# Vintage 2003 wine books

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Among this year's wine books there is no single volume that seems, as Andrew Jefford's *The New France* did last year, bound to win all the important prizes on both sides of the Atlantic. But the most significant entirely new wine book to emerge in 2003 is *Wine Report 2004* (Dorling Kindersley £9.99, 384 pages). This groundbreaking new annual has been produced by prolific wine author Tom Stevenson with, according to the blurb on the back of this thick pocket book, a 'taskforce of strategically placed experts'.

The book is made up of regional reports including an overview of the latest events, gossip and vintages with lists of best producers, best bargains, most notable newcomers and so on. And at the back are essays on recent developments in such varied topics as Wine and Health, Grape Varieties and Wine on the Web.

Stevenson's taskforce is decidedly variable, with the distinctly half-hearted contributions on the Rhône and Loire suggesting that France may not be such a strategic location for comprehensive reporting on wine after all. DK's antipodean contributors, on the other hand, have done a fine job with Denis Gastin in particular somehow managing to report on an entire continent, Asia, with depth and brio all the way from his base in Sydney.

This is the sort of book that is absolutely fascinating for wine professionals such as myself but I do wonder a) how many wine amateurs will be convinced there is a tenner's worth of practically useful information here and b) how easy it will be to fill all those pages with entirely new information in less than 12 months.

As wine (and food) continue to gain social and academic respectability, we are increasingly treated to the application of serious minds and prolonged educations to subjects once seen as terminally frivolous. *Wine and Words in Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Duckworth £45, 243 pages) is the result of Hanneke Wilson's serious mind and broad grasp of history and language. She sweeps through the centuries swooping on the curious part played by wine in literature, history and religion. Chapters are divided thematically, although excess seems to play an appropriately excessive role. Questions as 'how drunk is drunk?' and why there are so few references to young wine in classical literature are addressed. Such intriguing facts as the first use of the word 'alcoholism' (as recently as 1849) and the Talmud's view of the probability of a woman wishing to copulate with a donkey in the middle of the street if she is allowed four glasses of wine (high) are typical of the erudition in this lightly written overview.

Andrew Dalby meanwhile offers us in *Bacchus* (The British Museum Press £14.99, 166 pages) a narrative, a biography of the god of wine no less which has already been reviewed in the *FT* magazine.

Patrick McGovern's offering *Ancient Wine - The Search for the Origins of Viticulture* (Princeton University Press £19.95/29.95, 365 pages) is more scientific than lyrical. McGovern's keenly priced account usefully combines archaeology with the latest scientific techniques. The book was inspired by a 1991 conference sponsored by Robert Mondavi in California and finishes with some fascinating recent work that suggests that China's vinous history may be as long as the Near East's.

Mitchell Beazley, surely the leading publisher of wine books not just in Britain but the world, has the most prolific crop of wine titles this season, not least because it has taken over the old Faber and Faber Wine Library which was until recently edited by Julian Jeffs QC. Marshalling *pensées* and facts from a quiver of very different authorities into some semblance of a house style is a task now allotted to Margaret Rand, an accomplished author herself of 2001's *Grapes and Wines*.

The most useful Mitchell B title this year is surely *Hugh Johnson's Wine Companion* (Mitchell Beazley £35/50, 592 pages), more completely revised than it ever has been since its first appearance in 1983, by Stephen Brook.

Of course not every producer in the world is included in this well-designed directory but a sufficient number appear, with up-to-date information, refreshing opinion and a star rating (different from those in Johnson's *Pocket Wine Book*), to make this probably the most suitable gift this year for the literate wine lover in your life.

I was mildly disappointed by MB's other wine hardback, *Wines of South America* (Mitchell Beazley £25, 192 pages), because its author Monty Waldin usually writes with such passion. Perhaps South American wine is not yet quite good

enough to engender passion, but surely the landscape could? Nor does gifted photographer Jason Lowe seem the top of his form in between these particular hard covers.

Of three brand new publications in the ex-Faber series, now called the Mitchell Beazley Classic Wine Library and adorned with some very odd black-and-white photographs on its front covers, both Richard Mayson's *The Wines and Vineyards of Portugal* (Mitchell Beazley £18.99, 354 pages) and Alex Liddell's *The Wines of Hungary* (Mitchell Beazley £18.99, 346 pages) are seriously meaty. Both topics are woefully undervalued by the world's wine buyers. Both are treated to worthwhile contemporary analysis here, with Mayson's authoritative enthusiasm counterbalanced by Liddell's scholarly spirit of inquiry. The Portuguese have benefited from better editing.

The subject of the third new book in this series is another of the wine world's pariahs. *The Wines of Germany* (Mitchell Beazley £20, 444 pages) is Stephen Brook's second book this season. As usual, his research is thorough and his producer profiles constitute the meat of the book, but the introductory chapters are hardly designed to turn a new generation on to the unique delights of German wine. The opening chapter is entitled 'The Wine Law of Germany', the second 'Vineyard Classification: The Right Way Forward?' How about 'What's Good and Bad about German Wine'?