

INTRODUCTION

About This Book and “Postcards from the Harvest”

“Some scientists believe humans evolved to enjoy alcohol.” This tantalizing title introduces an article about Professor Dudley’s research. Dudley, a biomechanics researcher, posits that humans appear evolutionarily attracted to alcohol because it often brings a nutritional reward. Overripe fruit naturally ferments, so where there’s alcohol, there’s nutrition. While skeptics persist in criticizing this hypothesis, it certainly proves intriguing.¹

The word "oenology" comes from the Greek, the study of the vine. In fact, the science of oenology encompasses what happens in the vineyards, the chemistry, biology, and physics of growing grapes. To truly know wine, you need to fully understand the principals of how climate, soil, location, and other factors affect how the grapes will grow. You also need to know what will go on in the laboratory—the cellar where your grapes will become wine. You need to know how to prepare the grapes, how to ferment, why certain woods are better than others are for barrel ageing, and what to avoid if you want your wines to stay “clean.” To fully appreciate wine, its history and the culture of the places that produce it are also essential.

In Europe, ancient tradition links wine to that of being a “free spirit.” Wine began, in many respects in Mesopotamia. There is archeological evidence of vessels from the earliest period of civilization that show traces of their being used to store fermented grape juice. In ancient polytheistic cultures, the god of wine held an important place in the pantheon. In the summer of 2009, the Art Institute of Chicago held a fascinating exhibit of “The Case for Wine” where it traced representations of gods related to wine, the history of wine through antiquity. Dionysus, god of wine for the Greeks, is often shown on vessels and held great importance during festivals. After the Christian era, the Catholic Church took up the position of holding the knowledge of wine making. Not surprisingly, many of the most sacred vessels and implements used in the Church are somehow related to wine. In fact, in Catholicism, wine is not only represented by a god; but it becomes God and is shared among the faithful.

You need to know some history, geography, soil, and climate in order to understand wine. If I talk about Bordeaux, I can tell you it’s usually a more tannic wine than Burgundy. But, that makes no difference

to you unless you have some idea of tannins, how they affect your taste for wine, and which wines tend to have tannins. So, right there, we are dealing with chemistry and botany. My statement also makes little sense unless you know where those two regions of France are located. Still further, if you really want to understand those two wines, why these two regions have such different wine personalities, you need to go back to the history of Burgundy, ruled by Dukes and with vineyards parceled off during the French Revolution in 1789 and immediately after. You also need to go back to the 12th century, to when Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry II of England and brought with her the best dowry ever: all of the Bordeaux region and its wines. History DOES matter if you're really going to understand wine.

The idea for this book was born during my years teaching Geography 350. I learned there are some fundamental misunderstandings about wine, or basic difficulties in getting to know wine. In the course I've tried to answer students' questions; now I put those answers in a book for everyone. There seems to be more interest in wine than when I started teaching the course. Statistics say that for the first time, wine has surpassed beer as the number one beverage in the United States. I hope, therefore, this book helps you answer some of your wine questions.

This book meanders at times. That's deliberate. I will backtrack to reinforce information. Think about this book as a leisurely stroll down millennia of one of the most pleasant inventions humankind has ever produced. Along the way, we'll gather much information about wine. The best strategy: consider this book a kind of conversation about wine between the two of us and hopefully we'll learn much about wine together.

This book is intended for the beginner and anyone else who has just a few more questions on wine. Why, though, ten questions in the title and not another number? Western culture seems to do a whole lot of important things in tens: Ten Commandments, for example. Also, DePaul is one of those universities where the year is divided into quarters of ten weeks plus an exam week rather than semesters; so, ten questions corresponds to the weeks of the course. Also, ten represents an easy number to grasp. In ten questions, I am able to encompass many of the central ideas necessary for understanding wine (history, geography, etc).

Here are the ten questions we're going to try to address in this book:

1. **Why are we drinking Red Zinfandel?**
This chapter introduces wine science. To learn about the product itself, we will look at the essentials of how wine is made versus other alcoholic beverages.
2. **Is “Shiraz” really “Syrah?”**
This chapter explores grapes, the essential ingredient of wine. You can make fortified beverages out of just about any fruit that has sugar since the sugar converts to alcohol, but only the beverage made from grapes is really “wine.”
3. **What is “*terroir*?”**
This chapter outlines soil, climate, and other phenomena that affect wine. Grapes grow in particular places and where they grow gives an identity to the wine they will become. The French have a mystical term for that, “*terroir*,” and we see whether this term is justified or overused.
4. **Where in the world is Maipo?**
This chapter maps out the world of wine and geography, really the crux of the course that I teach. The science, grapes, *terroir*, history, and culture that make up wine, as well as a lot of the business of wine, depends on where the wine is produced. Geography is at the core of this work.
5. **What’s so important about Eleanor of Aquitaine?**
This chapter gives historical background on wine and why it’s important. When you are talking about wine, a very special agricultural product, you must relate to the history of the region where the wine was produced. Wine has variously been understood as a product with mystical powers, something of great monetary value, and a source of national pride, aspects covered in this chapter.
6. **Do we need to remember “puttonyos?”**
This chapter delves into wine and culture. The same grapes grown in one part of the world may have a very different flavor, or even character, depending on the culture that produced the wine. Culture, both capital “C” and small “c”

come into the mix when evaluating and getting to really know wine.

7. Do we have to know how to pronounce all these foreign words?

This chapter will help us read labels and understand those “foreign words.” Hopefully this part of the process is both fun and useful, and it shows how a bit of knowledge of a foreign language can open many doors—or help understand lots of wine bottles.

8. How did they get raspberries in here?

This chapter discusses tasting wine, and pairing it with food. Many cultures serve wine with meals and the table becomes the nexus for conversation, perhaps, in fact, about wine. So, information about how to pair wine and food seems of great interest. We will give some very basic guidelines so that you can go forth confident in trying new ways to enjoy wine.

9. Why does this wine cost more than that one?

This chapter explores wine and money, always a fascinating question. Once you get right down to it, wine is also a consumer product like any other, so why does a Pinot Noir cost more, often, than a Chardonnay (depending on where it comes from)? Or why does a bottle from 2000 of the same Bordeaux cost more than one from 2001? Or how about two different producers, neighbors perhaps, who sell their wine for very different prices? All these questions are crucial when you are selecting which wines to try.

10. Where will the next big wine area be?

This chapter will allow us to speculate on the future of wine. New areas are being “created,” in some sense, given a new wine identity. New techniques, too, are being used all the time and debate swirls about which technique appears most helpful. And then of course the most disturbing question concerns all of agriculture and the fate of the planet as a whole: what will global warming do to the wines we know now? The answer to the last question will influence the others, and may in fact change the wine we know today forever.

I've also included some detachable cards at the end that you can take to a restaurant or elsewhere to help you navigate the tricky issue of ordering wines. If you want extremely detailed information to take with you about vintages, every year the *Wine Spectator* magazine includes a pocket size card with vintage ratings in that particular year. The cards will include information with a longer shelf life.

At the end of this chapter, I'm going to describe my experiences during the harvest at the Capezzana Vineyard in Tuscany.

We'll end the book with another description of a harvest, this time at Kite Hill Vineyard near Carbondale in Southern Illinois. The contrast between Old World and New World could not have been more striking for me. By participating and observing these two harvests, I synthesized for myself the magic that is the vine. With these descriptions, I hope to convey some of that to you.

In this book, wherever possible, I will provide mnemonic devices if it seems helpful to remember key information. I will try to include anecdotes from the class that may enlighten what we know about a topic. If possible, I will also try to include references about where to get more information, although in this day and age, the internet is so filled with interesting information on wine that even a quick glance at some of the websites may answer your questions.

Let's begin this journey of inquiry so that we can better understand wine and through understanding learn to love and respect this ancient beverage of cultures around the world.

LA VENDEMMIA: THE HARVEST
CAPEZZANA, VIGNETO CONTINI BONACOSSI
TOSCANA (TUSCANY), ITALY
JOURNAL: SEPTEMBER



Tuscan countryside as seen from Capezzana. *Photo courtesy of Elliot Weisenberg, M.D.*

No postcard could do justice to this scenery.

That's the only conclusion possible as I sit scribbling notes on the rustic stone porch overlooking the green hillsides dotted with olive groves and vineyards that lies in front of me. Tuscany has a well-deserved, legendary reputation for heartbreakingly beautiful landscapes. Fig trees with their broad leaves sit right under my window in the old farmhouse, heavy with ripe figs as the summer moves slowly into fall. I am here to observe the harvest in one of the corners of the world most associated with wine, olive oil, and "la dolce vita": an untranslatable phrase roughly meaning "the good life." By witnessing the harvest I think I will be better able to understand wine and winemaking, and help others appreciate and understand wine as well. Every small village I see in front of me on the panorama I overlook from this porch is surrounded by vineyards, with rows of long, thin elegant cypress trees separating

them from the olives or the forests. No wonder Tuscany in Italy has a reputation for being one of the cradles of quality wine making in the world.

I hope you liked this sample from the book *Wine Lessons: Ten Questions to Guide Your Appreciation of Wine*. Get your copy on Amazon.com or ask your local bookstore to order copies!

Clara Orban