Great reads around, not about, wine

3 Nov 2004 by JR

One sign of how wine is now firmly embedded in our culture rather than being seen as an exotic ferment of interest only to an effete elite is that there is a new generation of books about it. These are not guides to buying or making it but discursive tales which are only tangentially about wine and which can just as easily be savoured by teetotallers as by wine fanatics.

We have, perhaps inevitably, the relocation genre, tales of how wine neophytes turned themselves into successful vignerons. Patricia Atkinson of Clos d'Yvigne's *The Ripening Sun* has been joined by the likes of Patrick Moon's account of the Languedoc's wine revolution in *Virgile's Vineyard* and, out next month, Tony Rocca of Collelungo's *Catching Fireflies*. But this is by now well-trod literary territory.

More significant in terms of what they say about wine's place in modern society are two new American books, of which Lawrence Osborne's *The Accidental Connoisseur* is possibly the most entertaining book about wine ever written.

What I cannot quite imagine is how he described the book he was intending to write to his publishers before committing what is, after all, the most nebulous of ideas to paper. "Well, see, I don't know much about wine but I'm going to go visit a few wine producers in California, France and Italy to find out about taste - okay?"

Perhaps he waited until he had a sample chapter or two to show, for no sensible publisher could resist the trenchant prose and determined mischief in this self-styled goof's guide to wine (subtitle: An Irreverent Journey Through the Wine World).

Although he was born in England and brought up on nothing grander than Sainsbury's Beaujolais, Osborne is now a New York-based author whose previous subjects have included Paris, Asperger Syndrome and A Brief History of Sexual Pessimism. He is clearly not nearly as naive about wine as he would have us believe.

This is a joyful book in which, unfettered by the need to pronounce as a wine critic (nor, it would seem, by any notion of drink-driving laws), he just drinks the stuff, with gusto and curiosity. His favourite wine of all, after ha has been entertained at the near-impenetrable likes of Château Lafite, Opus One and the Palazzo Antinori, turns out to be a bottle of inconsequential local white drunk, alone, on a Puglian beach. I think we know that feeling.

But he also drinks in the words and mannerisms of the famous and not-so-famous of the wine world whom he meets en route.

Thanks to a wickedly observant eye and a particularly acute ear, or perhaps uncharacteristically disciplined tape recording, we can relish encounters with princes, rogues, crazed technocrats and even Maurice Delgado, a French wine tourist in California's rain-sodden Russian River Valley in need of company other than his photocopied tasting notes from *L'Express* while his wife is struck down by a stomach bug.

Osborne and Delgado discuss whether the Rochioli Pinot Noir has, as asserted in *L'Express*, a 'spherical, sexy mouth'.

'"Well Laurent, I see your point. Yes, I'm prepared to assert there are floral notes. But it's a little *flat* after all, isn't it? I didn't say that I found it sexy."

"A sexy wine?"

"Oh I've had a sexy wine or two. The wife and I like a sexy wine on Saturday night. Especially on vacation. But this is not a sexy wine, is it?"

"If wine is like sex," I said, "this is yoga."

"Yoga?" He swirled and sniffed. "I'm not sure I get you there. You mean athletic?"

"Virtuous. Unsexy."

He suddenly laughed viciously. "Ah, you mean American!"'

The supposed Americanisation of European wine is a persistent theme in both books, although the English-born Osborne is wise enough to have any concerns about this voiced by others. There are the anti-Bush ('"*c'est pas Tony Blair!*"') rantings of Aimé Guibert of the (consistently mis-spelt) Mas de Daumas Gassac, and non-conformist American wine merchant Neal Rosenthal on what he sees as a dangerous trend towards "childish" wine: '"Everything is acceleration. We're in an age where people are like mad children. Is complexity too difficult now? Or are we all children?"'

Fellow American resident Englishman, the urbane Gerald Asher, is clearly rather a hero for Osborne who, when writing yet again about tasting, reports that Asher 'seems to be suggesting that place itself is twofold: on the one hand it is terroir: on the other it is what is going on around you as you are drinking. The first is geological, the second psychological. And taste was presumably a high-wire act balancing itself precariously between the two.'

The second was definitely in the ascendant on that Puglian beach, but also when Osborne was tasting a strange Vin Santo with Stefano Grillo of the Umbrian producer La Palazzola with his louche-sounding friend 'an English sculptor named Johnny Madge'. Osborne observes that the wine 'was gloriously unironic. It smelled like an old church suffused with incense or your father's library nutty with old tobacco. I couldn't resist blurting this out.

'Grilli cocked his head sideways as if considering the idea, then said "Why not? Why not your father's library?"

"Your father's library?" Johnny looked at me. "Did your father *have* a library?"

It was a good question. He did not.

"No?" Grilli said. "Then how can it smell like your father's library?"

I said I didn't know, but that it nevertheless smelled like my father's library, *if my father had had a library*.'

I know that feeling too.

So acute are the personal portraits that the father of modern California wine Robert Mondavi must be regretting agreeing to see, nay lavishly entertain, Osborne. American wine guru Robert Parker must be relieved that he did not even respond to Osborne's initial overtures. Osborne has quite enough fun with him without even a confirmed sighting.

Quite different in tone is William Echikson's *Noble Rot - A Bordeaux Wine Revolution*. As one might expect of the Brussels bureau chief for Dow Jones newswires, this is a dutifully journalistic account of one of the most obvious stories in wine of recent years, the rivalry between the old and new guards in the world's most significant fine wine region. Echikson is unquestioningly reverential towards Parker, inevitably a key figure in the current battle between classicism and modernism in Bordeaux wine styles.

Where Osborne's book is multi-coloured and multi-layered, rich with cultural allusion, Echikson's is black and white.

Old money? Boo.

New BMWs (and there are seem to be lots of them in this book)? Hooray!

The British? Boo.

Alain Raynaud of Ch Quinault L'Enclos (who lent Echikson and family a house while he was researching this book)? Hooray!

Everyone with a history is a 'mandarin'. And so on.

I would recommend *Noble Rot* to any close follower of the Bordeaux wine scene for what is revealed, sometimes perhaps unwittingly, about the long-standing alliances and motivations among some of the characters in this occasionally unedifying story.

And I would recommend *The Accidental Connoisseur* to anyone who will forgive the odd mis-spelling in order to savour a rollicking ride through wine country.

The Accidental Connoisseur by Lawrence Osborne, North Point Press (US)
Noble Rot by William Echikson, W W Norton (US)
The Ripening Sun by Patricia Atkinson, Century (UK)
Virgile's Vineyard by Patrick Moon, John Murray (UK)
Catching Fireflies by Tony Rocca, Century (UK)

Kent Lewis, Washington DC adds:

I can recommend *The Vintner's Luck* by NZ author Elizabeth Knox. A lovely book for anyone, whether interested in wine or not. It made a great read while travelling in NZ, but our non-wine friends here in the US have enjoyed it equally.

me:

I read that too and, while I admired it and was very grateful for any normal book with the word 'vintner' in the title, I found it illustrated how little imagination I have - or rather how relatively intolerent of fantasy I am. My fault not E Knox's.