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The Pour

An Invitation to Read, Sniff and Taste

By ERIC ASIMOV

BOOKS about wine are no substitute for drinking wine. But these six new selections can help to better understand what's in the glass, and what's in the minds of those who make wine and consume it.

Jonathan Nossiter is the wine world's own special irritant. In manner and style, his new book, *Liquid Memory: Why Wine Matters* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$25), like his 2004 movie "Mondovino," is annoying, polarizing and provocative. It raises questions that deserve to be considered, yet his technique and style may turn off potential converts. As portrayed by Mr. Nossiter, the world of wine today is a Manichean battleground, where the soulless forces of homogenization — Robert M. Parker Jr., *Wine Spectator*, etc. — have turned wine, a true emblem of individuality, community and culture, into (gasp) a commodity.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

YOUR CHOICE Recent wine books are provocative, philosophical and even humorous.

"Do people across the world really want all these alcoholized sodapop concoctions," he asks, "or are they conned and bullied by marketing and the collusion of the market into submitting to them?"

Mr. Nossiter raises other, more interesting, issues. Why is it that we resort to the absurd language of tasting notes to try to beat a wine down to its most obscure aroma and flavor? Does wine, like great art, illuminate the deepest ideas of what it means to be human? Or is it craft? How does something agrarian at heart retain its integrity in a post-industrial world?

These are all important questions, yet Mr. Nossiter draws attention away from them with regular showoff references to obscure avant-garde film directors and philosophers. He interrupts his lecture to meet with Burgundian winemakers he respects, like Christophe Roumier and Dominique Lafon. When he settles down to listen, we can all learn something.

Randall Graham, the proprietor of Bonny Doon Vineyard, is an original thinker, and unlike Mr. Nossiter, he has warmth and a sense of humor. They are all on full display in *Been Doon So*

Long (University of California Press, \$34.95), an anthology — or "vinthology," as Mr. Graham puts it — of several decades worth of literary satires, reveries, incessant yet clever puns and gnomish prognostications.

Regardless of genre, Mr. Graham's thoughts are brilliantly observed and beautifully rendered. But they are not light reading. Footnotes are sometimes longer and more convoluted than the text, and that's just in the introduction.

Mr. Graham is also relentlessly self-promotional, which puts him in the good company of writer-merchants like Kermit Lynch. In both cases, the joy and the vision they offer makes the salesmanship more than tolerable.

As labors of love go, *The Châteauneuf-du-Pape Wine Book* (Kavino, \$79), by Harry Karis, is more an act of devotion. Mr. Karis, a chef, doctor and wine aficionado, spent more than three years and, he says, 500,000 euros researching, writing, designing and publishing this homage to the great wine of the southern Rhone Valley. The result is a handsome coffee table reference book that for now, at least, is the definitive work on Châteauneuf.

Along with summary descriptions of more than 250 producers, Mr. Karis painstakingly but pleasantly covers Châteauneuf's history, geography, geology, climate, soil and winemaking.

While passionate about Châteauneuf, Mr. Karis maintains an even keel and largely refrains from critical judgments. What comes through is his love and profound respect for the region, its wines and the people.

The team behind *The World of Fine Wine*, an erudite British quarterly, has begun a series of excellent illustrated guides to some of the world's classic wine regions. The first two, *The Finest Wines of Tuscany and Central Italy* by Nicolas Belfrage, and *The Finest Wines of Champagne* by Michael Edwards, have been issued in the United States by The University of California Press, for \$34.95. Both books are straightforward yet refreshingly opinionated, and full of useful information on the people and issues shaping the wines in each region. The Champagne guide discusses many small grower-producers who have made the region so exciting in the last decade.

The Tuscan book focuses on well-known regions in the province. I can't help being disappointed that the lumped-in regions of Umbria, Marche and Romagna are given such short shrift. Perhaps they will merit their own guide one day.

Wine lovers long for the invitation, "Would you like to see my cellar?" In truth, the invitation rarely comes. Few among us have cellars worth seeing, and even fewer of our friends do, which makes *Living With Wine* (Potter, \$75) a gorgeous photographic trip to the cellars of our dreams, such a tease.

The prose, by Samantha Nestor with Alice Feiring, is direct but somewhat beside the point. The focus is on Andrew French's photos, which document the urge to store wine, whether in actual cellars, in backlit caves or, as in so many starter collections, under stairs. And yet this book is not so much about wine as it is about design. It satisfies the desire to know that those gorgeous floor tiles are "tumbled limestone." But the urge to fondle bottles of great old treasures is unsatisfied. It's all a bit too neat, more for display than for consumption.