

The naturals: rich, complementary approaches to the wine world's hottest topic

Jamie Goode and Sam Harrop MW
Authentic Wine: Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking

University of California Press, \$29.95 / £20.95

Alice Feiring
Naked Wine: Letting Grapes Do What Comes Naturally

Da Capo Press, \$24 / £15.99

REVIEWED BY
PETER RICHARDS MW

First, a caveat: Natural wine has a knack of generating heated discourse wherever it rears its protean head. The mere mention of this topical and contentious term has people—be they commentators, producers, salespeople, or even wine drinkers—closing ranks with a narrowing of the eyes and a steeling of the jaw. Caution, then, that the judgments of this piece—unashamedly personal and inevitably imperfect as they are—concern solely the books inspired by natural wine and not natural wine itself. It is beyond the remit of this piece to explore the mist-ridden intricacies of what natural wine is or isn't, or what it should or shouldn't be. Those thirsty for manifestos should look elsewhere; those keen to know more about two authoritative and articulate books on the matter should read on.

It's likely that Alice Feiring, Dr Jamie Goode, and Sam Harrop MW are familiar names to regular readers of these pages. New York City-based

Feiring is known as a thoughtful and occasionally outspoken commentator. Her breakthrough solo book was *The Battle for Wine and Love: or How I Saved the World from Parkerization* (Mariner Books, 2008); her latest release is *Naked Wine*. Goode, a respected writer, blogger, and former scientific editor, has teamed up with winemaking consultant and Master of Wine Harrop to pen *Authentic Wine: Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking*. This follows on from Goode's award-winning debut release, *Wine Science* (Mitchell Beazley, 2005), since rereleased by UC Press as *The Science of Wine*.

As the dates suggest, these books are hot off the press, presumably in response to the surge of interest in natural wine that has occurred in the past few years. (Just how widespread this interest actually is beyond the wine trade and connoisseurs may be a moot point—something I'll return to in due course.) It's worth noting from the outset, however, that while both books incorporate the word "natural" in their subtitles, neither uses the phrase "natural wine" in its title. This pointed avoidance is intriguing. It reveals just how controversial this issue has become and how keen the authors are to set their own seal—or definition—on the debate. Were a wry Tony Blair reviewing these books, he might have felt tempted to comment that the authors were feeling the hand of history on their shoulders.

Though they deal with common subjects, both books are remarkably different in their style and format. It seems appropriate, then, to consider each book in its own right before pulling together general conclusions. Comparisons may be invidious, but they can also be instructive in this context.

Authentic Wine is a worthy and welcome attempt, in the authors' words, "to make the wine industry pause to reflect on its current trajectory." The gentle exhortation is to "shift in the

direction of naturalness." It covers a range of subjects—from terroir, to marketing, via grafting, biodynamics, sustainable wine growing, winemaking interventions, natural wine, yeasts, alcohol, faults, and the carbon footprint of wine. Goode brings his customary scientific rigor and refreshing prose to the table, while Harrop's presence is most keenly felt in certain sections—for example, in the wonderfully eye-opening chapter on winemaking tricks of the trade or in discourses on yeast, faults, *Brettanomyces* and the role of sulfides in the perception of minerality.

There is much to learn and admire in these pages. The technique of countercurrent extraction, introduced in Australia in 2004 and used to extract wine from *marc* (improving the yield of wine by a scary 100 liters per ton), was new to me, as was the role and provenance of the antioxidant glutathione, a product of the lees but that can also be boosted by the addition of inactivated yeast. The fact that at least 400 of wine's 800 potential volatile flavor compounds are reportedly generated by yeasts vindicates the authors' contention that wine lovers and winemakers alike would do well to give more attention to these microscopic fungi. And the informed estimate that 45 percent of premium California wines are alcohol-adjusted makes for depressing but not unexpected reading.

Goode (and I assume it was Goode who wielded the pen) has a delightful turn of phrase. Provenance is "the power of wine to tell the story of its origin." Terroir "speaks with a quiet voice." In more mordant fashion, sustainability is "a word in search of a meaning." He can also be engagingly honest, for example, where there is a lack of scientific clarity on certain issues. How wines with no added sulfur work is "hard to explain" scientifically, while he concludes his case study on the lack of clarity on the



Alice Feiring: "I often don't taste or see the world in the same way others do"

processes that occur when wine ages by saying, "In some ways, it's nice that wine isn't all about science, and that there's still a lot of room left for art."

The book also features some fine quotes from various wine trade luminaries, such as Ted Lemon holding forth on natural wine, and a memorable discourse by Justin Knock MW on pumps. To cite a few, Nigel Greening describes biodynamics as "Harry Potter grows grapes"; New World biodynamic

producers are frequently "like fairies in the vineyard but orcs in the cellar" (Jason Lett); Eric Texier quips that "natural wines are full of good intentions. They are full of fossil fuel, too." Mac Forbes memorably says, "Anyone who thinks they know all the answers is a long way from making interesting wine."

Rooting around in murky waters
Moving from the micro to the macro, it is hard to disagree with Goode and Harrop's

basic contention that the wine trade needs to "put its house in order." This applies on many levels—from environmental impact, to social responsibility, even basics such as wine quality and marketing. The book is at its best when getting its hands dirty rooting around in the murky waters of issues like winemaking interventions, sustainability, and biodynamics—subjects the authors clearly feel comfortable around—and fishing out deliciously awkward questions, like why ingredient listing isn't more common; what the future might be for GM yeasts if they are proven to reduce alcohol levels; why the eminently PR-able natural wine found a voice in hitherto unfashionable regions like Beaujolais and the Loire; why white Burgundy is susceptible to premature oxidation; to what extent sulfur and Bordeaux mixture can be considered "natural"; how wine faults may be responsible for the character of terroir in certain wines; why many so-called natural winemakers don't want to talk about carbon footprint.

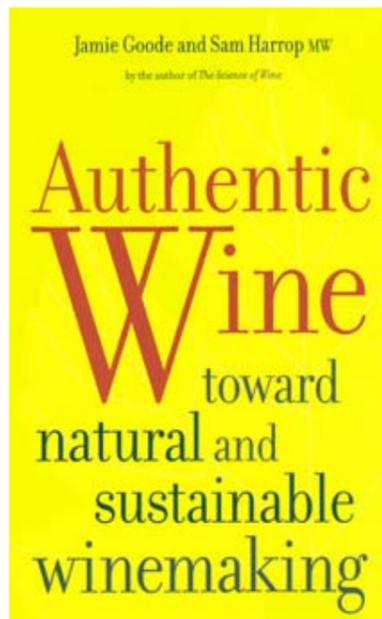
Where the book has a tendency to disappoint is when it comes to providing answers to these provocative questions. To my mind, some key issues are either left hanging (grafting, GM yeast, Bordeaux mixture, VA, minerality as reduction) or the book's learned, objectivized tone means they are resolved in shades of unsatisfying gray (acidification, amphorae, ingredient listing, enzymes, carbon offsetting). Are such fudges a function of the dual authorship? Perhaps. They may also, it must be conceded, be the result of a nuanced and sensitive reading of what are complex matters, the ramifications of which are still playing out around the wine world. (And yet to this you could uncharitably ask, Why not wait to write the book, then?) The book's ultimate conclusion for the trade to adopt a more sustainable outlook is sensible but hardly revolutionary, and it lapses into an odd, hectoring tone, touting hackneyed phrases such as, "There is a need for less politics and more action."

In those instances where the authors do stick their necks out—for example, eloquently advocating cultured yeasts for natural wines—the book takes on a new

lease of life. But the authors' natural tendency toward the pragmatic often ends up stifling such clarion calls, as it does in this case. Goode and Harrop argue quite rationally that blind, "dogmatic" adherence to indigenous yeasts can lead to spoilage both in primary and malolactic ferments, thus detracting from a wine's quality and by extension its expression of terroir. But naturalness to most natural wine producers is not about reliable fermentations or predictable outcomes; its core values lie in the very abnegation of zealous control and manipulation. The authors' call for a "broader view of natural wine" to allow the use of cultured yeasts "selected from nature" ends up sounding like exactly what many natural producers fear most: a watering down of what is by its very nature an extreme form of winemaking. One feels Goode and Harrop would be better placed pushing conventional winemakers into sustainable production rather than trying to convince natural winemakers of the virtues of cultured yeasts. Either way, for all their "slightly heretical" notions, the authors seem to empathize on some level with wild yeast adherents. They also applaud winemakers "who are able to achieve excellent results without any inoculation." Within all this, their message is robbed of its clarity and urgency.

Furthermore, questions have been raised about potential conflicts of interest in the book and on this topic in particular. Both Harrop and Goode have reportedly had dealings with yeast-and-bacteria-maker Lallemand, the true extent and nature of which I am entirely ignorant. Knowing both men, if this is true then I am confident neither would allow such involvement to cloud their independent judgment (and their argument patently holds water in any case). However, the fact that there is no obvious disclosure about this in the book has the potential to leave a bitter taste. Perhaps an oversight to remedy in future editions?

Further recommendations for cosmetic improvement include higher production values. (Goode's photos are sadly flat in monochrome gray, which leeches any sense of life and depth from them, especially the landscape shots.) Americanisms such as "gotten," "headed,"



"whole heap," and "math" may satisfy an important market but jar in the mouths of Goode and Harrop. Having written extensively on Chilean wine, I would contend that the assertion that "Chile has so far struggled to make world-class wines" betrays a limited experience of that country's increasingly fine wines. The book's case studies can interrupt an easy reading flow and are sometimes superfluous, albeit in an innocuously informative way. Finally, it would have been fascinating to read a section on wine health, which Goode dealt with in *Wine Science* but, somewhat inexplicably, not here, when it is an issue of such importance to so many wine drinkers.

Such criticisms aside, this is an immensely valuable and instructive book on what is a fascinating topic. As with all good work of artistic merit, it invites you to question your own position on many key issues, stimulating welcome debate along the way. Its advocacy of sustainable wine growing is rational and timely. It is a highly recommended read for all lovers of wine—authentic or not.

From a different angle

Naked Wine comes at its subject from a very different angle. Feiring's latest book is a variation on the format of her earlier *Battle for Wine and Love*—part travelogue, part defiant credo, part engaging confessional. The

overarching narrative is the challenge to make Feiring's own natural wine in California—a state whose wine she has fiercely criticized in the past—while drawing in tales from her travels in France, Spain, California, and beyond, taking in key figures in the natural-wine scene such as Marcel Lapiere and Jacques Néauport. At the end are illuminating lists including USA-approved additives and processes for wine and a compilation of natural winemakers she recommends.

This is a refreshingly frank and witty book, unashamedly emotive and outspoken—an almost seamless blend of the personal and professional recounted with great charm, candor, and skill. It's a compelling read that at once informs, entertains, and challenges its reader—no mean feat for a wine book. It helps to consider *Naked Wine* in the context of *Battle for Wine and Love*. This is partly because the latter provides an insight of startling clarity into Feiring the person and the writer, and this information is essential background in what are both very personal narratives.

In *Wine and Love*, Feiring announces herself with characteristic wit-tinged honesty as a flame-haired, straight-talking lapsed orthodox Jew of Russian extraction with considerable expertise in dance therapy. An occasionally acerbic vegetarian with a penchant for witty candor and a tendency for the dramatic, she has an elegant touch of the polemicist about her, as well as undeniable iconoclastic and slightly neurotic tendencies, all contained within a tiny, fragile, resilient frame. She has a "particular, peculiar palate and point of view"; in short, she confesses, "I often don't taste or see the world in the same way others do." She rails against "spoofulated" wine, which she sees as standardized, manipulated, and soulless (this kind of wine being typified by those awarded high Parker points), throwing out many memorable phrases along the way. (One wine is "like peonies pressed between the pages of a treasured novel"; Burgundy is "more intimidating than reading *Finnegans Wake*"; Nicolas Joly, deliciously, "wholly enjoys being Nicolas, and who wouldn't?") It also happens to have one of the finest opening

paragraphs of any wine book I've read.

By the time we come on to *Naked Wine*, it's a less emotionally denuded Feiring we encounter, possibly wiser and warier, slightly more guarded and defensive as a result. Yet the same emotional honesty remains. "When it comes to wine, I can be polarizing," she proclaims. Her position has hardened: "There's an emotional truth in natural wine that I can't ignore," she writes, adding elsewhere that, for her, "Terroir is an emotional response." Though these sound dangerously like grandiose claims (the latter meanwhile raising intriguing questions about the role of the drinker in the perception and existence of terroir), Feiring's engaging and bold style means she carries them off. Natural winemakers, "have a 'compelling single-mindedness'"; the same could be said of her.

Emotional and simplistic?

Of course, this partisan approach, while eminently readable, can and does become simplistic on occasion. She characterizes harvest in California as "business" rather than "an emotional experience," in comparison to an unrealistic European idyll (not all such harvests being like the one she worked in France). She is rather too keen to accept the controversial results of the 2008 PAN residue study at face value because it suits her argument—where, for example, Goode and Harrop are more enlightening and balanced. She glosses over issues that challenge her non-interventionist tenets—such as the use of dry ice and even reverse osmosis by some natural producers (one could add the issues of carbon footprint and the disregard of organic practices by some such producers). She does, however,

explore the potentially standardizing technique of carbonic maceration in natural wine in some depth. Finally, her climactic meeting with Jacques Néauport falls a little flat as he resists her attempts to wring something noble and meaningful from him on the beginnings of the natural-wine movement.

Yet for all this, Feiring's prose is full of insight and sense. She advocates ingredient and processing listing, which is an eminently sensible plea, chiefly because in her view it is the only way to stop natural wine being hijacked for marketing purposes. It is interesting to read that some producers making low-sulfur wines instead rely on the enzyme lysozyme—which, for those claiming to make natural wine, surely represents a moral contradiction. Her assertion that one of the key elements of natural winemaking should be honesty is disarming in its simple truth. (One could add that trust is the necessary counterpoint.) It is also worth noting that Robert Parker described natural wine as a "scam" in *The Wine Advocate*.

Her language moves from gracefully evocative to witty and acerbic in the blink of an eye. Benjamin Cantz "moved slowly, as if he owned time." Nicolas Joly searches out a wine with "song," which she memorably reinterprets as "a wine that has the rhythm of truth in it." In one cellar she comes across a tuning fork "big enough to musically align a rhinoceros." More brutally, "when many Americans talk of great terroir, they're actually saying they have a great view."

Both *Naked Wine* and *Authentic Wine* have one thing in common: In their own ways, they both rail against the Camusian "*tendre indifférence du monde*." This is to

be applauded. However, one does wonder if these worthy books will reach an audience beyond the converted few. Both books steadfastly turn their backs on the commercial reality that wine can, is, and should be all things to all people. Many people want clean, consistent, easy-drinking wine sold in an acceptable format. There should also be room for playful innovation in wine—I don't agree with Goode and Harrop, for example, that allowing flavor additives to wine would be "a disaster." As long as it's clearly stated on the label, why not add fruit or flavorings to wine and market it plainly as such? Natural wine is a niche within the niche of fine wine. While both books pay lip service to the notion that there is life beyond fine wine, they equally both appear to assume a default position that most wines need to be more natural, or more terroir-driven. While honorable in intent, this point is questionable. To willfully distort a Nicolas Joly quote, "*Avant d'être naturel, un vin doit être vin*." Wine should be wine—and that means many different things to many different people.

While Feiring's is clearly the more readable and engaging of these two books, *Authentic Wine* has just as much value as an authoritative, well-written reference book for the modern wine era. In *Naked Wine*, Feiring quotes Eric Texier, who says, "More and more, the world has no tolerance for gray but needs one to be extreme." Both ends of the spectrum are represented in these books, and together they provide a wonderfully complementary and rich take on this subject. For all their differences, the two books make a great pair. Both come highly recommended.

DISCOVER A WINE SHOP AND COMMUNITY IN
TRIBECA, NEW YORK CITY

Maslow 6

We believe in vino veritas.

MASLOW 6 WINE SHOP 211B WEST BROADWAY · NEW YORK, NY 10013
212 226 3127 · WWW.MASLOW6.COM

Discover, Explore, Collect, and Enjoy with Maslow 6

- We search out the best small producers and well known names - from Burgundy to Bordeaux, to Barolo and Tuscany, to California and the Maipo Valley.
- We take an integrated approach to wine, recognizing the intellectual and social joys wine brings.
- Our tastings, classes, and seminars run the gamut from "Back to Basics" to our Sommelier Series, to an exploration of Piedmont vs. Burgundy.
- Our clients share a passion for wine, for discovery, and for life.
- Perfect Gifts for the Holidays: a curated wine selection, a customized cellar plan, or the Maslow 6 Wine Club.

A photographic voyage through Napa

**Charles O'Rear and
Daphne Larkin**

*Napa Valley: The Land,
The Wine, The People*

Wineviews Publishing, \$45

REVIEWED BY JON WYAND

As in all branches of photography, wine photographers vary in what they know, what they see, and how they see it. With the growth of generalist photo libraries, it is possible for non-specialists and amateurs who have passed through a vineyard (on holiday perhaps) to submit pictures that can find their way into books and magazines. The publication may think it has a shot of Champagne and caption it accordingly, but it was actually done later in the day and in Chablis.

Fortunately, there are specialist wine photographers who know not only what region they are in but the name of the village, vineyard, and vine they are shooting. And just occasionally one of this select group has his or her own book published. These photographers tend to be American, since American publishers seem more willing to take on what can be expensive projects, even in the current uncertain publishing climate. Perhaps this willingness is explained by the fact that wine tourism is more developed in the USA, and therefore people are more prepared to look beyond the label to understand a wine's origins.

Focused as it is on an American region that has always pulled in a high number of visitors, *Napa Valley*, by photographer Charles (Chuck) O'Rear and his writer wife Daphne Larkin, should do very well when it comes to sales. Though the impact of the book comes from O'Rear's pictures, the best photography always leaves the viewer demanding, "Where? When? Who? Tell me more..." This is where Larkin comes in, with her concise, informative



Photography © Charles O'Rear



Belt Buckle (above) and Beaulieu Daughter (left)—both examples of Charles O'Rear's uncanny ability to "take us with him"

and sympathetic text that sits well with her husband's work.

O'Rear will not, I hope, mind being referred to as a doyen and veteran in his field. In 1978, one of his more than 20 *National Geographic* assignments took him to Napa Valley. The seed was planted, and he bought a property there. His globe-trotting life meant he was rarely home for more than a few days at a time, to do his laundry. But then, in 1989, he returned from an assignment to find the harvest in full flow, and with a few days to spare, he started to take some photos. The flame was lit, and a book on Napa took shape to be published in 1990, the granddaddy of this edition.

While the 1990 edition is mainly focused on vineyards, winemakers, and their work, the new book has a broader view. With a nod to the history of the region, this time O'Rear shows us more of the social life and fringe activities that bring another dimension to his vision of Napa. He records its development through tourism and new wineries, and the section on Napa Valley winery architecture is indicative of the breadth of what he can do. His enjoyment of light is everywhere, as is his affection for the place. I refer you to the picture of a vineyard shot by the light of a street lamp on a foggy February night (pp. 46–7) and rest my case.

I met him two years ago, when our

paths crossed at Cain Vineyards on Spring Mountain in Napa. I was shooting for a book (*The Finest Wines of California*), and on a misty October Sunday I was returning from a glorious early-morning visit to Philip Togni's mountaintop vineyards when I saw the sign for Cain Vineyard, where I had an appointment later in the week. I decided to take a look in the hope that, since it was harvest time, someone would be there and something happening. A warm welcome from Chris Howell was followed by a tour of the vines and an invitation to lunch. "We have a neighbor, another photographer, coming for lunch. I'm sure you'd enjoy meeting him." Almost Burgundian serendipity!

Lean and wiry in appearance, and with bright, constantly searching eyes, Chuck is immediately friendly and, one feels habitually, self-deprecating. As the man who has influenced me more than any other photographer, it was like meeting a long-lost [slightly] elder brother. He obviously knows his wine stuff, but he carries it lightly. I asked him what made him a wine photographer, and he said it was down to an agricultural gene and the excitement of seeing wine from another viewpoint. Along with the ability to get up early and to be constantly looking, his recipe for success is "two Nikons and a working wife." This is not a man who takes himself too seriously

—we both know that winemakers will soon find you out if you do.

He followed his first Napa Valley effort with, among others, books on Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, shot around the world. Two years ago, he and Larkin produced *Wine Across America*, traveling 80,000 miles (130,000km) in the process. But Napa is home, the place he found most welcoming, and his new book is a great celebration of the area.

Brought up in a farming community in the Midwest, Chuck found his natural photographic interest in agricultural subjects. He describes his style as more design-oriented than photojournalistic, though he still recognizes that critical moment. All this is plain to see in his work, but the strongest feature is the feeling that he is at home. He captures the feeling of intimacy that comes from a strong awareness of the subject and the place, with an eye for the telling detail that passes others by. You just know that he is either extremely lucky or hard working. But you do not sustain a 25-year freelance career at *National Geographic* by being lucky. Working hard by revisiting photographs until you are happy can kill the freshness, but somehow Chuck manages to hide the hard work and look as if he was just in the right place at the right time. And he takes us with him.

Photography © Charles O'Rear, Beaulieu Daughter (left) first published in *National Geographic* magazine

Two scholarly guide books offer an introduction to the Chinese century

Li Zhengping
Chinese Wine

Liu Junru
Chinese Food

Cambridge University Press, \$19.99/£12.99

REVIEWED BY STUART WALTON

The early stages of what has already been classified as the Chinese century have acquired giddy momentum. TV documentaries about everyday life in the People's Republic proliferate, along with books essaying a variety of awe-struck to deeply alarmed predictions about its coming destiny. Mandarin is being taught as an option in British secondary schools. China's vote in the United Nations Security Council grows more pregnant with geopolitical significance by the year. Barely had our gaze turned from the Beijing Olympics than another slew of dissident incarceration sagas hit the headlines. Now a Chinese space program, *Tiangong 1*, is upon us. As the country grows to Asian superpower status, its businesspeople pour into Europe, North America, and Africa, followed by a tourist tsunami.

If the West has awoken rather late in the day to this opportunity, some of the explanation for its slowness on the uptake lies in what is still seen as the vast cultural illegibility of China, itself distantly bred by the apathy of empire. Opium-pushing Victorian imperialists saw in the Chinese physiognomy a mask of incognizance. The country's history was a tale of centuries of feudal savagery, which had coalesced by the time of the Qing dynasty into what would be its swan song—a glacially impassive absolute monarchy supported by a complex bureaucratic mandarin steeped in Confucian obeisance. After the proclamation of a republic in 1912,

under Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-Sen)—China's Kerensky—a prolonged bitter struggle produced in 1949 one of the 20th century's more convulsive attempts at a revolutionary communist society, itself later to be consumed by waves of hysterical chaos, economic disarray, and morbid repression.

Nonetheless, for all its multibrachiate ethnic identities, this is the world's longest continuously surviving civilization and worthy of our notice. Where it has been noticed at all in the past century, with due respect to the efforts of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, has been in its gastronomic culture, surely the most richly elaborate in the world now that French haute cuisine is barely more than a lingering aftertaste. There is a sturdy repertoire of (mostly Cantonese) dishes that front the operation of the global Chinese catering industry, forming a kind of *cordon sanitaire* against the rather weirder stuff that the Chinese themselves eat. As one particularly tenacious myth once had it, if there were Chinese people eating in your local Chinese, it must be a good place, but they were possibly setting about fish maw, duck tongues, and chicken feet while you got through as much sweet-and-sour as you could before giving up.

CUP is currently publishing a series of around 30 introductory guides to aspects of Chinese culture in an attempt to dent Western bafflement. Li Zhengping's *Chinese Wine* will be enough of a surprise in itself to those who believe that all Chinese have enzymatic alcohol intolerance. So ingrained had drunken decadence become among the elite of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BC) that the first anti-wine regulations in Chinese history were promulgated. Wine was used in sacrificial ritual, ancestor worship, military rites, and medicine, but it was also valued as a tonic comforter for smoothing away the world's pains.

By "wine," Li predominantly means rice wine, of which there are several varieties, including the highly prized yellow wine of Shaoxing in Zhejiang province. Chinese legend supplies a cognate story to the accidental Western discovery of maturation, in the tale of a poor tailor named Zhang who had kept a buried jar of Shaoxing to celebrate the birth of what he hoped would be a son. When his wife produced a girl, the jar remained unbroached until his daughter's wedding day 18 years later, and the aged wine turned out to be as surprising and delightful as that drunk by the wedding guests at *Cana*.

A poignant tension between moderation and excess attends all intoxication cultures. In Chinese society, the former is reflected in the notional measure of three large cups being sufficient at any occasion to be marked by drinking, while the latter whispers its temptation in the ancient proverb that states, "When drinking with dear friends, a thousand cups are not enough." It is polite to fill a guest's wine cup to the brim (so no room for swirling and sniffing), while tea is filled no more than halfway.

Wine is the fuel and subject of literary creativity in the medieval period, much of its resplendent sensuality deriving from the legendarily capacious Eastern Jin poet Tao Yuanming (AD 365–427), from whose pen the drunken lyric flowed as eloquently and copiously as love sonnets from Shakespeare's. Enconced in Horatian pastoral seclusion, he prefaces a suite of 20 drink odes with the explanatory apology: "I live in seclusion without company and face long nights. Occasionally I have fine wine and spend the entire evening drinking. I drink alone until I am drunk." It lacks only the latter-day injunction, "Get over it!"

Grape wine came to the northwestern Xinjiang province with the Persians as early as the Han dynasty



A wall of jars used to store yellow rice wine at a wine factory in Xitang, in the ancient town of Jiaxing, Zhejiang province (2009), reflects the scale of China's thirst

(206 BC–AD 220), though it was to wait 20 centuries before it began to be a significant contribution to global viticulture. Li dates the production of the first bottle of modern dry white wine as recently as 1978, but China is now a grape-wine exporter and has attracted serious French expertise to its vineyards. It might have got out of the blocks earlier had it not been for the interdiction on foreign wine as a corrupting luxury, which held sway throughout the entire period of Mao Zedong's presidency.

It will doubtless take a while before an international taste for the traditional offal wines of the Zhuang minority is cultivated. Chicken gall-bladder wine and pork-liver wine are consumed much as is Mexican mescal with its worm, the liquor being drunk first, before the protein (in this case, slivers of innards) is meditatively chewed. Liu Junru's companion volume on Chinese food describes these impeccably nutritious drinks in the context of enumerating the fascinating regional food cultures of China's dozens of ethnic groups, all of which have contributed to the glorious edifice of its culinary tradition.

Other than during the period when communist state-owned restaurants

encouraged disciplined austerity in repudiation of "corrupt and backward-thinking" gourmandism—never the likeliest morale-booster—the Chinese have accorded gastronomy an exalted place in folk tradition and court culture. Even though, or perhaps because, the specter of scarcity and malnutrition has darkened so much of ordinary people's experience, the celebration of food, in the homes of the poorest as much as among the aspirant middling sorts, has played a key symbolic role. Food is essential sustenance both biologically and medicinally—a fusion noticeable in the fact that Shennong, the ancient god of agriculture, also does votive service as the god of medicine. To this day, professional chefs undergo courses in nutrition as a standard part of their culinary training.

There is pride in the colossal diversity of the Chinese kitchen, seen in its elaboration of up to seven taste categories (where Western cooking makes do with an unambitious four) and a keen awareness of the capacity that the Chinese palate has to assimilate and outdo even the oddest productions of Western gastronomy. "Cheese from the Western world," Liu writes, "may

be thought to smell, but it is said to have nothing on the stench of Chinese stinking tofu," likewise the counter-intuitive product of fermentation.

The dramatist Anton Chekhov, inviting a Chinese man to drink a vodka with him in the late 19th century, noted the extraordinary formal delicacy that his companion brought to the occasion. He held the glass out to the tavern-keeper, his staff, and to Chekhov in turn—a little bow and the word "*qing*" ("please") accompanying each acknowledgment—and he sipped appreciatively at it little by little amid the general ambience of Russian gulping and then offered his host a handful of coins. "This is a rather interestingly polite nationality," observes Chekhov, attentive as ever to the minutiae of social exchange. Indeed, the more one explores, the more evident it becomes that there is virtually nothing about China that isn't, at the very least, rather interesting.

A massive task of comprehension lies ahead of the Western world if this is, indeed, to be the Chinese century. These useful, well-illustrated, and mostly capably translated handbooks will help many along the way.

Books round-up

Gentlemen and Scholars

REVIEWED BY DAVID WILLIAMS

Fans of the work of British screenwriter, novelist, and professional posho Julian Fellowes will enjoy Ben Howkins's *Real Men Drink Port... and Ladies Do Too!* (Wine Appreciation Guild, \$21.95/Quiller, £16.95). This slight tome is ostensibly a guide to the history of Port, the Port trade, and what Howkins calls the "Port person"—a function it fulfills pretty well over its 170-odd pages of generously spaced text fleshed out with anodyne cartoons by illustrator Oliver Preston. But as with Fellowes's country-house sagas *Downton Abbey* (which Howkins suggests could be a useful vehicle for Port product placement) and *Gosford Park*, the real pleasure of *Real Men* lies not in the thrust of the main narrative so much as the incidental details and the sense that you're getting a glimpse into the peculiar lives and mores of the British upper class.

Howkins, a director of the Royal Tokaji Company, comes across as the embodiment of the jovial old-school, upper-class British wine-trade gent. Patriotic, conservative, hedonistic, and mildly eccentric, he relishes larks (playing cricket in wellington boots on a rain-drenched Isle of Mull with a descendent of Baron Forrester), pranks (he tells the story of a pair of brothers putting a dead seal, done up with glasses and a copy of *The Times*, in their father's bed in revenge for not offering them a glass of Port), and schoolboy humor (just look at the book's title, for heaven's sake) every bit as much as Bertie Wooster. Like Wooster, though rather more knowingly, he's also clearly a bit of a snob, someone who believes going on a shoot "in a baseball cap" is a modern-day faux pas and who is still very much attached to the "etiquette" of Port with all its tedious rules and opaque, alienating rituals (see the cartoon above).

Fortunately, Howkins also happens to be a fluent writer with a (for the most part) light touch, an ability to laugh at himself, and a profound love of Port



both as a drink and an expression of Britishness that is palpable on every page. Whether Howkins is drawing affectionate pen portraits of characters from the Port trade's present and recent past, or sharing his deep knowledge of vintages and producers, this rather whimsical book eases gently by, leaving a sense of him as a proper "Port person."

While similar in length and, to a degree, ambition to *Real Men Drink Port*, Becky Sue Epstein's *Champagne: A Global History* (Reaktion Books, \$17/£9.99) has none of Howkins's (or Champagne's) joie de vivre. Epstein, an American food and wine writer, has a functional, rather humorless style that frequently lapses into marketing speak ("trending up") and platitude. She also has an infuriating tendency to repeat the most banal aperçus (Champagne is "glamorous"; "In the West, educated wine consumers tend to believe every celebration calls for Champagne"), offering very little in the way of analysis, critical thought, or original information.

Still, as breathless and repetitive as it is, this canter through the history of Champagne and other sparkling wines (there is rather more of the latter than the book's title implies) is not without its merits for the newcomer to Champagne. All the important events in the development of Champagne and global sparkling wine are covered—from the early commercialization of the sparkling wines of Limoux in the 16th century, through Champagne's emergence as a fine wine in the 18th and 19th centuries, up to the gradual penetration of sparkling wine into

more everyday drinking occasions in the early 21st century. A useful primer, then, though there are many better books on Champagne and its history.

The latest in the field of wine encyclopedias, *Larousse Wine* (Clarkson Potter, \$65/Hamlyn, £40) is billed as "the definitive guide to the wines and winemakers of the world." However, this is very much the world as seen through Gallic eyes: All the contributors and editors are French, and the book's content is unusually skewed toward French wine. No doubt a sensible move in its original French edition, the bias is harder to justify overseas, and the book comes across as dated and parochial when compared to competitors such as the *Oxford Companion to Wine* or the more recent editions of *Hugh Johnson's Wine Atlas*. The bias is most obvious in the "Great Wine Regions of the World" section, which takes up the second half of the book's 528 pages. France gets 110 pages to Italy's 15, Spain's 10, and the USA and Canada's 11 (with a lengthy profile of Opus One—"an exceptional California wine," indeed, but one with no little French input). The section on South America is particularly skimpy, with no sense of either Chile or Argentina's expansion into new territories. But even the book's more generic first half, which is devoted to wine production, tasting, and buying and storage advice, is overwhelmingly reliant on French examples and illustrations. Those very major gripes aside, the book is clearly written and presented, easy to navigate, and lavishly illustrated, making it a decent buy for Francophiles.

Image © Oliver Preston / Quiller



UNSURPRISINGLY, THE BEST GRAPES PRODUCE THE FINEST PORT

Quinta de Vargellas is arguably the most prestigious port estate in the world. Its grapes produce a single quinta vintage of the highest calibre. If you would like to appreciate port at its very best, our 2001 Vintage is ready to be savoured.

drinkaware.co.uk
for the facts about alcohol

Mentzendorff & Co Ltd, Uk Agents | Tel. 020 7840 3600 | www.mentzendorff.co.uk



TAYLOR'S
PORT

www.taylorport