

Book Review: “Educating Peter”

Lettie Teague’s buddy book is a wine guide worth having

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If wines were movies, what would be your “Citizen Kane?” After all, one man’s genre-defining epic is another man’s “Roadhouse.” That’s the premise of Lettie Teague’s “Educating Peter: How I Taught a Famous Movie Critic the Difference Between Cabernet and Merlot.” Teague, an executive editor at Food & Wine magazine, spent a year weaning her dear friend Peter Travers off fatty Chardonnay and into the nuanced arms of Riesling and Pinot Noir.

Entertaining and easy to read, it is an ideal ride for the budding wine enthusiast: After the basics (40 pages of everything from grape varietals and sensory evaluation to wine vocabulary), Teague opens each chapter with a wine region’s brief history, significance, and contributions to the larger wine world. She drops a few names, suggests key producers in each region, and gets out. Folks who thirst for more than two pages on Austrian wines may want to look beyond Peter’s education.

Save for a weekend trip to Napa Valley, their romp is limited to New York City, where Teague shuffles Travers to dinners and private tastings with world-class winemakers. It is a buddy book that would be tired without Teague’s dry wit and Travers’ inflated persona. He is a critic, after all, accustomed to dining with Marty (as in Scorsese) and George (Clooney, to us). So he’s at home in the grand presence of Burgundian Laurent Drouhin, the Marchese Piero Antinori, and Argentina’s famed Susana Balbo. And when he finds his wine voice, it is earnest, and often linked to a film.

Some of Travers’ ah-ha moments: The delayed recognition of a great Bordeaux vintage reminds him of the film industry’s treatment of “Network.” German wines are romantic and intense, like Wim Wenders’ “Wings of Desire,” shot in Berlin; and Spanish Garnacha reminds him of Sergio Leone’s movies – spaghetti westerns that are exaggerated imitations of the American version.

Teague uses the analogy to discuss the larger issue of internationalization in wine – how wines made in older regions bear no resemblance to their predecessors. Fans of her monthly wine column, “Wine Matters,” will recognize her ability to inject wisdom in a simple and unadorned style, not to mention her penchant for bargains. She manages to explain German ripeness classifications in a paragraph, and even lets Travers drink a 1990 premier cru white Burgundy with foie gras, a destructive pairing.

Unfortunately, the book lacks a wine index, not to mention Teague’s illustrations. (Her first book, 1995’s “Fear of Wine: An Introductory Guide to the Grape” is filled with her humorous doodles. But we can see Travers swirling and sipping and evolving, and even though she is Miles and he is Jack, he is an eager and inquisitive one, and that makes “Educating Peter” at least a second growth Bordeaux. Or “Lord of the Rings.” You pick.

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