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Books on drinking offer good value

By Jon Bonné

Books about drinking are in a curious place this season. Familiar names, familiar concepts. That's not a bad thing. It's a good year to provide solid value per page, and that's what you'll find in these selections.

If you want to understand the sea change in the realm of Robert Parker, here's what you do: Take a copy of Parker's "Wine Buying Guide" (sixth edition) and flip through for 10 minutes. Take Parker's Wine Bargains (Simon & Schuster, 497 pages, \$18) and do the same.

What's different? For one, no scores. No vintages either, a choice both savvy and disorienting. And don't overlook the extra voices in the mix, including contributors like Riesling expert David Schildknecht, who help bring a sensibility that - and let's be fair here - reflects the shelves of a smart wine shop far better than the Wine Advocate might have even a few years ago.

Hence wines like Riesling from Austria's Loimer and Basque Txakoli from Xarment, plus more mainstream fare like the (excellent) Chablis from Gilbert Picq.

"Bargains" makes a larger statement about the state of Parkerdom. Producers and places, not numbers, are given center stage. In that sense, it can serve as a very handy guide to consistently worthy wines; its shorthand descriptions balance the usual fruit rigmarole with solid contextual detail.

Let's be honest: Rather than nabbing a one-time superstar, much of our wine buying is about hunting for labels we trust. That's the approach in "Bargains," and for a Parker book to fly without scores is yet another sign of how the world's most powerful wine critic is finding a way to stay relevant in changing times.

Another new release with familiar pedigree is The Concise World Atlas of Wine (Mitchell Beazley, 352 pages, \$30). The key word is "concise," as this largely replicates the 2008 edition of the World Atlas edited by Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson (an occasional Chronicle contributor).

This paperback form may contain less detailed text (and no wine labels), but all the 200 maps are retained. At substantially less than the \$50 hardcover, this allows the curious drinker on a budget to access what has become the indispensable source for understanding wine's geography.

I already noted the arrival of Randall Graham's compilation of writing, "Been Doon So Long," (UC Press, 318 pages, \$35), but as holiday bells draw clear, the collected works of the bibulous muse of Santa Cruz hold sway. Graham's tributes to literature ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Rootstock") mostly illuminate his brilliant excesses of biochemical creativity.

But move past that and find there's also a serious side in Graham's repertoire. It's here that Graham's talents truly shine, as when he turns Friulian winemaker Josko Gravner into his own Salinger in "Six Feet Under." When he's on, Graham manages the sort of wine writing that rarely finds a place in print anymore: rhapsodic, smart and frank, if not for the beginner.

Now to strong tipple. All cocktail books need a hook, and Kara Newman has found a novel one for "Spice & Ice" (Chronicle Books, 159 pages, \$17): drinks with a notable kick beyond the alcohol.

In their most interesting form, this includes beverages like a jalapeno-enhanced julep or the cayenne-powered Gunpower Gimlet from Presidio Social Club's Tim Stookey.

At its less glorious, it wraps in beverages like the "Hot Lips" Chocotini, and there's a preponderance of ginger, perhaps a reflection of the root's elderflower-style saturation in cocktails. (Trend wager: Ginger on the wane in 2010.)

Aspiring mixologists note: Adding spicy heat to drinks requires infusions and other boozy legerdemain, so most concoctions require planning. But for those who want their drinks with a whomp - like me - Newman has conveniently sleuthed out most of what's in the canon.

If you got a postmodern twinge from that last paragraph, take comfort in the re-release of Bill Boothby's 1891 "Cocktail Boothby's American Bar-Tender," (\$14.95) newly reproduced by Fritz Maytag's Anchor Distilling. Still available from the California Historical Society, it's useful enough as an old-timey drink reference but also serves as a window to the Barbary Coast days, when Madeira could be synthesized with 40 gallons of cider, spirits, sugar and a dream. Boothby's book is as much a chance to revisit San Francisco's pre-righteous past as it is about making a proper Gin and Pine.

Speaking of gin, Gaz (a.k.a. Gary) Regan's "The Bartender's Gin Compendium" (\$24, Xlibris, 371 pages) is worth lingering over. (Disclosure: I edit his longtime Cocktailian column, familiar to many readers.) Though a large chunk of the book is taken up by profiles of individual gins, anyone who has spent more than a few minutes at a bar with Regan (disclosure: me) will know of his longtime academic interest in the subject.

"Compendium" is a self-started project, but it's also one of few efforts to look at the subject in such detail, perhaps so much that only a true juniperhead would need it. Those interested in diversifying their martini repertoire will find plenty of compelling detail.

Finally, it's worth noting - not recommending - one other offering. Jonathan Nossiter, who directed the documentary "Mondovino," has taken a widespread drubbing for his new book, "Liquid Memory: Why Wine Matters" (\$26, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 272 pages).

No surprise. Nossiter frames "Memory" as a consideration of wine's "profound relation to the general culture," but the effect is more a \name-dropping travelogue as a vehicle to lament the many threats to vinous tradition he perceives.

For an alleged ode to loving wine, the tone is surprisingly sour. Maybe he should flip through Parker's "Bargains" and see that even in the wide world of wine, things change.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/11/29/FDoQ1ANL80.DTL>

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