

BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

Andrew Jefford: *Drinking with the Valkyries: Writings on Wine*

Académie du Vin Library Ltd., UK, 2022, 272 pp.,
ISBN: 978-1913141325 (hardback), \$35.

Neal D. Hulkower

McMinnville, OR, USA

Email: nhulkower@yahoo.com

The foreword to this new book is written by Jay McInerney, whose *The Juice: Vinous Veritas* (2013) I found slight and pretentious. But here he does himself proud, likely inspired by reading the mini-masterpieces he introduces. Spending time with the works of one of the finest, most literate wine writers can do that. Gorgeous writing about noteworthy wines not only increases the pleasure of reading to a higher level but also serves as a model for one's own work.

Drinking with the Valkyries collects pieces originally written by Jefford between 2007 and 2022, and revised in 2021–2022. Most originally appeared in Britain's two "premier grand cru" wine publications, *Decanter* and *The World of Fine Wines*, with a couple in *Noble Rot*, and three of the earliest in *Waitrose Food Illustrated*. A brief biography of Jefford and his preface, "Why Wine?," are followed by 10 themed chapters, each containing 1 to 14 articles. An eight-page glossary presents definitions of some wine terms. The chronology maps each article to its original source by year. Acknowledgments are followed by an index of 11 pages, each with 3 columns.

Chapter One, "Origins," contains a single essay, *Homo Imbibens: The Work of Patrick McGovern*. It summarizes the investigations of McGovern, who has dedicated his career to discovering the beginnings of viticulture.

"Some Soils, Some Skies," the second chapter, is a 14-part tour of the wine world with stops in both well-known areas like Napa and Bordeaux, and little-known wine regions, including Japan and England. For example, *Downhill All the Way* describes a visit to Mont Granier in Savoie where Jacquère, a descendant of Gouais, yields wine that "whispers stone rather than singing fruit" (p. 40). In *A Sea Interlude: 2015 Picpoul de Pinet, Cuvée Anniversaire, Beauvignac*, Jefford praises the bottle in question: "Picpoul de Pinet is a quiet wine ... limpid, sappy, fresh, like unaccompanied flute variations, or classical guitar fandanguillo, coming and going on the wind" (p. 48). He then follows with an aphorism: "What is truly fine wine is not that which is expensive ... but that which is both beautiful and unique ..." (p. 48). Descriptions such as these fill the pages and are the pinnacle expression of the "wordoir" of British wine writing.

The 13 pieces comprising Chapter Three, “Taste and Tasting,” offer their own gems. The chapter starts with *Bags, Butter and Biscuits*, an alliterative title—Jefford loves alliteration and backed by a vast colorful vocabulary deploys many examples—for a critique of wine-tasting language. He insists that “Those who say that all discussion of wine should be in ‘plain English’ are plain wrong. The results would be plain boring” (p. 67). He goes on to offer tips on how to communicate about wine. After enumerating features that should be addressed, he advises that you should “... open your mind to the wider possibilities the wine suggests: not simply flavour analogies but any telling metaphor drawn from your own experience” (p. 68). Jefford follows his own advice, lacing tasting notes with allusions to music, art, and literature.

Through the Mangrove Swamp, explores the best way to taste wine. Jefford acknowledges that “No wine is ever fully and satisfactorily assessed until it has passed through the back of the mouth, down the oesophagus and into the digestive system” (p. 69). Since professional wine tastings often preclude swallowing, he concludes that “tasting without drinking is a monstrous flaw in all wine criticism” (p. 69).

Nine distinctive descriptions of “Some Beautiful Wines” comprise the fourth chapter. In *Jewelled Absence: 2016 Petit Chablis, Les Crioux, William Fèvre*, Jefford likens its slow ripening to a Dickens’ character: “It took all summer to limp its way, like Magwitch in irons, to a 12% ripeness” (p. 99). Of the wine’s nose and palate, he writes: “It’s the presence that is almost an absence...” (p. 98). With images like this, who needs an aroma wheel?

The Cup that Consoles is the sole item in Chapter Five, “A Tea Break.” It is a revealing discussion of humankind’s second-most favorite drink, after water. “Tea is much more widely drunk than wine, not least because of Islam’s proscription of alcohol” (p. 122), Jefford explains. A brief history is followed by descriptions of the types of tea and their respective health benefits. Why so much information in an anthology of wine writing? “Both tea and wine ... are old friends of humanity ... If I had to choose between the two, I’d choose tea ...,” he admits (p. 122).

“Interrogation and Impieties,” the sixth chapter, presents 13 contrarian perspectives on a variety of wine-related topics. *Drinking with the Valkyries* is Jefford’s case for not waiting decades to drink vintage port: “...you won’t fully understand unless you have tasted it young, in its ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ stage, when it come hurtling out of the glass and puts the screamers on you” (p. 144). *In Praise of Young Wine* expands on this theme: “I love youth in wine, and everything that goes with it: the energy, the excitement, the flesh, the vivacity, the extravagance” (p. 163).

On a subject about which I have written extensively (see, e.g., Hulkower 2019), *The Party’s Over* is Jefford’s review of the work of geologist and winegrower, Alex Maltman, author of *Vineyards, Rocks, & Soils: The Wine Lover’s Guide to Geology* (2018). The party to which he refers and then urges an end to is the persistence of words in tasting notes referring to rocks and other minerals in the literal sense. Maltman, in his book and many articles in popular and academic publications, reminds us that “Any mineral solutes present in wine ... exist at levels well below the threshold for detection ...” (p. 158). Though he regularly deploys “mineral” as a descriptor himself, Jefford has come to see the light: “Maltman’s painstakingly argued critique made me aware of the difficulties inherent in drawing any direct

inference about aroma and flavor from vineyard soil and geology. I'm happy to use 'mineral', 'stone' or 'earth' in a strictly metaphorical sense..." (p. 159). Given that there is no consensus as to what "minerality" in a wine signifies, an entry in the glossary would have been helpful in understanding what it means to him.

Chapter Seven, "Wine Shadows," focuses on aspects of wine that are disastrous or annoying in a half dozen short essays. Topics include hail, wildfires, earthquakes, price inflation, and *The Curse of the Vertical*. *Score Rigid* is the height of incongruity. "My view is that scores are foolish, philosophically untenable and damage wine culture rather than enrich it" (p. 187). So far, so good. But then we get "Readers (and editors) like scores, so of course I use them: refusing to do so would be pompous and unhelpful. We exist to serve readers" (p. 187). Since I do not regard pandering in contradiction to one's views as justifiable, I vehemently disagree. For one whose wine writings are the pinnacle of erudition and literacy, Jefford is in a position to subvert this dominant, innumerate paradigm, and offer a better way to enlighten his audience.

"Wine In A Life," Chapter Eight, collects a dozen vignettes about the joys and travails of a career in wine, comingled with descriptions of notable bottles in the context of the circumstances of their consumption. *Mille Fois Morte, Mille Fois Revécue: 2008 Chateau Musar Blanc* starts inauspiciously: "I don't like this wine" (p. 211). But then Jefford recalls the late winemaker and manager Serge Hochar, who said, "They are difficult, but whenever somebody gets there, they are hooked" (p. 212). Jefford waits: "...I come back again four days later ... and at last I like the smell of it, fresher than even now, as if dusk has come round to dawn ... Serge, you were right" (p. 213).

A philosophical essay entitled *Wine and Astonishment* is the only item in Chapter Nine, "Against Wine Worldliness." Jefford defines wine worldliness as "a taking for granted of the givens of wine, and the assumption of a kind of assurance or familiarity over the subject that precludes astonishment" (p. 235), the latter being essential to its fullest enjoyment. Here again, he criticizes scores: "The scoring of wines is a form of wine-worldliness. It does, of course, acknowledge difference ... Yet it also freezes difference by rendering it numerically immutable" (p. 235). A foolish inconsistency, perhaps, from one who also states, "There's a sort of fun behind scores ..." (p. 187).

The title of Chapter Ten, "Three Last Wines," tells it all. It closes the compilation with a trio of wine notes as stories. *Restoration: 2018 Saint-Mont, La Madeleine de Saint-Mont, Producteurs Plaimont* imagines Jefford walking the road to Santiago de Compostela and stopping at a monastery along the way in the town where the wine originates for food and shelter, "... this is just what I would want the wine to be: black, sturdy, restorative. Wine that fulfils just a little of the function of blood..." (p. 243).

Jefford does not avoid controversy. On the question of whether or not wine is art, he is clear. In *A Honeycomb of Light: 2010 Mas del Serral, Pepe Raventós* in Chapter Two, he asserts: "... no wine is a work of art" (p. 61). This is echoed in *Wine's Transactional Flaw* in Chapter Seven. Regarding great wine, he insists: "These are a matter of craft, not art" (p. 176). And he establishes a clear delineation in *Lessons from the Laureate* in Chapter Eight: "A work of art ... is wholly a creation of the human mind, whereas the winemaker simply stewards the transformation of one product into another. Winemaking is craft, not art" (p. 217). His criterion only

considers the creator and not the audience. Yet wine can elicit an aesthetic or emotional reaction as intense as a work of art, which to me suggests it could legitimately be called one. Also, is not a sculpture that results from transforming a natural medium, wood or stone, for example, into another “product” considered a work of art?

Here is a paradox: can wine writing, clearly, a creation of a human mind, be considered a work of art even though its subject is not regarded as one by the author? Jefford’s work shows that it can be. *Drinking with the Valkyries* is one of the finest anthologies of wine writing I have read. McInerney concludes his foreword by declaring “It’s not wine writing. It’s writing” (p. 13). I will go a step further. It is superb literature.

References

- Hulkower, N. (2019). Book review: Vineyards, rocks, & soils: The wine lover’s guide to geology by Alex Maltman. *Journal of Wine Economics*, 14(2), 217–220. doi:10.1017/jwe.2019.19
- Maltman, A. (2018). *Vineyards, Rocks, & Soils: The Wine Lover’s Guide to Geology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- McInerney, J. (2013). *The Juice: Vinous Veritas*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.