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What Makes a Wine Worth Drinking - book review

What Makes a Wine Worth Drinking

In praise of the sublime

Terry Theise

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In 2010 Terry Theise published his first book, *Reading Between the Wines*. It has remained my most beloved wine book of all times. It is the book I read when I am tired of life. It is the book I read when I need to be reminded that wine is not work but joy.

So when his new book arrived on my desk, it was with mixed feelings that I picked it up. Would it be a disappointment? Would it be more of the same? Could he possibly top *Between the Wines*?

Terry Theise (rhymes with peace) began importing wine 33 years ago. As the child of a peripatetic father, he'd spent three of his teenage years in Germany and went back there on a gap year from college, a gap which lasted 10 years. It was during this time that he discovered wine and began a lifelong love affair with German Riesling. He also got fired from McDonalds. Corporate thinking is still not his strong point.

In 1985, after two years of being a salesman for a liquor wholesaler, he gathered a tiny clutch of small German producers and began to sell their wines in the US. Today he is known as the High Priest of Riesling and is as infamous for his exacting principles as he is famous for his wine catalogues. The latter not because of the wines they list (although it's a stunning selection, focusing solely on Germany, Austria and Champagne) but for his remarkable ability to write about wine.

It was Eric Asimov, back in 2007, who said, 'There's a dying tradition of great writing from wine merchants', but in the same breath said of Terry Theise that his wine catalogues were 'simply some of the most enjoyable wine reading of the year'. If you've never read a Theise catalogue, savour this [2006 excerpt](#) from one of his catalogues. You'll see what I mean.

The first thing to know is that this is a deeply personal book. Theise does not write to be objective. Quite the opposite. The whole of chapter four, 'Accounting for taste', is a brilliant, fierce essay on cultivating 'the richest possible subjectivity'. It's a call to those who serve as guides to wine (importers, merchants, writers, educators) to act as gatekeepers; and as gatekeepers to clearly, boldly delineate our principles: what we cherish, what our concept of quality is – in a nutshell, to be proud, and transparent, about our subjectivities.

Theise himself is gloriously open about his subjectivities and his prejudices. In many ways the book is a series of beautifully crafted linguistic soapboxes on the things that matter in a glass of wine: calm, reasoned tirades against; impassioned, lyrical defences for. If you're looking for objectivity, read no further.

The second thing to know is that this is a deeply metaphysical and emotional book. If you're uncomfortable with reading about moments when beauty and mortality intersect, about attaining a state of sublimity, about exultation and joy, being subsumed into paradise and merged with wine, then this book is not for you. Theise's tasting notes make the most exuberant of us sound staid:

'The 2011 I tasted that mild spring day was so creamy, so musical, so grave, yet so hopeful. It wasn't sad; it was grave because life is serious. Stocks and gelées, spices and glazes, a kitchen full of stories, a home full of welcome, a respite in the unquiet life. And a funeral in the coming days as the family gathers. That kind of serious.'

His tasting notes are bits of poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins crossed with Ted

Hughes. They soar. They are urgent, as if the wines are dragging words from the marrow of his bones. He offers no apology. He stands by what he feels and thinks, by the metaphors, the colours, the tumult of emotion that wine evokes. He is not afraid to weep.

The third thing to know is that his writing is sometimes raw, often blunt. He writes about sex, he swears, he writes with sensuality. He is not politically correct and eschews the carefully neutral line.

And the fourth thing to know is that not a word is wasted. Anyone might think, up to this point, that Terry Theise is verbally and emotionally incontinent. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a writer so articulate that he could make the stones cry out.

What this book is not is a seven-point guide to finding good wines. 'Authentic wine', writes Theise, 'is connected to place and family, whatever that may entail. It is not "formed" to appeal to a "market" ... If a wine is inauthentic, I'd rather not know it at all. It's a guy I don't wanna hang out with. I also consider, why this particular friend? What makes him a good companion? Concomitantly, what would make him an annoying one? ... By what am I pleased or displeased? I have learned I prefer friends who are easy to be with. They aren't always my most fascinating friends, but sometimes I prefer ease and solace to fascination.'

What Makes a Wine Worth Drinking is a winding perambulation, with many detours, through Theise's 'manifesto' ('fatuously' called that, he says, with faint embarrassment). This collection of unorthodox criteria, a juxtaposition of prejudices, ethics and beauty, brings Theise - and the reader - to wine that is, in every sense, a good companion:

- small-scale family wine over large-scale industrial wine
- distinctiveness, wines that display their origin
- clarity of flavour
- beauty of flavour over impact of flavour
- harmony over intensity
- quietness, soul.

The first couple of chapters are, to some extent, the story of where the author's love for wine began, how it has changed, and why it has changed. Briefly touching on his time as a sales rep, 'extol[ling] the virtues of a lot of mundane, commercial,

industrial wine', and coming to the realisation that the only way he could carry on working in the wine industry was to get out and 'champion that which I loved and truly believed in'.

Chapter three is an argument for authenticity – a wine that is not designed for a market, or manipulated to taste a certain way; a wine that may even be humble and ordinary, but that 'tastes of what it is'. This is a chapter about soil and climate, winemaking and people, flavours and words to describe flavours. It also brings him to the next question: In the big world of these authentic and therefore worthy wines, from the nondescript to the magnificent and everything in between with not enough time in a life to drink them all, how do you whittle down your options?

Which brings us to the incisive chapter four. And objectivity. And his opinion on blind tasting. 'A winged unicorn of fantasy', he flatly states, 'Far too much energy is squandered pursuing this chimera of objectivity.' To his credit, he acknowledges the arguments in favour of blind tasting. And then ends the paragraph with 'Bollocks to that.' His debate against blind tasting and 'our romantic notions of objectivity' are contentious but strangely compelling. It's not an argument I am even going to try to summarise in a book review, but if there is one strong reason to buy this book (among a hundred strong reasons), it's chapter four.

If there is a point in the book where the soapbox becomes a pulpit, it might be chapter five, 'Power at all cost?'. It's about alcohol, and Theise has a rule: Nothing over 13.5%. He won't drink Fino or Priorat or Châteauneuf-du-Pape and freely admits that he's 'become something of a pill'. Of course, he's got well-thought-out reasons and I sympathise with them. I don't like high alcohol either, but even I felt a little irritated by his rigidity. Not all 14% wines yell rudely with distorted flavours.

Sympathy came under more strain as his strictures segued into natural wine. 'I have a rather uneasy relationship with so-called natural wines; I sometimes love them and other times I want to cringe. They make exceptionally scintillating conversation, but they forgot to apply deodorant.' Ouch.

Residual sugar also comes under gunfire – 'can we *please* stop being such damn puritans about residual sugar? ... The endless debates and discussions and jihads around sweetness in wine are an entirely useless wastes of time.' Sometimes he gets so cross about things. But it's a good point he irascibly makes (in more detail) on page 155.

But then his innate honesty and penchant for brutal self-reflection kick back in and he laughs at himself for being an old geezer bemoaning these feckless youngsters and their 'crappy little wines with no fruit', and he pulls himself up for 'devolving into truism and bromide'. As well he might.

These likes his wines to be refreshing and companionable ('I do not need my blocks busted and I don't find being blown away always to be entirely pleasant. I like wines that embody quietude, because quiet contains more than noise, which contains only itself.'). He advocates for delicacy, for wines that don't take over the conversation or the meal. He writes about the quality of wines he loves as 'a kind of tactfulness ... gentler, less overt, more analog'. And I can't help seeing the beauty in the modesty he is playing for.

There are other characteristics of the wine worth drinking. These looks at the question of soul, old age (of man and wine), introversion, dreaming and reverie. In some of the most beautiful wines he finds melancholy, in others a tenderness. Some are memory, smelling like 'a road you want to travel down forever'. Wound into this almost haunting scarf of musings are wines: the one that made him feel like words are tiny fists battering a huge edifice of indifference; the quiet one that wrote the warm memory of a cool moonlit night and the smell of cedar and ham cooking in the kitchen; the one with flavours that ricocheted around like a little steel ball in a pinball machine with a smiling yellow-plum mid palate. A wine that shone and shone.

I don't agree with everything he is against: natural wine, organic and biodynamic, wild-yeast fermentation, phenolic ripeness, high alcohol... At times I wondered whether this magnificently erudite, knowledgeable wine guru didn't need to travel a bit more widely and meet a few more of these winemakers in so-called hot climates who are making beautiful, balanced, pure wines well over 13.5% despite being organic, biodynamic and fermenting with wild yeast [see Tam's account of her recent voyage of discovery in Australia - JR]. But even when he's being narrow-minded, dyspeptic and stubborn, it's hard to resist him. He is so eloquent when disagreeable.

And I'm being particularly adversarial. Perhaps I'm playing devil's advocate. If you saw my copy of this book, just a couple of months old and more thumbed, underlined, corners-turned-back and tea-stained than any college textbook, you'd

know that I have climbed into these pages, soaked up the words, pored over all this unfathomable honesty and bareness.

Is it better than *Between The Vines*? It's up to date, and the author is older, and so am I. It feels just right. I now have two wine books to choose from when I'm world-weary.

