



Inventing Wine: A New History of One of the World's Most Ancient Pleasures

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Wine is some 8,000 years old, but the wines that people buy and drink today are for the most part quite new. Modern wine exists as the product of multiple revolutions scientific, industrial, social, even ideological. Though the same basic chemical substance as its ancient forebear, it is in every other respect very different. Contemporary wines both taste unlike those from earlier eras and are valued in novel ways. For many thousands of years, wine was a basic need. Today it is a cultural choice, and the reasons why millions of people choose it tells us as much about them as about the contents of bottle or glass. In Inventing Wine, Paul Lukacs chronicles wine's transformation from a source of sustenance to a consciously pursued pleasure, in the process offering a new way to view the present as well as the past.

Inventing Wine: A New History of One of the World's Most Ancient Pleasures Details

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Dmitri says

This is a good introductory book on the history of wine, both from a cultural perspective as well an overview of the major developments in the industry. Coming into this book, I was fairly well-versed in modern wine, but knew little about its history. One of the central topics of the book is that wine as we know it today is nothing like the wine of the past and was consumed for different reasons. Commentators today often talk warmly about returning to "traditional" wine, but it is surprising how recent most of these traditions are. True, vines have been growing in certain places since antiquity, but the focus on quality and identity is something very recent. The oldest traditions were only established in the Middle Ages by monks in Burgundy and Germany, who scouted out the best locations and chose the varietals that still dominate today. Other famous regions, like Bordeaux, Piedmont and Rioja only created traditions in the 19th century, a mere 200 years ago!

Previously, I imagined that wine was always something for the elite, while the masses drank beer. I learned that this was not always true. In the Mediterranean countries where vines grew plentifully, wine was a staple even for the poorer class. The wine they drank, however, must have been sour and thin. It was not drank for its taste, but rather as a source of potable water, calories, and of course as a relief from human suffering. It is also fun to imagine what the higher class drank throughout the ages. Before the invention of glass bottles, sweet, concentrated wines were prized, but what's fascinating is that ancient connoisseurs were more interested in what flavorings were used, especially resin, than the quality of the grape itself.

About modern wine, the author is refreshingly optimistic. Wine aficionados often bemoan that globalization and wine critics have shifted consumer preferences to flamboyant, concentrated wines that taste very similar. Lukacs is not so easy to lay blame, and points out that these wines are popular because they are easy to appreciate, approachable when young, and consistent. Even the worst wine today is of high quality, much better than what was available to even royalty not long ago, due to progress in science and competition in the marketplace. And despite the global homogenization of style, the variety available is greater than it has ever been.

These are just some of the interesting ideas I found in the book. In regards to some bad reviews here, I agree that the author can be repetitive at times, but that's only to emphasize key concepts. There is more than enough thought-provoking material to recommend it, at least for someone that is new to the subject of wine history.

Mackenzie says

While I found the subject matter quite interesting, I thought the author relied too heavily on repetition in order to make a point.

Christina Boyle says

Basically the punchline of the book is that humans like to party, dating back to antiquity. If something is rotting or oozing and even tastes disgusting, humans will still put it in their mouth if the hooch packs a punch.

The author is a wine judge and provides a truly interesting overview of wine history through medieval times (ha ha ha). And then the book becomes ambitious and tries to cover a whole mess of other topics but it is more survey-like. It was a fascinating read!

Mattie says

I generally enjoy these sort of cultural/anthropological histories taking a closer look at some particular piece of life/culture. This was no exception. Fun read and learned some things I didn't know. My biggest criticism has to do with Lukacs' writing quirks. He overused certain words and an awkward "this, because that" formulation. I think Lukacs, the book and the reader would have been better served with better editing. Also, there is a set of end notes, but the notes aren't indicated in the text, so you don't know when to look for notes. What the hell is up with that?

M Christopher says

A very interesting read on the history of wine. If you ever thought that wine drinkers through the ages were enjoying the taste of wine in the same way oenophiles of today do, think again! Our modern experience of wine is just a couple of hundred years old, dating from the popularization of the glass bottle and advances in chemistry and biology that allowed winemakers to understand how to stabilize and preserve their product. Human beings have drunk fermented grape juice for millennia, but only as an alternative to dirty water and to get their buzz on. The gustatory pleasures of the grape were rare events indeed until quite recently.

Lukacs does a fine, if occasionally repetitive, job of tracing this history and of telling the story of the explosion of the fine wine market in the post-WW2 years. The most obvious omission is much detail on the story of American wine, probably because he has two books on this subject already on the market. This book is good enough to make me strongly consider adding those to my library to complete the story.

Howard Cincotta says

There are certain subjects that I only pretend to really care about (real estate), others that I am content to admire from afar (architecture), and a few that I do care about but never seem to achieve any real liftoff. Wine is one. Well, I still can't discourse knowledgeably about varietal distinctions, but I know a helluva lot more about the subject after reading *Inventing Wine*.

The main takeaway from this engaging history is that, for most of human history, human beings have drunk sour vinegary wine because a) they had no choice, and b) vintners hadn't figured out how to preserve and transport the stuff.

Lukas explores the origins of wine and the reasons that, unlike beer and spirits, wine acquired both a sacred and profane identity. Generations also drank truly wretched-tasting wine – laced with everything from ash to

honey to cut the acid taste – because the polluted water around them would likely sicken them. Gradually, however, winemakers discovered that oxygen was the enemy of wine – and that sealed casks and bottles were the trick making wines that could travel and still taste reliably consistent.

Lukas takes us into the contemporary age of “two-buck” Chuck and boutique wines, perhaps with more detail than the general reader might need. (Want the details about the evolution of New Zealand’s wine industry? It’s here, along with that of California, Chile, and Australia.)

Now, I’ll have that glass of the Riesling, please.

Vicki says

The author did his research very well, this is a very thorough history of wine. It went into too much detail for my tastes and the author seemed to repeat certain topics over and over again. It was very interesting but I did end up skimming over certain parts. It is definitely worth reading if you are interested in the history of wine but his editors should have helped him to cut back the lengthy by about 1/4 and it would have been a better read.

Kimberly Cheng says

Definitely a very thorough description of wine through the ages. I personally felt that while the subject matter was interesting, the book was rather repetitive and very Anglo-centric. The book was very focused on Western European and its I suppose colonial influence on wines. I was a little disappointed that other forms of wine that were also 'invented' weren't included. There are other forms of wine that were invented throughout history that were not made of grapes - plum wine for example. If this book is claiming to discuss the invention of wine in a global context, I would have expected these other types - e.g. Asian wines - to be discussed in more depth or at least acknowledged.

Matt Heavner says

I'm not enough of a wine snob to fully enjoy this book, but I did still get a lot out of it. I've read similar books on beer and coffee -- I did find it interesting that this is definitely written "from a wine snob's perspective" (it totally makes sense). If you enjoy wine, you'll enjoy this book. It is a really well written book and it is clear that the author has a tremendous depth of knowledge. I don't think it is a "intro to wine" in that I feel the more you already know about wine the more you can appreciate this book. According to the author's discussion this is a bit of revised look at wine history -- wine went through a very revolutionary history and is not a "great tradition" that has slowly evolved.

One example of this was on 180 in a discussion on the founding fathers of the U.S. They credit Ben Franklin with "God loves to see us happy, and therefore he gave us wine." -- now I've seen this quote before in reference to beer. I don't think there is any translation issue... Maybe Franklin came up with such a great line that he used it on everything: beer, chocolate, coffee, foot massages, :) I'm sure he said lots of things.. I did have to go look up and found some discussion on the "urban legend" part:

<http://urbanlegends.about.com/b/2008/...> Anyway, this was a very minor part of the book.

I found another great Ben Franklin non-quote (bacteria wasn't called bacteria when Franklin was alive!!) -- but for your enjoyment: "In wine there is wisdom, in beer there is Freedom, in water there is bacteria." -- not Ben Franklin!

Irina says

Some academic books go out of their way to transcend the academy. They'll bust out narrative tools like characters, emotion, twists, varied pacing or just some funny language. This isn't one of those books, though.

andrew said says

Lukacs likes to refer to the "Lake of Wine" that Europe experienced in the 19th century- wherein too much wine was produced resulting in an oversupply of cheap vin ordinaire- which is an apt analogy for this repetitive wide-but-shallow recanting of the history of wine. If you want to know what wine tasted like prior to the 19th C, it tasted like sour vinegar. There, I just saved you reading the first 2/3rds of the book where he reminds you repeatedly that wine prior to 150 years ago spoiled easily and winemakers did anything they could to keep it fresh. The final third is slightly more interesting as it deals with modern wine practices and the rise of winemaking on a global scale. Rather than talk about the particulars of a certain veritable or movement, Lukacs spends much of the remainder of the book listing the names of famous vintners and their chateaux.

Beyond mocking the shortcomings of beer, spirits and any other beverage, he also derides the poor quality of wine in developing nations all while writing in a haughty professorial manor. (Ex: writing about the various bacteria effecting wine "The different infestations made a great deal of allegedly fine wine taste old-fashioned because ordinaire." [sic]) Yet his best analysis for the rise in popularity of the "International Style" of Bordeaux-type blends boils down to 'well, people seemed to like it (paraphrasing.) Like bad wine, this book should have been sent to the distillery and made into something stronger and denser. Perhaps a magazine article.

Kevin Kizer says

If there's one thing to take away from this book it is this: Until Louis Pasteur discovered that yeast aids fermentation and bacteria causes spoilage, the vast majority of wine throughout the ages would have tasted god-awful unless it was very, very fresh. Most often this wine would've tasted like vinegar, which is the end result of the natural fermentation process for grapes.

So for roughly 7,800 years, people the world over fortified themselves with a liquid that usually tasted downright nasty. Sure, they tried all kinds of things – adding sugar and spices and anything they could think of – but when it came down to it, they drank a lot of, well, vinegar.

While today we naturally link food with wine that in and of itself is a relatively modern contrivance. In fact, what became the first restaurants were created specifically for wine drinking but then expanded to include

food. The truth of the matter is for centuries, people young and old drank wine day in and day out, from sun up to well-past sundown. And it wasn't just because of the righteous buzz they got from the vinegary fortifier. It was because drinking wine was safer than drinking water, which could very well be contaminated. If they did drink water, they would add a good measure of wine to it in order to help make it safer (again, this is before people knew about bacteria and its effects).

Over the centuries, winemakers struggled to find ways to improve their wines and make them last longer. Thankfully, scientists like Pasteur and Emile Peynaud helped pave the way by giving them greater control of their wine which enables them to create high-quality wines all around the world. This is a rollicking look at the history (and science) behind winemaking and how it has been reinvented over the centuries and well worth the time of any wine lover.

Raymond says

A solid introduction to the history of wine from ancient times until the present. I'd recommend this as a primer before seeking out more in-depth works on specific regions, periods and types of wine.

Trish says

Very enjoyable read!

John says

This is an excellent history of wine, since its earliest, around 8-10,000 years ago in the Trans-Caucasus. The main take-aways are that until recently, wine was an awful, astringent necessity because water was polluted everywhere in Europe. The other is that the "heritage" aspect of wine, especially for fine wine in France, is an invention. (Where did all those endless Chateaux come from anyway?). Beyond that, it is a very-well researched work from a fairly objective standpoint. Unlike some readers, I did not find it snobbish at all.

What it is not, and there are other good books for this, is a guide to varietals, an in-depth exploration of current wine regions, or a how-to-appreciate text (for that, try Hugh Johnson's "How To Enjoy Your Wine").

This is a great addition to a wine lover's book collection, not a replacement for other good wine books.
