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Winding down with wine books

By Laurie Daniel

As summer winds down, many of us are still in search of a good book for reading on vacation or during a lazy afternoon. For some people, this means devouring mysteries or romance novels. But if your tastes run to wine, there is some good summer reading for you.

A common thread runs through all these books: They all sound an alarm about globalization, the influence of certain wine critics and the homogenization of wine styles.

The alarm is loudest in "The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World from Parkerization" (Harcourt, 271 pp., \$23), Alice Feiring's call to arms in defense of what she labels as traditional or authentic wines and against wines subjected to a lot of newfangled technology. The title does indicate a fair amount of wishful thinking. Though she's making a valiant effort, Feiring has hardly saved the world from "Parkerization," which refers to the way some winemakers apparently try to craft wines to earn high scores from uber critic Robert Parker. Parker, in an interview with Feiring, expresses skepticism that "Parkerization" even exists. Still, it's clear to me that more wines than ever are being made in the huge, concentrated, jammy, lavishly oaked style that receive his highest rankings.

Feiring's crusade is certainly heartfelt, and her writing is very funny at times. She also introduces us to some fascinating characters. But her championing of some wines that are clearly flawed—she admires one for its "nail-polish-removerlike acidity"—can be exasperating. She confides to a friend, "Increasingly, I find I have a very particular, peculiar palate and point of view. I often don't taste or see the world in the same way others do." Without that "peculiar palate," of course, there would be no book here. Feiring's search for purity and authenticity at times had me wishing she would stop whining and drink more German rieslings.

In "Reflections of a Wine Merchant" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 257 pp., \$24), Neal I. Rosenthal makes clear his prejudices from the beginning: "I have a distinct preference for the traditional wines of western Europe and a matching skepticism about most of the wines produced in the New World as well as for those wines made in the Old World that seek to imitate the characteristics of their New World brethren." The travels described by Rosenthal—who owns a New York-based wine importing business, Rosenthal Wine Merchant—take him to New World spots like the Napa Valley and Santa Cruz Mountains, but he's obviously much more comfortable in European cellars, in places like Burgundy and Piedmont. He clearly has an affinity for wines that are unknown, distinctive, even downright funky, and he delights in introducing us to the bottles he loves so much. Rosenthal, who figured prominently in the wine documentary "Mondovino," also laments some of the changes that have taken place in the years since he started in the wine business: the influence of critics and the points they bestow; the trend toward powerful wines that make a good first impression "but begin to deflate as soon as they are opened, like blow-up dolls;"

technology run amok. It's a thoughtful journey through 30 years in wine.

"Passion on the Vine" (Broadway Books, 285 pp., \$24.95) is New York wine merchant Sergio Esposito's memoir of growing up in Naples, emigrating, and his subsequent life in the United States, but above all it's a celebration of traditional Italian food and wine, with a considerable amount of travelogue mixed in.

Esposito has an epiphany in the mid-1990s while working at an Italian restaurant in New York. Wines, even Italian wines, were becoming more modern, bigger, unblemished. "You couldn't very well serve the most classic dishes from Italy with these new wines," he writes. "As the journalists were slapping high scores on the new wines, I retreated to my older collection. Every time I drank an old Barolo, I was overwhelmed with remorse. There was the Italian in me: Why change such a perfect thing? What could I do to make sure these guys who followed the old way, these holdouts, didn't disappear altogether?" He went on to establish a wine store in Manhattan, Italian Wine Merchants.

Esposito introduces us to vintners such as Josko Gravner, who rejected the latest technology in favor of making his wine in clay amphoras, and Bartolo Mascarello, who continued to make his Barolos with 200-year-old methods even as many of the wines of his region were being aged in small oak barrels. Esposito also takes on Robert Parker. Before Parker, he writes, "there were bad wines and great wines, not right wines and wrong wines. What you liked was, in large part, a question of taste, a complex concept generally agreed upon to be a reflection of personal preference. And part of tasting and understanding wine involved being open to the idea that some wine requires patience and work, and is not instantly gratifying."

In "Wine Politics" (University of California Press, 208 pp., \$27.50), Tyler Colman focuses on California and Bordeaux to examine, as the title suggests, the politics behind the wine business. From the aftermath of Prohibition, and how that resulted in state-by-state laws regarding wine distribution and taxation, to the strengths and weaknesses in the appellation systems of both France and the United States, to how land-use decisions affect where grapes can be planted in California, Colman looks at some of the governmental factors affecting what's in your wine glass.

The book's subtitle, "How Governments, Environmentalists, Mobsters and Critics Influence the Wines We Drink," makes it clear that Colman is defining the term "politics" rather broadly. For example, in the chapter titled "Who Controls Your Palate?" he takes on the effects of globalization and consolidation in the wine industry, as well as the tremendous influence of some wine critics (notably Parker) and winemaking consultants like Michel Rolland. The chapter that follows, about environmental battles in the Napa Valley and the return to more natural viticulture by some vintners in Napa and France, is also packed with fascinating information.