2012 wine books - South America

23 Dec 2012 by Paul O'Doherty

See our guide to 2012 wine book reviews.

Vintage Moquegua
History, Wine and Archaeology on a Colonial Peruvian Periphery
Prudence M Rice
University of Texas Press
£18/$30

Charting the remarkable story of Peru's wineries, Rice, distinguished professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, has come up with one of those books that, despite arriving under the radar, is a fascinating read and deserves to be enjoyed at the top table. One of the less well-known centres of viticulture, the tiny Moquegua Valley in deep southern Peru in the western mountains, 1,000 kilometres south of Lima, comes alive as Rice reports on the Moquegua Bodegas Project – one of the first anthropologically based multi- and interdisciplinary historical and industrial archaeology projects in the Andes. Retelling the history of the wine industry in colonial Peru, from the 16th through to the 19th century, the narrative follows the arrival of the Spanish invaders and their vinicultural practices and what effect all of this had on the social history of the indigenous population. Along the way, Rice discusses her encounters at over 130 wineries in the Moquegua Valley. The story begins with the colonists importing grapevines when their masters in Spain were unable to supply the Peruvian viceroyalty with sufficient wine for religious and secular purposes.

While essentially an academic textbook within the fields of archaeology and anthropology bordering on history, it is all set in the context of what happened when the Spaniards brought wine to Peru with conquistadores such as Francisco Pizarro. In that sense, there are sections on early viticulture in the Iberian peninsula back in the Old World, the use of wine in an imperial colonial economy where the Christian church was seen as one of the extensions of colonial power, the Spanish colonial wine trade, and the need for New World vineyards when supplies from Spain dried up.

Getting much more specific, Rice explores the difficulties of wine production in the Moquegua Valley, water rights, distribution and transportation, the 16th-century wine boom, the 18th-century brandy boom, and how the industry developed into the 20th century. If there's a minor flaw, it's possibly in the title: if you've never heard of Moquegua Valley, you might not be aware that this is a book about wine. Other than that, this is a fascinating and intriguing investigation that's well written and authoritative, and one of the books of the year.

The Vineyard at the End of the World
Maverick Winemakers and the Rebirth of Malbec
Ian Mount
W W Norton
£17.99/$29

Another well-written book on the market this year is Ian Mount's take on the Malbec renaissance and Argentina's journey from producing mediocre cheap, rustic plonk to being an important wine producer with a serious signature grape variety. Beginning with the familiar tale of immigrants and colonisers arriving in the New World with the need to produce wine, Mount's tale takes us to the 16th century with the conquistadores and the church in tow, so often happy bedfellows in the colonial struggle in these lands. Where this differs from so many of these other opening scenarios is in Mount's ability to explore and account for the lives that collide in the vacuum created by the need to cultivate vines. And so we have a story of the wild west, sex, bandits, fraudsters, Machiavellian characters, fast getaways to Chile, an earthquake and what Mount calls 'primitive winemaking … straight out of *The Flintstones'.*

This is a really enjoyable jaunt that careers at breakneck speed into the 20th century, delving into irrigation, phylloxera and the new immigrant magnates who organised themselves to lobby politicians. These early years were a bonanza for Argentina, making it one of the 10 richest countries on the planet. Such prosperity fuelled a burgeoning wine market. Then, bang! The Wall Street Crash in 1929 put paid to all this. As Mount acknowledges, winemakers suffered alongside their fellow countrymen as Argentines saved money by drinking less. For years the industry was in decline until Juan Perón's labour reforms gave the masses sufficient income to buy cheap wine. What's extraordinary about the Perón

years is that wine could not be shipped across the country unless it had an alcohol level below 11.5 per cent, not an easy achievement when one is growing grapes in one of the world's warmest climates. So, what did the producers do? Well, they watered down the wine with nearly two million litres of water every year. As Mount points out, 'Evita herself personally exhorted winemakers to water down their product'. What followed was a wine boom that brought the wine industry forward for another couple of decades until it finally burst in the 1980s.

Of course, by the 1980s the military junta were 'in government', shaping nearly every façade of society, including that of wine. In one such incident recorded by Mount, Héctor Greco, a major player in the Argentine wine industry, was arrested by the junta in the weeks during which he was planning to buy Grupo Catena's table wine business, having already handed over seven instalments of the ten-part payment plan. Cleverly, Catena's lawyers had negotiated into the deal a clause that stipulated that, if for any reason Greco defaulted on his payment schedule, the bodega would remain in Grupo Catena's hands along with any money that had been already paid. Thus Grupo Catena got their bodega back together with seven tenths of a $129 million deal, while Greco went to jail for four years.

It's just one of many stories that Mount brings together while also describing how export markets were courted with the arrival of the 'new conquistadores', the flying winemakers and consultants who came from France and America, among other places. Michel Rolland, Paul Hobbs, Robert Mondavi, Alberto Antonini and Robert Parker Jr all get serious mention in the chapters leading up to those on Malbec and its 'discovery' as a signature grape variety for Argentina. And that's only half the story.

In essence, this is a brilliantly written investigation of Argentina and Malbec that reads in part like the sort of background material that gets the Coen brothers excited in the film business.