2008 wine books Part 3

6 Jan 2009 by Jancis Robinson

You will see that at least two purple pagers were able to draw our attention to their own books, which I somehow managed to omit in 2008 wine books – Part 2. My apologies.

Doubtless there are many other potential candidates for inclusion here but the one little paperback that has reached me since I wrote Part 2 and managed to tickle my fancy is ***The Ecco Guide to the Best Wines of Italy*** by Ian D'Agata of the International Wine Academy by Rome's Spanish Steps. This is the sort of book that must have been great fun to write –and is also great fun to criticise – because it is his personal selection of the best wines in the wine-producing country that is arguably worst-served by current literature in English. We have Gambero Rosso's annual ***Italian Wines,*** which continues to be easier and easier to use, but still lists producers alphabetically by village within region which is not that helpful to non-Italians. It is also limited to one fairly brief bit of prose about each producer and can rarely do justice to individual wines.

Ian D'Agata's job is to rave about the wines that really turn him on. You may disagree that Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino Riserva is the single finest wine in Italy. You may feel that by choosing Bruno Rocca, Rabajà Barbaresco as his second best he is turning his back on legions of more traditional Piemontese producers. But the point of a book like this is to be a sort of scratching board for wine lovers. What is incontrovertible, and delightful, is the enthusiasm and insider detail that D'Agata provides about each wine. For each of the '200 Best Wines under $100' (the book is published by Harper Collins of New York) he gives the background to the wine, why he chose it, which grape varieties (not 'varietals' – hooray) are responsible for it, how many bottles are produced, its alcoholic strength (which must be difficult because the choice is not vintage-specific), its retail price, what to eat with it, who imports it into the US, and – at last - notes on specific vintages.

Towards the back of the book are lots more shorter sections, 'Best Of' lists: Wines at $25 or Less, Cult Wines, Wines Made from Native Grape Varieties, Wines Made from International Grape Varieties, Wines You May Never Have Heard Of, Old Wines and New Wines and various subsections of best Wine Estates and Producers. This is a usefully up-to-date selection which, even if it is not comprehensive, provides an enormous amount of information and opinion in easily digestible form. Bravo for a book officially priced at $13.95.

See also Swig's Italian gems for details of *Italy's best wines 2009* (*Guida ai migliori vini d'Italia 2009*), compiled by Ian d'Agata and Massimo Claudio Comparini.

This Ecco guide weighs almost exactly one twelfth of the nearly four kilos of a new and massive monograph in slip cover from Banfi called ***The Pursuit of Excellence***. (Penfolds' counterpart is called *The Rewards of Patience*, but then they have been around South Australia a heck of a lot longer than Banfi have in southern Tuscany.) The covering letter acknowledges that Banfi of Montalcino have had a challenging year (see here for example) but tells us that the book is designed to celebrate their first 30 years there with detailed contributions from their technicians.

There is certainly a mass of technical detail here – and some very pretty photographs – but little sign of an editor. There's a long chapter for example on 'Zonation of the Castello Banfi Estate' with pages given over to tables detailing their zonation methodologies, including a long treatise entitled 'Role of ripening kinetics in aiding environmental vocation assessment', which is followed by an analysis of grape varieties in the following order: Cabernet Sauvignon then Merlot and only then Sangiovese.

If you want to feel excited about Italian wine, go for the D'Agata pocket book.