

A rich holiday crop of books on drinking

THIRST

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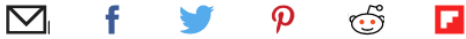


Photo: Craig Lee, Special To The Chronicle

Books: "To Have and Have Another," by Philip Greene, "How to Love Wine," by Eric Asimov, "A Vineyard in Napa," by Doug Shafer, "The History of Australia Wine," by Max Allen, "Wine Grapes," by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and Jose Vouillamoz. as seen in San Francisco, California on Wednesday, October 31, 2012.

Want a sign the recession is receding? Consider how this robust season for books on drinking. After several dry years, serious writing is afoot about wine and spirits. From the top, then:

As the **New York Times**' chief wine critic, **Eric Asimov**'s words have weight. I have no doubt that every sentence in "**How to Love Wine: A Memoir and Manifesto**" (**William Morrow**; 272 pages; \$25) is being scoured along the wine roads. But there are no surprises on that front: Asimov has long been clear about his preferences for wines from small producers around the globe, using less intrusive methods in field and cellar. The passages invoking them felt so kind-hearted that at first I was lulled.

Then the manifesto side grew teeth. Asimov is an unapologetic aesthete; no tolerance here for objective declarations of taste or the parlor game of blind tasting. Nor is he a fan of scores or of tasting notes - the latter about which I'm in respectful disagreement. Perhaps they're a "self-indulgent exercise that serves mostly to alienate the very people whom writers would like to entice"; my in-box over the years suggests otherwise.

Instead, he details an aesthete's path through an ever more diverse wine world - seeking pleasure in wines simple and great - and waving off a didactic army of acronymed wine experts and their overly firm ways to appreciate wine. His alternative: Be curious, be omnivorous. Buy, drink, contemplate, repeat.

From farming to culture

More crucially, he defends wine as culture - a view that extends to the Times, which proposed his critic title as public declaration that his role involved "the same sort of critical eye used to analyze, evaluate, and explain other forms of cultural expression." Those who shrug off wine criticism as a form of scorekeeping? Take note.

These points make "Love" an essential book. But its memoir portions hold the most momentum. Asimov engagingly details his rise from beer columnist at his high-school paper (that's right) through the ranks of newspaperdom and the Times' internal mechanisms, including a delicate role editing his predecessor, [Frank Prial](#).

And he recounts memorable visits to the winemakers he loves. Mostly abroad, but in a salient passage, he goes to the home of Napa viticulturist Steve Matthiasson, at whose table Asimov finds a continuity between farming's history and wine's modern reality, a veneration of what he holds dear: wine as culture.

This season's other big release is "**Wine Grapes**" by **Jancis Robinson**, **Julia Harding** and **José Vouillamoz** (Ecco; 1,280 pages; \$175). Big being operative: At more than 1,200 pages and priced to match, it rivals **Robinson's** must-own "Oxford Companion to Wine" for authoritative detail. She and counterpart Harding partnered with grape geneticist Vouillamoz to disentangle the often woefully misunderstood field of wine grapes - their muddy histories, entangled genetic lineages and unruly global proliferation.

Romantic? Nah. But what seemed at first like a prim reference tome to crack when I needed to sort out the 13 different varieties of Lambrusco has a more compelling mystery underneath. The thoroughness (Listán Negro and Listán Prieto? Not the same thing, Canary Island fans) is matched by a sense of purpose, mostly because equal space is devoted to the esoteric (Grillo, Menu Pineau, Parellada) as to the obvious.

And with the obvious, they carefully mapped a complicated lineage. A "Pinot Pedigree" diagram shows that grape's connection to at least 156 varieties spanning much of northern Europe. By comparison, the Tudors' lineage seems straightforward.

That, ultimately, is why "Wine Grapes" rallies. In its pages is the whole messy biological history of grapes - one that parallels the rise of (mostly) Western culture. Along the way, it nullifies most simple homilies that litter the world of wine, instead offering a more complicated and interesting tale, one that reinforces wine as one of history's great culturing forces.

What "Grapes" has in breadth, "**Sherry, Manzanilla & Montilla**" by **Peter Liem** and **Jesus Barquin** (sherryguide.net; 270 pages; \$30) has in extraordinary focus. It's hard to imagine more skilled guides on the topic than Liem, an expert writer on the region (and Chronicle contributor) and Barquin, whose Equipo Navazos project curates the hidden gems in Jerez's solera.

This, too, is studious stuff - metabolic activity of flor, anyone? - but it also details a world of Sherry largely unknown even to experts. One chapter, "The Terroir of the Bodega," might be the best explanation yet on how location and architecture are an essential part of making Sherry. If most wine books now tout populism, "Sherry" skillfully makes the case for deep expertise. It is an invaluable read for anyone who has loved Sherry in a serious way.

Rosy-colored approach

Back to family trees. The Shafer family has a proud lineage in Napa Valley. Patriarch **John Shafer** and his son Doug built jewels with their vineyards and their Hillside Select Cabernet. The work is chronicled in "**A Vineyard in Napa**" (**University of California Press**; 284 pages; \$30), which Doug Shafer wrote with **Andy Demsky**, who handles the winery's PR. Shafer loyalists will find a warm read, detailing high points and the occasional moment of seeming crisis, like phylloxera's arrival in Napa.

But at these tougher moments, the soft focus turns on. Shafer recounts how he (and others) were assailed by 1980s critics for lower-alcohol "food wines," yet there's nary a word about how Hillside Select's style might have shifted over the years to engage those critics. Not required material for a memoir, of course, but the rosy-colored approach at times comes across more as marketing pamphlet.

At a time when cocktail books have become rote, "**To Have and Have Another**" by **Philip Greene** (Perigee Trade; 320 pages; \$24) subverts the formula and provides recipe-by-recipe substance to **Ernest Hemingway's** drinking ways. Any lover of Hemingway knows how his myth hinges on drinking, including early rising to write profusely after his nightly benders. Greene, a Marine Corps counsel, lets the drinks lead the way but fleshes each one with meticulous detail to round out the pieces of Papa's lusty life.

Now across the equator: Among several new books out on the Southern Hemisphere, the one to tap is "**The History of Australian Wine**" by **Max Allen** (**Melbourne University Publishing**; 224 pages; \$51), largely a narration of oral histories from that country's defining wine figures. It reveals a rambunctious, human-scaled portrait of a culture that most people think of as monotone.

Finally, "**Drops of God: New World**" by Tadashi Agi, with illustrations by Shu Okimoto (Vertical; 376 pages; \$15), takes our favorite wine manga both Down Under and to Napa Valley. Perhaps jet lag has set in? Both settings come across as, yes, cartoonish - unless you believe the Wine Train is reasonable transportation, and also serves Screaming Eagle.

That said, "Drops" hasn't lost its narrative momentum; I stayed up late to finish it in one sitting.

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