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Good Wine Reading With Mellow Aftertaste

By Eric Asimov

GASOLINE? Shooting past \$4 a gallon. Airfare? Similar trajectory. The dollar? Stuck at the bottom. Summer? A shady spot in the park and a good book is sounding awfully attractive.

For wine lovers, a raft of absorbing new books will help ease the economic blues.

The season's wine reading cannot get off to a better start than with **The Billionaire's Vinegar: The Mystery of the World's Most Expensive Bottle of Wine** (Crown, \$24.95), by Benjamin Wallace, one of the rare books on wine that transcends the genre.

Mr. Wallace, a journalist, traces the murky history of the Jefferson wines, bottles of Bordeaux said to have belonged to Thomas Jefferson that were auctioned off in the 1980s for extraordinary prices. Their provenance, though, is impossible to establish. Are they real? Or part of an elaborate fraud?

In his deftly told account, Mr. Wallace leads us into the world of the big, swinging collectors, men (invariably) who measure their stature by the size of their cellars and the number of very old wines they've made their own.

It's peopled with outsized characters, like the eager-to-believe auctioneer and writer Michael Broadbent, whose access to the wines of the superwealthy depends in part on how he assesses their collections; Hardy Rodenstock, a buccaneer with an uncanny ability to turn up precious old bottles; Bill Koch, a billionaire American yachtsman with an urge to litigate; and Lloyd Flatt, an aerospace consultant with an eye patch who, when his collection outgrew his New Orleans town house, simply bought the house next door for his wine.

Though the story is the collector's world, the subject is also greed and how it can contort reality to fit one's desires. It's been optioned for Hollywood. I hope the movie's as good as the book.



Tony Centicola/The New York Times

Curl Up and Sip Greed, mystery, grandiosity: some new wine books have these and more.

Clive Coates's monumental new work, **The Wines of Burgundy** (University of California Press, \$60), is not the same sort of page turner, but it's a solid, in-depth reference on Burgundy—the best, in fact, since Mr. Coates's own "Côte d'Or" (University of California Press, 1997).

Mr. Coates, a British wine writer who now makes his home in Burgundy, is perfectly placed to navigate the dauntingly complicated curlicues of Burgundian vineyard organization, viticulture, winemaking and producers. Aside from thorough revisions and updates since "Côte d'Or," he has also added chapters on Chablis and the Côte Chalonnaise.

Writing in short, pungent bites, Mr. Coates comes at Burgundy by looking at the vineyards, the producers and the wines themselves. Those well-versed in Burgundy may disagree with some of his assessments, but for most people "The Wines of Burgundy" is an invaluable starting point.

The authors of three very personal new wine books share the feeling that the best

wines are made as naturally as possible with a sense of place, an approach they believe is threatened by globalization. Yet each makes a point in a way as distinctive as are the wines.

Neal I. Rosenthal is a longtime importer and merchant whose first book, **Reflections of a Wine Merchant: On a Lifetime in the Vineyards and Cellars of France and Italy** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$24), makes the case in sober and measured prose for the importance of individual, artisanal wines of place. Like "Adventures on the Wine Route" (North Point Press, 1988) by the importer and merchant Kermit Lynch, with whom Mr. Rosenthal has a surprisingly rivalrous relationship, "Reflections" takes us along for the ride as Mr. Rosenthal samples wines, meets winemakers and finds that trust and honesty can be in short supply.

Time and again he must negotiate a generational shift among the producers he loves, underlining that while vineyards and terroir may outlive the individual, they also depend on the human element. Like Mr. Rosenthal's wines,

“Reflections” is subtle, nuanced and rewarding.

Sergio Esposito is also a wine merchant, an owner of Italian Wine Merchants in New York City. He was born in Naples, where he lived happily until economic circumstances forced young Sergio and his family in 1974 to immigrate to Albany to live with relatives. At first Sergio could not bridge the gap between his life in Italy, filled with the brightness of fresh food, family and wine on the table, and the dour, gray, bland world of Albany.

So begins a life of trying to blend the brilliance and authenticity of Italian culture with American energy and vitality.

Now grown up, Mr. Esposito embarks on a trip through Italy with his wife, two children and his parents, visiting idiosyncratic winemakers like Josko Gravner, Ales Kristancic of Movia, Bartolo and Maria-Theresa Mascarello and Gianfranco Soldera.

In the resulting book, **Passion on the Vine: A Memoir of Food, Wine and Family in the Heart of Italy** (Broadway Books, \$24.95), Mr. Esposito and his co-writer, Justine Van Der Leun, have constructed a warm, funny and surprising story that brings to life Italy’s blend of old and new without sentimental stereotypes.

Of the three books, **The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World from Parkerization** (Harcourt, \$23), by Alice Feiring, is more polemic than measured memoir.

Ms. Feiring is an uncompromising judge of wine and people who can no more stomach a lover’s preference for a wine she abhors than she can the presence of a microwave in her kitchen. “I have close friends with different politics,” she writes, “yet somehow, different palates seemed a greater barrier to overcome.”

For someone with such definite opinions, Ms. Feiring is both charmingly insecure and, as her title indicates,

satirically grandiose. By Parkerization she means the influential effect of the wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr., who for the most part seems to prize the wines that Ms. Feiring most detests. Will the stubborn, idiosyncratic winemakers she loves have no choice but to knuckle under to the Parker influence?

Nothing is that simple, and Ms. Feiring knows it, but she writes as if she does not want to believe it. “Those were the pre-Parker years,” she writes at one point, “and Burgundy and the wine world were innocent.” As if!

If you are not put off by some of her stylistic tics, like assigning nicknames—Owl Man, Skinny and Mr. Bow Tie among them—Ms. Feiring is entertaining and passionate. And she knows a great wine when she tastes one.