

BOOK REVIEW: "Red, White, and Drunk All Over"  
Natalie MacLean's wine-soaked journey is worth taking

By Jessica Yadegaran  
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Do readers really care about active yeasts and secondary fermentation? Or do they long to understand wine's seductions, and its otherworldly sense of place? Do they care about a region's production, or would they rather hear how a glass of juice resembles a curvy redhead, and why it makes them feel the way it does? You know, drunk.

This is among Natalie MacLean's first points in *Red, White, and Drunk All Over: A Wine-Soaked Journey from Grape to Glass*. A descendent of Celtic alcohol-lovers and livers, MacLean, a sommelier, writes first and foremost from a sensual place, dispelling many commonly held myths about wine writers: she doesn't spit a whole lot, and she loves the buzz just as much as she loves obsessing over the grape. The book is entertaining, informative and ideally suited for someone who has a working knowledge of wine.

From her first visits to Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and Domaine Leflaive to her honest appraisal of biodynamics in Burgundy - she's on the fence - MacLean's observations are cerebral and spot-on, and her language both beguiling and accessible: "Some wines will always taste like a lost argument or a long embrace." The book lacks an index, but is part-travelogue, part-memoir. You learn as she learns.

From Burgundy, MacLean leads us to the cellars of Champagne, winning points with readers who might not be familiar with the grande dames who have kept that region running. We meet Gerard Liger-Belair, a professor of bubbly at the University of Liger-Belair before taking off for the land of Zinfandel, and MacLean's internship with Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon Vineyards.

It's hard to decide if it's MacLean's colorful prose, pop wine sensibility or portraits of winerati that make her book so readable. The latter is definitely the case when it comes to Grahm, who, through MacLean's eyes, comes across very much like one of the wild-eyed Ralph Steadman drawings that grace his bottles. In other words, spot-on.

The book quiets down a bit when MacLean gets practical. She pulls a nine to five at two wine stores - The Jug Shop in San Francisco and Discovery Wines in New York City - and even does sommelier duty at Le Baccara in Quebec (yes, she drips). She shows you how to throw a tasting party.

She takes on Georg Riedel and Robert Parker and devotes too much of the book's denouement, sacrificing her flow, in my opinion, to wine auction number-crunching, but makes up for it by ending on a lavish dinner with Jay McInerney, the 1980s cocaine-novelist-turned wine writer, who tells her: "Wine makes me more thoughtful. I always want to taste the next thing so it slows me down; I pace myself. Wine saved me from rehab."

And MacLean saved us from another predictable wine book.