

The Grace Kelly of wine

Tim Crane

Kerin O’Keefe
BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO
Understanding and appreciating one of
Italy’s greatest wines
299pp. University of California Press.
\$39.95;
distributed in the UK by Wiley. £27.95.
978 0 520 26564 6

Ian Mount
**THE VINEYARD AT THE END OF
THE WORLD**
350pp. Norton. \$26.95;
distributed in the UK by Wiley. £17.99.
978 0 393 08019 3

Jay McInerney
THE JUICE
Vinous veritas
287pp. Bloomsbury. £14.99.
978 1 4088 3326 1

Published: 1 August 2012



Broadbent/Coates tradition. More than half of the book is devoted to detailed descriptions of the Brunello producers, and the ever-present tasting notes. The rest is a useful history of the wine, written in a brisk, informative style. O’Keefe covers many of the main issues in Italian winemaking of the past few decades: the battle between tradition and reform, the impact of the “super-Tuscans” (expensive, international-style wines whose makers side-stepped the official Italian regulations for labelling wines) and the “Brunellogate” scandal of 2008, when non-permitted grapes were added to the

The combination of inherited wisdom, creative ambition and scientific knowledge that characterizes wine-making today has produced an extraordinary variety of things for which the word “drink” doesn’t seem quite adequate. Hemingway (quoted by Jay McInerney in *The Juice*) put it nicely: “wine is one of the natural things of the world that has been brought to the greatest perfection, and it offers a greater range for enjoyment and appreciation than, possibly, any other purely sensory thing”. And then, of course, there is the capacity to intoxicate, politely ignored by most wine writers but without which wine would hardly be where it is today.

As I see it, there are three kinds of wine book. First, there are those that give extensive lists of winemakers and “tasting notes” for a given area or kind of wine. The style of these notes often corresponds to the style of the wines their authors prefer. Robert Parker, for example – the most powerful and influential wine critic the world has ever seen, who has famously insured his nose for \$1million – writes loud and fruity descriptions of the loud and fruity wines that achieve his sought-after 90+ points (“it hits the palate with a crescendo of intense, ripe, concentrated black fruits interwoven with barrique, charcoal and burning ember-like flavors”). A contrasting English style is exemplified by Clive Coates MW (“Master of Wine” is a scholarly qualification more demanding than many PhDs). No self-respecting wine nerd should be without Coates’s mighty work, *The Wines of Burgundy* (2008). But like some of the Burgundies he recommends, Coates’s notes can be a little tight, reserved and challenging for the inexperienced consumer: “good fruit. Very fine”. The grand master of this style is the legendary Michael Broadbent (also an MW), who, now in his eighties, writes with all the finesse of the old claret he so admires. (My favourite Broadbent description, though, is of a sweet German Riesling as a “good elevenses wine”).

Tuscany’s Brunello di Montalcino is, along with Barolo (from Piedmont), one of Italy’s most long-lived and prestigious wines. Kerin O’Keefe’s authoritative book on Brunello is in the

wine to boost its colour and accessibility. This scandal has been dealt with and Brunello is now better than ever before, if O’Keefe is to be believed.

While Barolo is a place, Brunello is a grape. In fact, it is a clone of the Sangiovese grape, which is also used to make the once ubiquitous and highly variable Chianti, as well as the more consistent and expensive Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. Vino Nobile can be absolutely delicious, but Brunello di Montalcino is a wine that makes enthusiasts push the expressive power of language to its limits. Even the normally reserved O’Keefe lets herself go when describing Biondi Santi’s 2004 Brunello: “a true masterpiece, a monument to Brunello . . . layers of wild cherry, earth, and mineral and a hint of tobacco . . . A stunning, gripping wine with Grace Kelly-like finesse and polish”.

I must confess I don’t have much time for tasting notes. My eyes glaze over when I survey either Parker’s romantic rhapsodies or Broadbent’s classical sonatas. But the world of wine is baffling, full of opaque terminology, hyperbole, snobbery and downright deception. It is easy to make expensive mistakes. Many will have had the experience of coming across some quite stunning wine and wanting to repeat the experience – but finding too that it can be hard to locate the very same thing again. So we need a guide we can trust; and those once seduced by the delicate complexity of a perfect Brunello could hardly do better than O’Keefe’s book.

The second kind of wine book is one that has a point to make, or a story to tell. Has France changed its ways as a consequence of methods introduced from the New World? What is “natural wine”, and is it any good? What happened to the great cellars of Europe during the Second World War? How did the phylloxera louse destroy almost all of Europe’s vines in the late nineteenth century and how did Europe recover? (Answer: by importing immune rootstocks from America. Few people are aware that American roots are literally the basis of most European vines.) What matters most: grape, technology or what the French call *terroir* (according to O’Keefe, “the most abused term in winespeak”)? These are all real examples, but this last one – a favourite of all wine magazines – will surely run and run.

Ian Mount’s book on Malbec belongs in this second category. Until fairly recently the Malbec grape was known only for producing austere, teeth-staining wine from Cahors in south-west France. In fact, to most people it probably wasn’t even known for that, because few French regions identify their wines by their grape varieties – how many champagne drinkers know that Champagne is made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay? Cahors (known as the “black wine” in the Middle Ages) had its enthusiasts, but from the 1950s the production of Malbec declined all over France, and no one seemed to mind much.

What changed all this was the activity of a few ambitious winemakers in Argentina, and some accidents of Argentine history. Argentina had long been by far the biggest producer of wine in the Southern hemisphere, its output dwarfing that of South Africa and Australia combined. But its wine was, in the opinion of everyone who knew anything, simply rubbish: oxidized, dirty, brown and distinctly “tired”. As the hugely influential consultant Michel Rolland (a great friend and ally of Robert Parker) put it, “there wasn’t even one wine good enough for the export market”.

Rolland is one of the heroes of *The Vineyard at the End of the World*. Originally invited to Argentina by the winemaker Arnaldo Etchart in 1988, he there found dirty equipment, huge old barrels inhabited by bacteria, and underpruned vines with too many leaves and too much flavourless fruit. In *Mondovino* (2004), Jonathan Nossiter’s wonderful documentary about the world of wine, Etchart credits Rolland with changing the face of Argentine wine. Whether or not this is true, he did help introduce the methods that winemakers were using all over the world: cutting yields, harvesting later, using smaller and newer barrels and scrupulous hygiene. Perhaps if there is one general truth that characterizes modern winemaking it is the recognition that the wine is made in the vineyard as much as in the cellar: viticulture is as important as oenology.

Mount calls Nossiter’s film “controversial”, which is hardly surprising given its sceptical attitude to the influence of Parker and Rolland, whom Mount treats much more positively. One Argentine winemaker is quoted by Mount as giving the *Mondovino* view, however: “Michel Rolland makes his Merlot in a hundred different countries. He makes his wine in many parts of the world. You can’t blame him for it. But it’s not a wine with a regional personality”.

The chief hero of Mount’s book is Nicolás Catena, probably the most successful Argentine winemaker, and the man widely credited with discovering the potential of Malbec in Argentina. Catena, originally an economist, realized that the wines made from grapes planted in the hot lowlands in Mendoza were creating “cooked” wines lacking freshness, in part because they lacked natural acidity, killed by the heat. Traditional Argentine winemakers added what Mount

calls “shocking” amounts of acid in the winemaking process; but this kind of thing is anathema to modern winemakers. The best try to plant grapes that are optimally suited to their climates; and this is, of course, knowledge embodied in the traditions of the Old World. The tough and resilient Cabernet Sauvignon is suited to the warm Bordeaux climate, whereas the faster-developing Chardonnay has its natural home in chillier Burgundy.

With the assistance of his consultants Paul Hobbs and Jacques Lurton, Catena started planting at higher altitudes where the temperature was lower and the grapes could develop sugar, acid and other phenolics at their own pace. Eventually, the previously undistinguished Malbec was the grape that was found to work best there. Twenty years later, Catena’s wines are exported around the world, achieving high prices and high praise, and “Argentinian Malbec” is now a phrase as natural as “New Zealand Sauvignon”.

Jay McInerney’s *The Juice* is a wonderful example of a third kind of wine book. These are the books written by wine enthusiasts who write them just because they can write. A few professional wine writers are also superb writers – Hugh Johnson and Andrew Jefford are obvious examples – but most books in this category are written by amateurs, and are all the better for it. McInerney – yes, that Jay McInerney, of the novels *Bright Lights*, *Big City* (1984) and *Brightness Falls* (1992) – loves wine, and he writes beautifully about it. In fact, this is McInerney’s third book on wine in twelve years – a period during which he has published only two works of fiction, indicating perhaps the direction his career is heading in.

The book is a collection of short pieces originally written for the *New Yorker*, *House and Garden* and other magazines. They are all readable, often insightful and funny, but their unifying characteristic is something that all nerds, geeks and enthusiasts exhibit in their writing: the desire to inform and instruct, to tell people things they think they ought to know, whether or not they know them already, and whether or not they show any interest in knowing them. McInerney knows how confusing the whole wine world is, and he wants to guide us through it by telling us what we need to know. These are things like: what grapes French wines are made of and what their characteristics are; what makes a wine well-made; which wines age well and why; why the real nerds love Burgundy (seven of the essays are on these wines); what “terroir” might possibly mean, and so on.

McInerney does not talk in Parker-ese; there is not a tasting note in sight. He does gush a little sometimes, and he also compares a wine to Grace Kelly – this time a white Burgundy (Puligny-Montrachet). Nonetheless, he is a self-confessed wine geek. Trying to bring others down with him, he has a nice piece on Thomas Jefferson (“The Founding Wine Geek”). The book concludes with a captivating longer article on the now-defunct restaurant *el Bulli* and its wine list, which almost made me wish I had gone there.

Tim Crane is Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and the Philosophy editor of the *TLS*.