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Memoirs by contemporary wine authors

Alice Feiring, Neal I. Rosenthal and Sergio Esposito affirm the importance of the grape.

By Patrick Comiskey, Special to The Times

Three recently published books suggest that an emerging literary form, the wine memoir, is gathering momentum. Each book—Alice Feiring’s “The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization,” Neal I. Rosenthal’s “Reflections of a Wine Merchant” and Sergio Esposito’s “Passion on the Vine”—recounts a life or a wine-soaked slice of a life, and in each case wine is more than just a leitmotif.

Wine is a muse, a focal point and a life pursuit that provides purpose and adventure. The authors have much to say about drinking their favorite beverage, but leave the reader with the impression that wine has given their lives meaning and direction beyond the glass.

Answering the call

Each author—Feiring is a respected wine and travel writer, Rosenthal is a wine importer, Esposito a retail merchant—writes about coming to a wine-related profession out of a sense of wonder, about how some wine, somewhere, called to them with its mystery and complexity.

Each begins a wine career with a convert’s zeal, coming to grips over time with the banality of commerce, the reductive inclinations of critics (one in particular) and the introduction of technological advances that threatens to eradicate traditional winemaking practices, the practices these writers collectively believe give a wine honest expression and character.

The most radical voice is Alice Feiring’s. Feiring is America’s most vocal advocate for natural wines, wines grown and made without significant additives—no store-bought yeasts, no oak-chips, no coloring agents, or practices that obscure or distort a wine’s natural expression of place. How she got to this point is the subject of her book.

As she tells it, Brooklyn-born Feiring, from an early age, perceived the world through tastes and smells. Her aromatically inclined maternal grandfather inspired her to enter the world, as she says, “nose first.”

In the 1990s, as Feiring’s writing career took her to wine regions all over the world, she found that the wines that

moved her were becoming increasingly scarce. In country after country, her search dead-ended, and at each cul-de-sac, she found a culprit: wine critic Robert Parker.

Parker’s predilection for big, powerful, fruit-forward oaky wines has driven winemakers to create wines “that have such concentrated power that delicacy and minerality are overpowered,” she writes. It became her mission to seek the wines that inspire her, and to expose the ones that don’t as sellouts to the power of the Parker rating system.

The great virtue of “The Battle for Wine and Love” is its unflinching look at what rings false in the wine world today—the packaged, crinkle-cut uniformity of mass-production wines, the glossy allure of wine marketing and the sometimes tawdry ways in which producers believe their own hype.

At the heart of her account is a phone interview with Parker, during which Feiring more than holds her own as she confronts his almost delusional false modesty and eventual defensiveness.

“My problem isn’t with you,” she tells Parker, “but with producers and marketers who court your palate and change their ways because getting that score is so important.” She just wants room for the wines she loves to coexist with his. Needless to say, she isn’t able to convert her ideological rival, but in this passage the book’s message is lucid and convincing.

Feiring can come off as a bit of a scold in spots, but I, for one, am glad to have her scolding, cajoling, insisting that the wine in her glass be “real” and not “concocted.”

“There is hope,” she writes. “We are on the brink of a revolution, a renaissance. The best and most vibrant real wines are about to be born.”

Vibrant, real wines are on the mind of Neal Rosenthal in his memoir, “Reflections of a Wine Merchant.” Rosenthal left a career as an attorney in the late ‘70s to pursue a life in wine, first as a retailer in Manhattan and subsequently as an importer, bringing in compelling, never-before-imported wines, mostly from France and Italy.

The painstaking process of building that portfolio, finding doors to open and winning over mistrustful French



Photo by Bob Chamberlin (Los Angeles Times)

APPRECIATION: Alice Feiring, Neal I. Rosenthal and Sergio Esposito describe their journeys through the world of wine, from the start of their careers to where they are and how they feel today.

*vigneron*s and getting their referrals, is the book's principal story line.

On its surface, "Reflections" resembles the memoir of another American wine merchant, "Adventures on the Wine Route," by Kermit Lynch, published in 1990. Both men are groundbreaking importers of small-production wines from France and Italy. Both narratives are devoted to illuminating the traditions of some of the more thrilling new guard in the Old World.

But where Lynch tells vivid stories in vibrant, cheerful prose, Rosenthal's narrative seems obscured by a thick mist. His prose is overbearing and stilted, and rather than tell a good tale, Rosenthal prefers to pontificate, to demonstrate his importance at the expense of competitors and lesser producers, and to give lengthy illustrations of his discernment and good taste. The scene he's describing too often is obscured by the shadow he casts.

Many passages are devoted to the author's irritation—with wine critics, with fellow importers, with producers who stray or heirs who cannot toe the line, with an American wine public that is misguided or impressionable.

Except for the rare consumer who can see the world the way Rosenthal does, "the stubborn core of wine people," he writes, are people "who can't get enough of concoctions that thumb their noses at proper society." This gets tiresome.

The wines of Rosenthal Wine Merchant are beyond reproach; the memoirs of Rosenthal, the wine merchant, seem mostly self-serving.

Remembering meals

In Sergio Esposito's memoir, "Passion on the Vine," meals are the centerpiece, the linchpin of memory. It is hard to read a page without developing pangs of hunger and thirst.

Esposito owns Italian Wine Merchants, a wine shop in Manhattan that serves practically as a temple for Italian wine in that city. He makes frequent sojourns to Italy, to stock his shelves and to discover the secrets of Italian winemaking, and his accounts of these trips make up the core of the book.

It begins in the early '70s, in Barra, the suburb of Naples where Esposito was born, and carries on after a few years to Albany, N.Y., where he immigrated as a child.

Most of his childhood memories involve meals, where, surrounded by family, he devoured "heaps of spaghetti with a sauce of crushed fresh tomatoes; poached white fish dressed in lemon, olive oil and parsley; fried miniature artichokes; fluffy, anchovy-battered zucchini and cauliflower." I could go on, but it wouldn't be fair. You'd have to run to the kitchen.

His love of wine comes from the same table, where he took tiny sips from his beloved Uncle Aldo's glass. "Still today," he writes, "I remember those wines like I remember the smell of cigar—like musty cooked apples—on Zio Aldo's fingers."

Each chapter of "Passion on the Vine" takes you to a different corner of Italy (as well as to Slovenia) and the strongholds of the country's most iconoclastic winemakers: the 500-year-old farm of Bartolo Mascarello in Barolo, the Slovenian dungeon where Josko Gravner has buried traditional clay amphorae to make his ancient-style wines, and the fecund gardens that intrude upon the Brunello vineyards of Franco Soldera.

On its own, Esposito admits, Italian wine can be difficult to understand. But through loving, mouthwatering detail and portraits of unforgettable characters, wine comes alive in these pages in a quintessentially Italian way, "intuitively, emotionally, without pretension or over analysis."

A lifetime of practice has made Esposito one of Italy's most articulate and passionate wine promoters, and this book is liable to persuade readers to explore his path, too.