steadfastly individualistic, entrepreneurial psyche lends a conspicuously American flavor to this book and its characters. The power of "one-bottle epiphanies" to infuse people with a singular zeal runs beneath the surface, illustrated by Mat Garretson's dogged pursuit of John Alban. Not knowing he is phoning a modem line serving a weather station in the middle of a vineyard that only has a handset connected intermittently, he phones at all times of day and night for 3 months before his persistence bears fruit; their meeting gives birth to the Hospices du Rhône (p. 223). Similarly, graduate student Gary Eberle (p. 80) decides in 1972 upon tasting a Saint-Julien from Ducru-Beaucaillou that he no longer wishes to pursue a promising career as a geneticist but just wants to drink; it is safe to assume that many others have had similar thoughts after a particularly nice bottle, but few have made the career change stick.

In his opening lines, Comiskey qualifies himself as a writer who fell in love with wine, as opposed to a lifetime oenophile who embraced writing. He has enjoyed success using the writer's toolbox of vocabulary and metaphor to describe what he

<sup>1</sup><http://www.independent.com/news/2017/mar/02/patrick-comiskeys-ode-syrah-and-roussanne-and/>

is tasting and how it makes him feel. This skill comes through in his descriptions of people and places, from dusty wine retailers to foggy mountain vineyards. His use of language creates a visceral sense of place and engages the senses. The story balances a depth of information not possessed by the Rhône Rangers themselves, with an approachability that does not preclude the book from wider consumption, fulfilling his self-prescribed duty to “bring people closer to these experiences” (p. xiii).

It is pleasing that the author does not fall for any unrepresentative romantic description of the Rhône. Having cycled Lyon-Camargues, we find his description of a working river used for industrial transport to be accurate and rightfully dismissive of the idea that it is idyllic. This description applies specifically to the northern part of the Rhône valley and the prestigious appellations of Cotes Rôtie and Condrieu. However, a lack of maps of California or the Rhône makes it difficult for readers who are not familiar with both regions. While we are familiar with the Rhône valley, we find that California’s geography is not as easily deciphered without visual aid. This book would have been enhanced by the inclusion of tables summarizing changes in such topics as area under vine or volume of production, placing elements of the rather fragmented story in context.

The book engages well with modern scientific approaches, including DNA tracking of varietals. Previously, these enigmatic varietals have largely been lost to anonymity in field blends or misidentified in the vineyard. Chapter 2 is particularly dense with information, but most gets lost quickly. A table summarizing the different characteristics of each variety, plus how and where it is used in wine production, would assist the reader as he or she progresses to later chapters.

Given the relative freedom of US winemakers to experiment, some may have the perception that winemaking has stood relatively still in the Rhône during this period, but it has not, and a small summary to this effect would have been beneficial. The same could be said for the production of Rhône varieties in other prominent parts of the world. Development of the AVA system in the United States happened during the timeline of this book but is not spoken of, yet it could point to more European influence on the administration of wine production. Material is sufficient to yield a separate (and possibly dull) book on its own, but some links are needed. Perhaps this information could be presented in a condensed and separate appendix.

Because of the Rangers’ geographical isolation and the uniqueness of their dreams, the importance of bringing them together in such places as Chez Panisse and at such events as Hospices du Rhône is justifiably emphasized. The book mirrors the Rhône Rangers’ organization in making people who do not embrace the public eye in a conventional way thoroughly likable and sharing their very human enthusiasm for replicating at home the vinous French idyll they have fallen for. Most Rhône varietals have a US history that predates that of the Rangers, but this group’s efforts brought the allure of these wines to the mass market in the 1990s. In the process, they showed US consumers that red wine does not have to offer a chocolate and vanilla experience—a world of savory, gamey, meaty, and

spicy flavors is available. The boom of interest in new varieties and flavors saw them conquer the wine world and beyond; in 1992, asteroid #4934 was named “Rhôneranger” in honor of the subversive Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Winery (p. 116).

This boom was not to last, and the author describes current winemaking and -selling challenges in later chapters. The mavericks are underdogs who valiantly have made their way in the shadow of Napa Cabernet and growing corporatization, yet the book does not pay much attention to the Rhône underdogs of today. In his latest article for *Wine & Spirits Magazine*,<sup>2</sup> Comiskey looks at Vermentino, Grenache Blanc, and Picpoul. This examination would have brought the narrative full circle, especially given the current demand for light, dry white wines. It may have also provided a sunnier element to the conclusion of the book, which does not enthrall the reader about thoughts of following in the Rangers’ footsteps.

While writing these few lines we could not resist pouring ourselves a native Rhône and a Californian with similar blend. Our humble international tasting panel (with no French or American member) came up with some tasting notes that seem to fit the stereotypes. The Lirac (2014 Vignoble Abeille; Chateau Mont-Redon in Chateauneuf-du-Pape, 14.5% ABV) keeps its balance and offers a sincere mixture of red fruits without being too bombastic. The Cotes du Crow’s 2014 Morgan (Monterey, Morgan Winery Salinas, 14.2% ABV) delivers a more vanilla/chocolate experience. Although it is a fine product, its initial splashes of cherries and oak are unable to hide a certain platitude. Does this ridiculously small sample confirm the clichés regarding American/French palates? More tastings are needed, surely. Plenty of material for sequels exists, so this Canadian/Australian pair look forward to another quaffable and entertaining read from the author.

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HUGH JOHNSON: *Hugh Johnson on Wine: Good Bits from 55 Years of Scribbling*. Mitchell Beazley, London, 2017, 288 pp., ISBN: 9781784722623 (hardback), \$24.99.

It is a journey through five-and-a-half decades recorded contemporaneously, one can fancy, by your favorite old English uncle by marriage, during which the world of fine wine expanded from a handful of European countries to the entire globe. With wit, wisdom, and warmth, Johnson chronicles these changes in an annotated collection

<sup>2</sup><http://www.wineandspiritsmagazine.com/news/entry/the-little-three>