2012 wine books - America

23 Dec 2012 by Paul O'Doherty

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Soft Soil, Black Grapes
The Birth of Italian Winemaking in California
Simone Cinotto
New York University Press
£23.99/ $39

The immigrant story of bringing viticulture to the New World is a big theme this year, with a number of books extolling the virtues of Old World runaways building new lives in the Americas around viticulture and winemaking. This is no different, focusing on the Italians who made it to California. Italians such as the Gallo brothers, who've made such a name for themselves as winemakers in a world away from their ancestors. Originally written in Italian by Simone Cinotto, who teaches history at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo in Italy, it now arrives translated into English, thoroughly revised, with the help of Michelle Tarnopolsky.

Cinotto's exploration sets out to discover why, of all the ethnic and immigrant groups in turn-of-the-century California, it was the Italians who came to dominate one of American's most important agricultural industries. Cinotto answers her own question by reflecting on 'race', suggesting a number of factors came together to create a single phenomenon. Those factors include wine's image as a foreign beverage; Anglo winemakers' discrimination against Italian workers; the presence of a vast workforce of disenfranchised Asian and Mexican labourers; and northern Italian immigrant prejudices against immigrants from southern Italy.

In her study, Cinotto focuses on three wineries founded or run by first- or second-generation Italian immigrants: the Italian Swiss Colony, the Italian Vineyard Company and E & J Gallo. She looks at the stereotypical explanations for all three success stories, while also considering the similarities between California and Italy's Piemonte. Asserting that, while writers such as Cesare Pavese (the Piemontese Italian novelist, literary critic and translator who wrote about American themes) gave the impression in his stories that he'd been to California (which he hadn't), and that California was the image of Piemonte (which it wasn't), it didn't stop the stereotypical lie that Italian winemakers from Piemonte had found a home away from home, becoming widely accepted. In reality, the Italians who came from Piemonte had little or no experience of modern winemaking or financial backing, and the land they bought for their vines in California was poor even by vine standards and poorly situated. Moreover its beauty didn't resemble Piemonte.

What set Italians apart in this industry was their hard work, tenacity, entrepreneurial savvy, social capital and links to a low-paid immigrant workforce. Nevertheless, it didn't stop the many journalists and writers, having read novelists and critics such as Pavese, from swallowing what Cinotto calls 'the Pavesian myth'. Taking this theme to further levels, Cinotto also explores, for instance, why Nebbiolo and Barbera, prominent grape varieties in Piemonte where all three of her families had their roots, never made it into the mainstream soils of California, and were almost written out of a new history in a new world. This is a captivating history of Italian winemakers with a gripping thesis that many might never have considered before.

The Makers of American Wine
A Record of Two Hundred Years
Thomas Pinney
University of California Press
£24.95/$34.95

The general premise here is to tell the story of American wine through the lives of 12 men and one woman, all of whom have contributed something positive to the history of wine in the States. Thus we have, for instance, a pocket life-story of John James Dufour, the Swiss immigrant who arrived in America in 1796, and eventually started a vineyard in Kentucky with European varieties only for his crop of grapes to fail. Switching to the Cape grape, by chance, and planting another vineyard in Indiana, he was more successful, not because he'd chosen a better site but because the Cape was not a true European variety but an American variety hardy enough to survive in North America. This was something of which Dufour

was never aware as of course phylloxera did not emerge as the scourge of European vine varieties for another 100 years despite Dufour writing a book about his experiences in *The American Vine-Dresser's Guide*. Nevertheless, Dufour, is still credited with being the brains behind the first commercial wine production in America.

Other people featured in Pinney's tale include Nicholas Longworth, a wealthy banker who produced wine and sparkling wine from Catawba (a foxy native grape variety that's not offensive) grown in his Ohio River Valley while also popularising American wine to the masses as a serious business venture rather than as a cottage industry. There is also German immigrant George Husmann, who sang the praises of the native Norton grape as the signature grape variety of Missouri and wrote *The Cultivation of Native Grapes and Manufacture of American Wine* while also supplying rootstocks to save French vineyards from phylloxera. Maynard Amerine, the pioneering researcher at the University of California at Davis whose work on the cultivation and fermentation of wine is internationally recognised, is also featured.

While some names will not be familiar to a general lay readership, two names certainly are: Robert Mondavi, who, arguably single-handedly, changed perceptions about California's top wines; and Ernest Gallo, who co-founded E & J Gallo Winery with his brother Julio in the last days of Prohibition in the knowedge that its repeal would open up opportunities for winemakers. The sole woman, incidentally, is Cathy Corison of the eponymous Napa Valley winery.

Overall this is a sturdy history by Pinney, Emeritus Professor of English at Pomona College in California, that's full of well-researched detail and makes an entertaining enough afternoon read.

Maryland Wine
A Full-Bodied History
Regina McCarthy
The History Press
£12/$19.99

For wine geeks, Maryland is possibly famous for two points of reference that are connected: the state is home to Philip Wagner, the former editor of the *Baltimore Sun* who wrote one of the classic books on American winemaking in 1933 (*American Wines and How to Make Them*) and the same Philip Wagner who founded Boordy Vineyard, which established Maryland as a serious wine-producing region in America. Both of these reference points are touched on in this book's forward before the author details the first mention of winemaking in Maryland back in 1648 with the arrival of the French Huguenots and its evolution ever since to the time of Prohibition. McCarthy makes the point that Prohibition wasn't exactly popular in Maryland, with even the congressman John Philip Hill being indicted for making wine and cider during the period. With the arrival of Roosevelt and the New Deal in the 1930s and the Repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the industry recovered slowly, much of it due to Philip Wagner, who is mentioned extensively, as is his famous vineyard at this point.

Following McCarthy's history, 1974 seems to have a memorable year for Maryland's wine industry. By that year there were three wineries and Montbray Wine Cellars' Hamilton Mowbray had just made the first American ice wine. Others were getting the bug and more wineries started to spring up, including Provenza Winery, Linganore Winecellars at Berrywine Plantation and Bon Sporanza Winery, among others, all of whom McCarthy, a local marketing co-ordinator with the Maryland Wineries Assocation, acknowledges. She also mentions the Maryland Grape Growers Association and how the industry began to organise, before the arrival of a second spurt of wineries which have opened in the intervening years. In the closing chapters, the industry's future is discussed, much of which is promising.

In essence, this no-frills history of Maryland wine gives an insight into a region that normally doesn't get a lot of press [apart from being home to the most famous wine critic in the world Robert M Parker Jr - JR].

Pennsylvania Wine
A History
Hudson Cattell and Linda Jones McKee
The History Press
£12/$19.99

Presented in a similar way to *Maryland Wine - A Full-Bodied History* (see above) and *New Jersey Wine - A Remarkable History* (see below), this is a similar account of a shared history, with on this occasion the Swedes mentioning wine for the

first time in Pennsylvania in the 17th century. Written by the wine journalists who founded *Wine East* magazine in 1981 (it merged with *Wines and Vines* in 2008), the history includes mention of Benjamin Franklin, who had words of praise for grape growing (Franklin, like many of the founding fathers - Jefferson, Washington, Madison and Monroe - could as easily have founded a winemakers' union as a country), the Frenchman Pierre Legaux's unsuccessful attempts at growing grapes, and the Harmonist Society from Germany, who made Harmony, one of the first local ferments. The civil war, Prohibition, and the birth of the limited wineries all get a good word before the authors turn their attention to many of the new wineries who've opened their doors. There are more than 160 now. Overall, this is another well-written history.

New Jersey Wine
A Remarkable History
Sal Westrich
The History Press
£12/$19.99

From the same publisher as *Maryland Wine - A Full-Bodied History* and *Pennsylvania Wine - A History* (see above), this is a similar history that captures the mood from the arrival of immigrants, through revolution and Prohibition, to where we are today. This local history charts the life and times of New Jersey wineries that now number 34, a remarkable achievement in itself considering there were only seven in 1980. There is also an afterword written by George Taber, the only journalist present at famous Paris tasting, who later wrote *Judgment of Paris*.