

Though I used to be quite skeptical about bio wines, after having read the book, my advice would be to go for bio, even if the wine does not taste like the *old beard* of an *old smoker*. In fact, a paper published in this Journal analyzed this question empirically (Delmas, Gergaud, and Lim, 2016) and reached the same conclusion.

Victor Ginsburgh
 Université libre de Bruxelles
vginsbur@ulb.ac.be
 doi:10.1017/jwe.2020.9

References

- Delmas, M. A., Gergaud, O., and Lim, J. (2016). Does organic wine taste better? An analysis of experts' ratings. *Journal of Wine Economics*, 11(3), 329–354.
- Séralini, G.-E., and Douzelet, J. (2017). The taste of pesticides in wines. *Food & Nutrition Journal*, 2017(8). doi: 10.29011/2575-7091.100061. Available at <https://gavinpublishers.com/articles/Research-Article/Food-Nutrition-Journal-ISSN-2575-7091/The-Taste-of-Pesticides-in-Wines>.

VICTORIA JAMES: *Wine Girl: The Obstacles, Humiliations, and Triumphs of America's Youngest Sommelier*. Ecco, New York, NY, 2020, 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0-06-296167-9 (hardcover), \$26.99.

A memoir by someone under 30? Outrageous! What can we learn from someone so young, especially if 30 is the new 18? Quite a bit, actually. In less than a decade, Victoria James has gained important recognition. She became a Certified Sommelier in the Court of Master Sommeliers at age 21. In 2013, she won the Chilean Wine Challenge in New York and was named Best Sommelier of the Sud de France. Two years later, she came in first in the Ruinart Champagne Sommelier Challenge in New York, was named by Forbes as one of the “Top 10 Innovators under 30 in New York City,” and earned a place on Zagat’s 30 under 30 list. She made Wine Enthusiast’s 2016 Top 40 under 40 Tastemakers list and secured the title of *Wine & Spirits Magazine* “2016 Best Sommelier.” In 2017, she published her first book, *Drink Pink: A Celebration of Rosé*, which was illustrated by her future husband, Lyle Railsback. Forbes included her on their 2018 30 Under 30 list. That same year, *Food & Wine* called James the Best Sommelier in New York City. She is now a partner and beverage director at Cote in New York City and cofounder of Wine Empowered, a nonprofit that helps women and minorities enter the hospitality industry. But what makes her story so special is what she had to overcome to finally succeed and how she did so.

The prologue describes a disturbing encounter with some obnoxious customers during James’ first year as the youngest sommelier in the United States involving a bottle of 2009 Domaine Ramonet Chevalier-Montrachet at which time she was

first called wine girl. She then presents her story in seven parts, each covering a span of ages: 7–14, 14–19, 19–20, 21–23, 23–24, 24–26, and 26–28. Each part contains three or four chapters with titles including “The Poor Kids,” “The Wine School,” “Wine is a Blood Sport,” “Watch Out for the Wives,” and “The Real World.”

In Part I, James, the second born of four children, recounts her childhood from hell. “I grew up in a household of manipulation and neglect, left to fend for myself” (p. 242), she stresses. Her mother was an Italian countess but lacked the basic skills needed to be an effective spouse and parent. Her father came from a more humble background, had strong analytic skills, which he never seemed to apply, and was frequently absent and broke. He eventually fell into alcoholism and developed a gambling addiction. “This juxtaposition of blue blood and blue collar is what I believe groomed me for the eventual role of a sommelier, essentially a highbrow servant” (p. 11), she explains. Her mother homeschooled her brood until succumbing to frailty, an overbearing husband, and to the demands of raising her children. She became reclusive. With their father off on extended trips, the children were left to fend for themselves and had to cobble together meals from what few edibles were around. “We had to make the sleeve of crackers last for days” (p. 16), she recalls.

James’ first foray into the beverage business was a lemonade stand. Her father collected the cost of materials and a rental fee for the table. Becoming a better shopper and more attentive to customer preferences led her to succeed in her first beverage director experience.

A particularly traumatic episode involved eight-year-old Victoria slamming the car door on her mother, as James’ father, fed up with his wife’s neglect, took the children to live with his mother in their aunt’s house. “The Poor Kids” covers the time of the divorce proceedings, tutoring by an unemployed physically and mentally abusive father, and little money. It also describes the transition to public school, where the children skipped a grade after testing high. “I found that because my father had drilled into me with relentless focus, I always forced myself to learn at an unusually accelerated pace” (p. 34), James acknowledges.

At age 13, James was hired as a waitress at a diner in New Jersey, where her father had landed them. Part I concludes with the story of her friendship with the cook and dishwasher. Despite the grossness of many of the tasks, the two never grumbled. “Sometimes the more honest the work, the more honest the people” (p. 51), observes James.

During her teens, the era comprising Part II, new challenges and traumas arose. James’ father returned from triple-bypass surgery with a new partner, who later gave him a fourth daughter. Later he succumbed to alcoholism and gambling. During the frequent trips to Atlantic City so that her father could indulge in his

vice, James kept busy by becoming an “unofficial drink runner” (p. 64), collecting chips as tips and learning about classic cocktails along the way.

James took a job at the Plaza Diner when she was 15 and credited Franky, the most senior waiter, who taught her how to be a “real hospitality professional” (pp. 68–69). “The advice I most appreciated from Franky was about customers. ‘You gotta love ‘em, I mean it... Tell ‘em you love ‘em, too’” (p. 69), she remembers. While this advice generally served her well, it led to her rape by a regular during the graveyard shift. Because he seemed trustworthy, she accepted a ride home. He attacked her in his car not far from her house. She did not discuss the trauma with anyone and suffered nightmares. She also began to abuse alcohol and drugs.

Although Part III is titled Age 19–20, it really started earlier. At 17, James was in New York in college on a scholarship. Her academic career ended in less than a year, as she continued to indulge in booze and drugs. An aunt took her to California, but this did not turn out well, and she ended up back in New Jersey living with her father. A few months later, having kicked drugs with the help of therapy, she returned to New York City, where she has been since.

In the Big Apple, James took a series of positions in higher-end restaurants in which she expanded her knowledge of cocktails and developed a love of wine. At Lattanzi, she had her first wine and food pairing epiphanies. She enrolled in a wine school where she met her first sommelier. At Harry’s, she acquired a mentor who shared some of the treasures of its legendary cellar, although not with the permission of the owner. While there, she assisted in reorganizing the collection when not tending bar. But after teaching her about wine and introducing her to haute cuisine, the mentor began to pressure her. “I so desperately wanted to be in that wine cellar, to learn and touch all those rare bottlings. I needed to make a living, too. So eventually, I gave in” (p. 134), she admits.

At the recommendation of her mentor, James worked a harvest in Sonoma. When she returned to New York City, she began to see an acupuncturist/therapist to deal with some of the physical effects of the harvest. James also credits her mentor with helping her cope with her emotional issues.

Things started to look up when James was 21 to 23, the period covered in Part IV. With the help of the instructor at the wine school, James became a sommelier at the Michelin-starred Aureole. She continued at the wine school, entered wine competitions, and became a Certified Sommelier. She later migrated to Marea, a Michelin two-star restaurant.

But as James discovered, Marea was but a way station to Ristorante Morini, a new establishment she would help open. Part V covering age 23–24 details the rise and demise of that venture following a bad review by a *New York Times* critic, Pete Wells. She returned to Marea and became a full-time sommelier after surviving a grueling trial period.

Part VI, Age 24–26, describes James' transition from a hectic and toxic environment to an island of tranquility. During this time, James took trips to out-of-the-country wine regions that she had won in competitions. There was also recognition in several publications, as noted earlier.

Despite her growing reputation, James lost her job at Medea the day after she learned she was on Zagat's "30 under 30" list. But there was also another rape, this time by an unnamed boss in a wine cellar. The abuse to which she acquiesced for fear of losing her job lasted months.

Now shuttered Piora became James' next opportunity. It brought serenity and respect into her working life, and when it closed, an even greater chance to grow and excel. It, too, had been Michelin-starred under the proprietorship of Simon Kim, who not only took care of patrons, but, also, the small staff. There James thrived. As wine director, she "instituted a policy where a guest could order *any* bottle on the list and only commit to drinking half of it, hence paying half price" (p. 254). She also was responsible for purchasing wine. Unlike many restaurants in New York City, which markup wine three to four times retail, James used a factor of 2.9 and sold twice as many bottles.

At the end of Part VI, James shares the story of how she met her husband, Lyle, a wine salesman for Kermit Lynch. The final part, Age 26–28, continues with reminiscences of the courtship and ends with the wedding at the family castle in Piemonte. It also describes the closing of Piora and the opening of Cote, the Korean steakhouse awarded a Michelin star a few months after. There James insists that all wines by the glass are poured from magnums bottled especially at the sources in France because "the wine...stays fresher for longer and tastes better" (p. 289).

While at times utterly depressing and infuriating, *Wine Girl* was an engaging read. James' style is forthright and unadorned. It must have been painful for her to recount the abuse she experienced or witnessed, which she does in explicit language. Admittedly, I was hoping for some occasional respite from the unalloyed descriptions of mistreatment she endured. A little more on notable wines she had tasted, food pairings she recommended, or positive encounters with patrons would have helped lighten her heavy narrative. Nevertheless, I came away in awe of this young star, whose intelligence, persistence, and resilience are bringing her recognition and peace. "I had grit" (p. 220), she proudly declares.

Wine Girl is the "wine cellar confidential" in the age of the Me Too movement worthy of our regard. James' cathartic account of her physical and psychological abuses and indignities over the recent past should serve as a cautionary tale reminding us that despite increased opportunities for women in male-dominated professions, attitudes and behaviors remain largely unchanged. A female coworker's response to a customer who was "calling her the most horrid names" (p. 195) bears repeating: "'Sir, with all due respect, I am a human being. I would demand, at the very least, recognition as such'" (p. 195). James' poignant story needs to be

told to everyone in the hospitality industry and to those who come in contact with it. In other words, everyone.

Neal D. Hulkower
McMinnville, OR
nhulkower@yahoo.com
doi:10.1017/jwe.2020.10

LAWRENCE COIA and DANIEL WARD: *Wine Grape Varieties for New Jersey*. Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ, 2018, 112 pp., ISBN: 978-0-06-296167-9 (paperback), \$29.95.

In the Spring of 2011, I was asked to join Karl Storchmann (Editor of the *Journal of Wine Economics*) in speaking to a group of grape growers and wine makers in Pittstown, New Jersey, home to one of Rutgers University's several agricultural extension services. After our presentations, and some spirited discussion, we adjourned to lunch, accompanied by barrel samples of wines from the 2010 vintage in New Jersey.

Thus occurred my New Jersey wine epiphany! Both Karl and I thought the wines on offer were of excellent quality. How, I wondered, did I live in the state of New Jersey for 50 years without knowing there were such high-quality, local producers? In the nine years since that time, I have come to realize that I was not alone—New Jersey wines are among the most under-rated in the world. That is not to say that all producers or growers are making superior products, but there are many who do, and the number increases almost monthly.

That single day in Pittstown led to a decision by the American Association of Wine Economists to hold their 2012 annual meeting in Princeton, NJ. Where, people asked, would we find local wines to serve to our members? It turns out the wines were not hard to find, and some were being made only a few miles away. The culmination of the meeting was a blind tasting, arranged in the style of the famous Judgment of Paris (where California wines were compared to French wines). And yes, in this Judgment of Princeton, the New Jersey wines were not only competitive with the fine (and very expensive) French wines in the tasting, in some cases, they were superior. Indeed, you can read all about it in a Wikipedia entry constructed, in part, by two of the French judges at the Judgment of Princeton. In addition, the *Journal of Wine Economics* devotes an entire issue to the tasting (see Ashenfelter and Storchmann, 2012, and four more articles).

One thing led to another, and in 2015 I even began planting a small vineyard site with vinifera grapes in South Jersey. We have had two small harvests from these young vines, and so far, the wine made from those grapes has not disappointed. It is true that rain in September does reduce grape quality (just as it does in