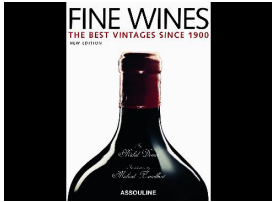


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Rhone Ranger's Vinthology, Winemakers' Profiles: Holiday Books

Review by John Mariani

Nov. 23 (Bloomberg) -- I like to think that wine lovers are also book readers, at least to feed their oenophilia. So, for holiday gifts I can guarantee that the following books will make your drinking buddies very happy.



The 25th anniversary edition of Kevin Zraly's "Windows on the World Complete Wine Course" (Sterling, \$27.95) is the summation of the author's mission to make wine as accessible as possible to both the complete novice and the wine lover who needs a good update.

Zraly held his first elementary classes back in 1976 as cellar master at Windows on the World, the restaurant on top of the north tower of the World Trade Center that was destroyed on 9/11. About 20,000 students graduated under Zraly using his book as the text.

His own passion for wine began at 18 when he was a bartender at a New York restaurant. He began studying wine and visiting vineyards every chance he got, although he didn't get to California until he reached the state's 21-year-old legal drinking age.

In the anniversary edition, Zraly has added a tremendous amount of new material on countries that 25 years ago had little clout in the wine market, including Austria, Hungary, Canada, New Zealand, Greece and some in South America. In a section entitled "25 Years of Wine Changes (1985-2010)" he shows just how evolved the global wine industry has become, from the importance of sustainability and organic winemaking to his prediction that the U.S. will be the world's largest wine consumer within five years.

As it did a quarter century ago, Zraly's book covers wine in easy to digest segments, starting with the absolute basics and moving through chapters to greater sophistication. Wholly revised and expanded, it's the one book I would give both the newcomer and the veteran wine lover.

'Willy Wonka'

Randall Grahm's "Been Doon So Long" (University of California Press, \$34.95) is what was once called a chrestomathy -- a collection of essays, poems, arcana, and humor. Grahm, 56, is founder of Bonny Doon Vineyard, whose irreverent naming of wines and satiric labels has earned him the nickname "Willy Wonka of the Wine World." He is also the one most responsible for bringing Rhone Valley-style varietals to California as one of the original "Rhone Rangers."

Included within his "Vinthology" Grahm writes his own hilarious take-off on Dante's "Divine Comedy" called the "Vinferno by Al Dente Allegory" -- in terza rima! -- as well as deft parodies of Philip Roth ("Trojanoy's Complaint"), and James Joyce ("Cheninagin's Wake"). He gives 20 reasons to use screwcaps on wine bottles, ten ways to recognize a real wine geek ("He has brought his own food to the restaurant"), and an essay on "How I Overcame My UC Davis Education" ("Merlot actually does pretty much suck.") I know of no other compendium of wine lit so erudite, witty, and straightforward as Grahm's remarkable book.

Wine Wanderings

George M. Taber, the award-winning author of "The Judgment of Paris," about the notorious 1976 taste-off between French and California wines,

has turned his twin enthusiasms for wine and travel into a narrative of visits to the world's most interesting and beautiful wine regions -- "In Search of Bacchus: Wanderings in the Wonderful World of Wine Tourism" (Scribner, \$30).

Unlike other books in this genre that simply give listings, highlights and hours when the tasting rooms are open, Taber's focus is on the terroir itself, meeting the winemakers and showing the renegade streak that runs through so many of them, Like Australia's Denis Horgan, who in 1984 thought it a capital idea to bring the London Symphony Orchestra to his Margaret River Leeuwin Estate "in the bush" in Western Australia. For the concert, 5,000 people showed up.

Off to Colchagua

As a former correspondent and editor for Time magazine, Taber is a thorough investigator and his prose is reportorial, though the subject calls for something a bit more vigorous. Still, this is a book that well might well cause wine lovers to plan a trip to Colchagua Valley, Chile, Stellenbosch, South Africa or even Margaret River.

Finally, my pick for the most beautifully produced wine book of the year is "Fine Wines: The Best Vintages Since 1900" by Michel Dovaz (Assouline, \$40), first issued in 1999 and now in a much-needed update.

The profiles of wineries and winemakers are insightful and to the point, the assessments of the vintages sound, and the evocative photos throughout make this a first-rate gift book.

To buy these books in North America, visit: <http://www.powells.com/>

(John Mariani writes on wine for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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