

References

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JAMIE GOODE and SAM HARROP: *Authentic Wine: Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2011, 279 pp., ISBN: 978-0520265639, \$34.45 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0520275751 \$24.95 (paperback).

Authentic Wine is an exploration of the questions posed by today's Natural Wine movement. (It narrowly missed having those two words as its title.) The opposite pole to authentic wine is not artificial but mass-produced wine, similar to Coca-Cola, which tastes the same whether you open a bottle in China or Abu Dhabi. I don't find that idea so appalling (I love Coke), so I detect a slight elitist taint in the authors' viewpoint. Their arguments are aimed at the sort of person who might buy a book like this, someone who treasures wine as an important element of his or her life and values its amazing diversity. It is a sophisticated and fascinating tome even though I take issue with one of its central themes.

OK, you say. You can have mass market wine as well as niche wine. Hasn't that happened to beer? Not so fast. The authors argue convincingly that while Château Lafite doesn't have to worry, the economics of the market are such that the middle level of winemakers, those who are innovating and producing the most interesting wines, will be squeezed out. There are many indications of a "homogenizing" trend even in fine wine that will ultimately limit choices.

The authors generally favor the idea of Natural Wine but argue that there are degrees of "naturalness," and taking it to extremes may be counterproductive. The subject turns up throughout the book even though there is only one chapter specifically titled "The Natural Wine Movement," which is largely a discussion of the use of sulfur dioxide as an additive. For example, in a fascinating chapter with the title "Grafted Vines," the authors review the wine plagues of the nineteenth century, including the phylloxera epidemic. Phylloxera is a louse transported to Europe on American vines, which attacks the roots of European *vitis vinifera*. The eventual solution has been to graft European vines onto resistant American root stock, and this is the situation today for the vast majority of wine grapes planted in Europe and America. The interesting question becomes, isn't it hypocritical to make

an obsession of “naturalness” when the first thing you do is entirely unnatural, grafting two distinctly separate species of grapevines together?

“Terroir” is a term that refers to the effects of all the factors that comprise a specific geographic location, such as soil composition, drainage qualities, heat retention, altitude, microclimate, sun exposure, microbiological flora in the soil, and nymphs and dryads in surrounding woods. Some, including the authors, allow the inclusion of some human activities in the meaning of “terroir,” but this eventually leads to the tautology that the wine tastes as it does because of everything that has happened to it. Best to stick with a clean definition minus humans.

The following things are true about terroir:

1. It is important in determining the eventual taste of the wine. Burgundy tastes like Burgundy because it is grown in Burgundy.
2. Terroir is a limiting factor in the quality of the wine. Only the best sites, used appropriately, can create great wine.

Where I run into trouble is with the notion of “sense of place,” an elusive quality in wine that could be paraphrased as “expression of terroir.” Indeed, the authors insist that without this attribute, your wine cannot be “authentic.” They point out, correctly, that it is not possible to produce identical wine in two different places. But they run into the problem that “sense of place” must have some correlate in the taste of the wine, not just that it is different from other wines. The implication is that the terroir imprints a particular flavor profile on wines made from grapes grown on that soil that is durable from one year to the next. If not, then the concept is diminished. “Sense of place” wouldn’t matter much if it changed every year.

And that is where I bridle. I cannot conceive of a mechanism by which terroir could give a consistent character to the wine from a specific vineyard each vintage. The problem is that while the physical aspects remain for the most part constant, the atmospheric ones (rainfall, temperature, sunlight, etc.) vary greatly and do so in a different time course each season. To change the proportion and nature of flavor compounds in the resulting wine involves altering the biology of the vine. This happens when circumstances such as heat or water availability cause different degrees of expression of a variety of genes in the DNA of the plant. Such influences are exquisitely sensitive to the stage of development of the plant. A stress that could cause one effect at one time might do the opposite two weeks later. It is hard to imagine how these events could be coordinated to produce a consistent result every year.

At the same time, there is abundant evidence that the ultimate flavor of the wine is due to choices made by human beings. One of the biggest is the selection of root stock and grape clones when replanting. Those are choices that can give a consistency of results over many years. And there are so many other factors.

I have tasted wine made by the same producer from two different plots in a single Burgundy commune, and they were quite similar. At the same sitting, I tasted other examples from a different winemaker who also had vines in those same two vineyards. They were also strikingly similar to one another but distinctly different from the first winemaker's. There was absolutely no way, however, to determine which of the wines came from which vineyard. There was no "sense of place."

It is possible to argue interminably about the nature of terroir. In my mind, these authors don't have it right, but many more authorities probably agree with them than with me. It doesn't detract from a very worthwhile book.

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