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The Best Books for Wine Lovers

Peter Hellman recommends new books from 2015.

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Is there another agricultural product that begets such a steady outpouring of books as wine? The keyword “wine” returns almost 170,000 titles on Amazon. This year’s harvest is led by revised editions of two bedrock reference works (which both make superior gifts): Jancis Robinson’s **“Oxford Companion to Wine” (Oxford, 835 pages, \$65)** and Karen MacNeil’s **“Wine Bible” (Workman, 996 pages, \$24.95)**. The latter is the more freewheeling. When Ms. MacNeil charts the ascending tannin levels in red wine grapes, she compares the gritty stuff to Clint Eastwood’s five-o’clock shadow. The body of this bible is a country-by-country march through winedom, offering lively regional history, sketches of notable personalities, as well as tips on the best local wines and the foods to match with them. The more didactic Ms. Robinson never strays far from facts in her hefty encyclopedia, and she seems to have neglected none, however obscure or seemingly far afield. There’s an entry for “earthworms” and one for “gold rushes” (prospectors, it turns out, thirsted for wine as well as the hard stuff). If someone is to own just one wine book, Ms. Robinson’s mighty effort is the fail-safe proposition.

The shortest of this year’s wine titles is also the most combative: **“True Taste” (Cider Mill, 126 pages, \$18.95)**, Matt Kramer’s broadside at conventional wine criticism. A veteran columnist for the Wine Spectator, he wants to establish fresh guidelines for assessing the quality and character of individual wine and to toss aside the two most common critical tools: the 100-point rating scale and the trusty array of fruit, vegetable and mineral wine descriptors snarkily encapsulated here as *“decaying burlap hanging from a Japanese maple.”* The better way to get at a wine’s attributes, Mr. Kramer argues, is via seven simple words: texture, insight, harmony, finesse, nuance, layers and surprise. “A great wine,” in his estimation, “is a Scheherazade: We are transfixed by its seemingly endless series of suspenseful chapters.”

In **“Wine in Words” (Rizzoli, 232 pages, \$29.95)**, Lettie Teague (this newspaper’s



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wine columnist) muses on matters as diverse as her trusty Laguiole corkscrew, New Jersey vineyards (yes, there are some) and even winery dogs. The 106 brief essays are darted with mischief: If a blended wine marketed to women can be called “Little Black Dress Divalicious,” Ms. Teague wonders, why not a man’s wine called “Couch Potato Chenin Blanc or Channel Changer Chardonnay?” And she dispatches those “ultra-ripe” and “super-concentrated” Napa Valley “cult wines” in a single sentence: “I love a good bottle . . . I don’t want to deify it.” These are graceful “notes for better drinking,”

In **“Thirsty Dragon” (Henry Holt, 337 pages, \$32),**

Suzanne Mustacich explores the fraught courtship between

the traditional Bordeaux wine trade and the nouveau Chinese entrepreneurs. It’s not a pretty picture, with each side appearing equally avaricious. So long as the prices of Bordeaux’s iconic wines spiraled upward, the relationship was smooth. When prices withered in 2011, and overpriced “futures” could no longer be sold to the new Chinese elite, things got down and dirty. It makes for delectable reading in Ms. Mustacich’s telling. A sordid tale closer to home is vividly told by Frances Dinkelspiel in **“Tangled Vines” (St. Martin’s, 302 pages, \$26.99).** At its fiery heart is a 2005 fire at a giant California warehouse, which destroyed 4.5 million bottles of wine. Among them were 175 bottles of 19th-century wine made at a vineyard owned by the author’s great-great-grandfather. Ms. Dinkelspiel tracks three century’s worth of dastardly deeds on the

California wine scene, including multiple murders.

“A Natural History of Wine” (Yale, 252 pages, \$35) is modest in size, but not in scope. Co-authors Ian Tattersall, a paleoanthropologist, and Rob DeSalle, a molecular biologist, roam through the natural and social sciences to reveal vistas sure to surprise even well-versed wine buffs. Who would have guessed, for example, that the unlikely origin of our seduction by wine may lie with tiny tree shrews “attracted to ripe fruit by alcoholic aromas” in the Malaysian rain forest. Or that by 2200 B.C. it had become “unthinkable among Egypt’s elite not to be buried with wines from the most prestigious regions of the Nile Delta.” An especial pleasure in turning these pages is the illustrations by Patricia Wynne.

Epic in size and scope, Kelli A. White’s **“Napa Valley Then and Now” (Rudd Press, 1,255 pages, \$95, available at napavalleythenandnow.com)**, neglects no detail relating to the vineyards, wineries, winemakers or bottlings of America’s premier wine region. The author provides thousands of tasting notes from 200 wineries, many from long-ago vintages, affirming that Napa Valley wines, like all wines aspiring to greatness, improve with age. Free of numerical scores and focused on wine character, these notes add up to a profile of a wine region that is nuanced, individualized and intimate. Even a Europhile will find kinship in this watermelon-weight tome to an effort devoted to the glory of the fermented grape.

*—Mr. Hellman wrote the
Urban Vintage column for
the New York Sun.*

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