

THE DAILY SENTINEL

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Three books worthy of the attention of wine lovers

By Dave Buchanan

Flowers, grapevines and books all blossom in the spring, and three recently published books with a wine motif are deserving of some attention.

Two are memoirs, Alice Feiring's "The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World From Parkerization," and Sergio Esposito's "Passion on the Vine," while the third is a documentary about one of America's leading wine families, Julia Flynn Siler's "The House of Mondavi: The Fall of an American Wine Dynasty."

The two memoirs recount how one person discovered the beauty of wine, not only what it offers the individual but what it means to society and culture.

Feiring, a well-known travel and wine writer and author of the blog *In Vino Veritas*, might well be this country's most vocal advocate of traditional winemaking, that is, those made with the least interference on the part of the winemaker and that preserve the individual characteristics of the grape and the region.

She also abhors those wines made with an increasing worldwide uniformity, the result of winemakers turning away from tradition in order to appease the palate of Robert Parker, who many consider the most-influential wine critic ever.

Parker's preference for powerful, fruit-driven wines and his well-known 100-point rating system, in which a few points up or down can mean the difference of hundreds of dollars for a bottle of wine, seemingly has driven winemakers to adopt such practices as using special yeasts, color stabilizers or additives, or, as being purported in parts of Europe, adding non-approved varietals in order to boost color and flavors.

Feiring found herself increasingly frustrated in her search for true wines, those that retain their delicacy and natural sense, and she turns to small "grassroots" producers, who she thinks may be the hope of the future.

She also is (I think) the inventor of the marvelous term "spoofulated," which refers to a wine that has been, as she says in an interview with Raincoast Books, "tricked

up with chemistry and process to look like the real thing, but it's not."

Sergio Esposito, who co-authored "Passion on the Vine" with Justine van der Leun, owns Italian Wine Merchants, a Manhattan wine shop, which he keeps well-stocked with frequent journeys to his home country (he was born in Barra, a suburb of Naples).

While this book recounts many of his travels to Italy, it also tells of the roles wine, food and family played in his personal development. Throughout the book, Esposito's heartfelt writing takes the reader to parts of Italy where you meet some unforgettable winemakers (Josko Gravner buries traditional clay amphorae in his dungeonlike basement to make his ancient-style wines) and unforgettable meals, for like most Italians, Esposito considers wine and food a natural part of the family life.

Judith Flynn Siler's book documents how one family, led by iconic figurehead Robert Mondavi, carved a wine empire that rivaled any ever created only to lose nearly everything because of internal squabbles, poor business dealings and personal failings.

The book is even more timely now with the recent death of Mondavi at 94. It was he, after starting the Robert Mondavi Winery in 1966, who campaigned across the country and worldwide that American wine was worthy of a place alongside the best Europe could produce.

It wasn't quick in coming, but eventually he was proven correct, and today the U.S. wine trade is internationally respected and exceeds \$22 billion a year. For Mondavi watchers, the stunning blow came in 2003 when the family sold its empire to the mega-giant Constellation Brands and lost the rights to its own name.

Robert Mondavi's legacy will long be felt in the California and American wine industry. Flynn Siler's well-documented and well-spun story recounts how Mondavi and his family reached fantastic heights and how they tumbled from grace.