

Book review: "A Wine Miscellany"

Graham Harding's jaunt is filled with 'wow' factor wine knowledge

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Did you know that the world's oldest single vine is in the Slovenian city of Maribor? Or that the Italian Ministry of Justice supports a Roman jail's production of Novello wines to the tune of \$600,000? And how about this: the world's largest wine list belongs to Bern's Steak House in Florida. The restaurant stocks half a million bottles and employs ten wine waiters.

Gems like these make up Graham Harding's "A Wine Miscellany: A Jaunt Through the Whimsical World of Wine." Harding, chairman of the Oxford Wine Club and director of a specialist wine importer, compiles a thorough and entertaining collection, sprinkling facts and lore on the history, culture, business and science of making and savoring wine.

The small, hardcover book is appropriate for any wine enthusiast, as even connoisseurs can learn something from Harding's comments and observations. He starts with the origin (Persia or China, around 7,000 BC) and spread of wine to the oldest wine families (Goulaines, Riscasolis, Antnoris) and the first wine sellers, which were women.

Harding arranges these brief, bright entries so they flow seamlessly: you go from the advent of cork and cork woes to the death of cork in Grand Central Station, as staged in a wake held by Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm and officiated by Jancis Robinson MW. Harding is particularly fond of the Santa Cruz winemaker, as Grahm and his eccentric ways pop up in numerous entries.

The author follows a similar sequence with label lore (the first paper label was written by botanist Pier Antonio Micheli in 1700 on a bottle of Verdicchio) and wine health. He writes not only of Resveratrol pills but about Paradoxe Blanc, a French white wine deliberately enriched with antioxidants. Another entry links the altitude of a vineyard to healthier wines, suggesting that higher levels of UV light stimulate the synthesis of polyphenols. A Sardinian study points to the number of centenarians in the Nuoro region as evidence.

But it's not all quirky wine minutiae. There are handy lessons, from the names of bottle sizes and the price of vineyard land (Napa is \$70,000 per acre) to what flavors various oak sources impart and fascinating tidbits from history. For instance, Thomas Jefferson was so obsessed with wine that he spent \$3,000 of his \$25,000 annual salary on the likes of Chateau Margaux and Chateau d'Yquem. Meanwhile, he paid his 11 servants a total of \$2,700.

Ultimately, discovering your favorite wine factoid (that women are better tasters, perhaps?) is the biggest reason to read "A Wine Miscellany."

