

DAVID MICHALSKI

Real Taste

The search for authenticity in wine

Jonathan Nossiter, **Liquid Memory** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009)

Alice Feiring, **Naked Wine: Letting Grapes Do What Comes Naturally** (New York: Da Capo Press., 2011)

Michael Veseth, **Wine Wars: The Curse of the Blue Nun, the Miracle of Two Buck Chuck, and the Revenge of the Terroirists** (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011)

Jaime Goode and Samuel Harrop, **Authentic Wine: Toward Natural and Sustainable Winemaking** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011)

Charlie Rossi—better known as Carlo—used to say, “I like talking about my wine, but I’d rather be drinking it.” In those 1970s television commercials, he introduced millions of viewers to California wine as a matter-of-fact, down-to-earth, everyday source of enjoyment, one he claimed was free of the cultural baggage and conceit that allegedly accompanied European wines. Dressed in his unbuttoned white shirt on the edge of his vineyard, the Gallo salesman pitched the eponymous label by reaching out to those unacquainted or unimpressed by chateaux, appellations of origin, or high prices. He insisted estates and lore were less important than what was in the glass. While his commercials did stress the hard work and expertise that went into making wine, the popular appeal of Rossi’s message rested on the feeling that wine culture had separated itself from what was real. In his way, he gave voice to a potent social concern: all the rarefied talk of wine character and all the discourse about technique and tradition inevitably adds up to so much noise when it is removed from the immediate pleasures of taste.

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But when it comes to wine, it is impossible to simply shut up and drink. Wine requires conversation. It demands stories and explanation. And it always evokes vibrant debate. Wine comes to us infused with elegies and songs permeated with poetry, but it is also freighted with history, scientific literature, and commercial

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COURTESY OF DAVID HERRERA

concerns. The very taste of wine is shaped by the shared practices of those who make it, by the cultures of industry, law, and markets affecting it, and by the critical responses of those who drink it. Wine is a social thing. It responds to its time. And it remains a vibrant cultural product even when winemakers and critics emphasize its timeless natural qualities.

Carlo Rossi's plea to pay sole attention to what's in the glass can thus be seen as part of a larger socio-cultural movement. Rossi's straightforward approach encouraged wine drinkers to bypass the conventional critical apparatus of wine. In doing so, his advertisements tapped into the prevailing anti-elitism of the 1970s and joined a growing set of roughly contemporary narratives challenging the wine establishment. These include the triumphal story of California wine in a 1976 Paris blind-tasting, and the 1980s rise of

wine critic Robert M. Parker Jr., whose consumer advocacy, powered by his system of awarding numeric scores to wines he tasted blind, also sought to liberate the wine industry from the outworn traditionalist biases of high-end wine merchants and auction-house critics.

Each of these challenges combined to form a populist invitation based on two principles: that the wine consumer should trust her or his own taste, and that wine quality be judged on its intrinsic character, without deference to vaunted labels or reputations. This manifesto for a new taste, one in which California figured centrally, resonated with a new generation of wine-drinkers. It was a message tailor-fit for an industry looking to reinvent itself, too, as California positioned itself in opposition to the snobbery of Old World wine. And although many of the so-called new breed wineries had close connections to the older

generation, the image of California as an innovator and a challenger forever changed a trade once dominated by European markets and taste regimes. It opened wine to a wider global audience. It gave encouragement to developing wine regions across the globe. And it gave license to winemakers, even those back in Europe, to experiment with craft and science in the service of wine beauty.

Yet today, the 1970s/1980s Californian wine revolution rarely is portrayed positively. Despite the rich diversity of styles and distinctive regions across the state, California wine too often is described by critics as a monolithic product, one produced formulaically to cater to targeted consumer preferences. According to today's stereotype, the California wine industry has no soul, no passion, no identity, and perhaps most damningly, no terroir, or place. The intervention of California, thirty years later, is disparaged as a destructive influence and held responsible for the development of a homogenized global style of wine.

The transformation of California from insurgent newcomer to global hegemon took hold slowly. In the mid-1980s, wine writers such as Jancis Robinson began to identify a Napa penchant for 'big' wines marked by strong tannins, fruit forward profiles and high alcohol, a style that is criticized today for its lack of regional character. In the late 1990s the critic Andrew Jefford expressed a growing unease about the loss of distinction and place in wines that altered their production to cater to mass demand. These concerns reached full steam with the release of two films in 2004: *Sideways*, based on Rex Pickett's popular buddy tale of a trip to wine country in search of life's meaning, and *Mondovino*, Jonathan Nossiter's documentary about the struggle to save wine from the alienating forces of globalization. In each film, the California wine industry is depicted as a leading exporter of the international-style, and its largest producers are characterized as ignorant of wine's cherished relationship to place.

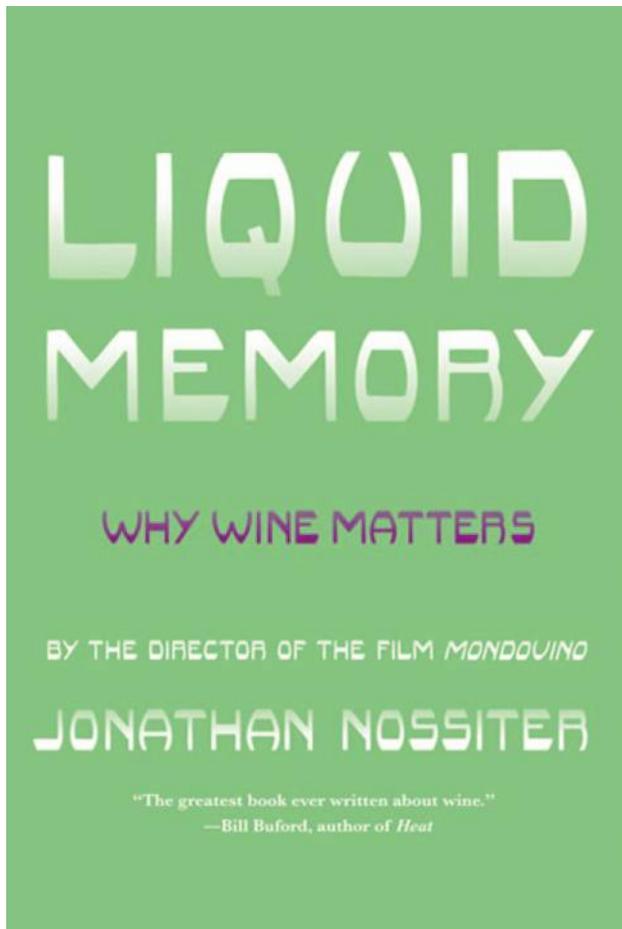
By 2004 wine had become a crucial element in a new kind of personhood. As the wine-drinking public—and everyone else in the deindustrialized US and Europe—became increasingly dependent on precarious careers, and more removed from the production of consumer goods, wine was conscripted to be more than a source of culinary pleasure. Consumers looked to wine and its deep cultural roots for a means to ground their shaky position in a global market society. In this context, the big Napa classics, which



COURTESY OF RYAN O'CONNELL

brought California alongside Bordeaux, were just as insensitive to a new desire for sincere and personal products as the mass produced low end wines were incapable of satisfying the new social responsibilities that were placed on wine. In this context a new crop of wine writers found an audience by calling for the development of wines that were complex rather than uniform, and by advocating a form of winemaking that could develop a deeper connection between the taster and the story of a wine's origin.

Nossiter's follow-up book, *Liquid Memory* (2009), makes the argument for wines of terroir in a unique and evocative way. He explains how small, local wine production based on tradition, originality, and environmental sustainability can influence the way one imagines and participates in society.



Questions of taste are understood by Nossiter to have moral consequences. He contends the big California wines of the 1980s primarily were made to appeal to the vanities of the nouveaux riche. In harnessing their allure to luxury and privilege, these wines are said to have neglected their responsibility to situate the drinker in the world. Nossiter critiques them as “wines of power” with no ethical connection to past or place. By contrast, his favorite wines are humble and earthly, noteworthy for their ability to awaken one’s imagination and memories.

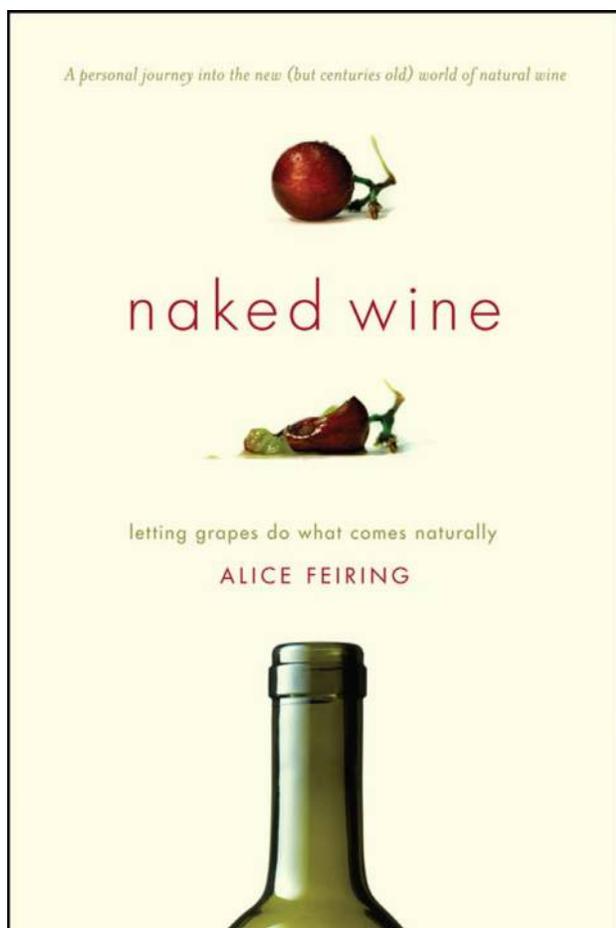
Although Nossiter’s polemics target the processes of globalization, his greatest strength lies in his ability to connect his readers with the social contours of wine’s more intimate communities of taste, whether he is sharing his memories, or bringing us to tables and conversations where sentimental winemakers and friends gather to contemplate the truth of wine. And while these conversations, unfortunately, often end up with the parties commiserating about the departure of wine’s capacity to ring true, the nostalgia he

expresses has motivated a quest for a new measure of authenticity in wine.

Alice Feiring’s, *The Battle for Wine and Love: or How I Saved the World from Parkerization* (Harcourt 2008) is another hallmark in the historic shift in the image of California from wine hero to wine villain. Feiring deploys a cagey confrontational method that takes her argument directly to the wine industry professionals she believes are responsible for the demise of *authentic* wine. In her interviews, she spars with her foils, asking plant biologists to value intuition over science, and corporate winemakers to trust unpredictable natural forces over controlled production. She also rails against the current state of wine journalism, in particular Robert M. Parker, whom she accuses of reducing the experience of taste to numeric points and bad poetry. Like Nossiter, Feiring explains the state of wine as gripped in a struggle between corporations, who manipulate flavor, and independent local winemakers, who promote wine as a natural product. And like Nossiter, who critiques California high-alcohol fruit-bombs as infantile, Feiring shows a similar tendency to map her aesthetic argument onto New and Old World wines, a geographical caricature which may itself stand in for a broader cultural war between new and old money.

In her latest book, *Naked Wine* (2012), Feiring does a better job of bringing out the complexity of her argument. There she gives voice to the burgeoning movement for organic viticulture and enology. This time her wit, which may remind readers of Myles in *Sideways*, is directed in search of additive-free wines and wines that ferment slowly with natural yeasts. Her journey brings the reader into conversations with the movers and shakers of the natural wine movement, including Eric Texier and Jacques Néaupert. She also recognizes a number of California wineries for making natural wines, including Coturri Winery, Arnot-Roberts, and La Clarine Farm, and it appears she is at last finding new world wines that respond to the criticisms she and others have leveled at the industry.

The forces that animated California’s wine revolution in the 1970s/1980s have given way to a different set of forces, which have propelled the question of “natural wine” to the center of debate. Wine economist Mike Veseth, in his book *Wine Wars: The Curse of Blue Nun, the Miracle of Two Buck Chuck, and the Revenge of the Terroirists* (2011), characterizes this shift as a reactionary response to a wine world still only



partially transformed by the ongoing forces of globalization. He argues that Nossiter, Feiring, and other proponents of terroir are fighting a losing battle against powerful economic structures. These include economies of scale, which limit a small producer's access to markets, an information technology revolution that erodes established wine institutions and their control of wine tradition, and the unquenchable modern desire for status acquisition, which drives the circulation and consumption of brand-name wines. The future of wine for Veseth is tilted in favor of large-scale bulk production and differentiated niche marketing, with future wine styles being driven by consumers in non-traditional wine regions, such as China. The advocates of traditional practices and terroir, whom he calls *terroirists*, will, at best only temper the most homogenizing forces of an economy that, he argues, is driven by its own nature to disrupt tradition as it ceaselessly expands. In essence, Veseth's message to the terroirists is to 'get real' and face the fact that the wine world is changing. Even if some terroir-based wines manage

Climate change will finish the job.

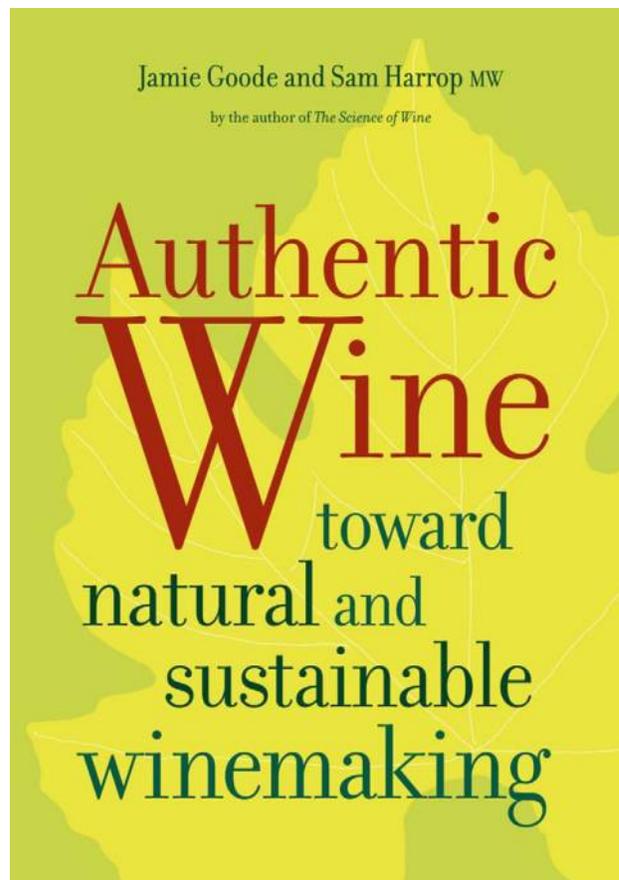
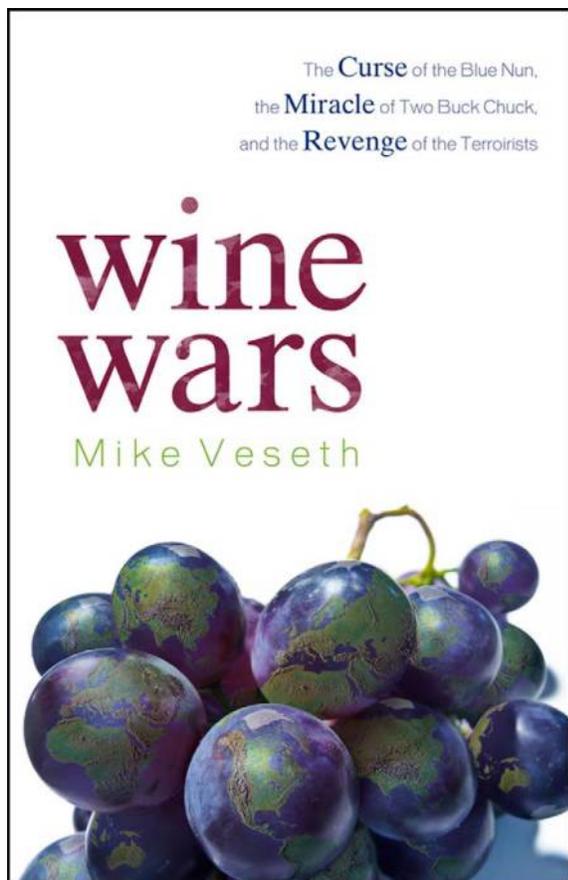
to hold out temporarily against market pressures, he concludes, climate change will finish the job.

The search for a natural and authentic wine does at times resemble quest of an anthropologist looking for the Last Primitive, but the work of Nossiter and Feiring remains attractive because it touches on a current anxiety, one that wine is uniquely positioned to provoke: the uneasiness about the authenticity of our contemporary way of life. The search for terroir resonates because it raises important questions about who we are. It also allows us to test the limits of commodity production and the current relation between science and craft.

If Nossiter and Feiring are guilty of characterizing true wine as the product of purely natural forces, Veseth can be said to treat the economic changes influencing the wine industry in a similar manner, as if they were both inevitable and guided by forces beyond our control. In doing so, he casts the school of terroir as a backward-looking movement, one that is out of step with the future. The movement in favor of terroir is not, however, a movement led by a few dead-enders. A survey of wine culture today shows this movement to be widespread and gaining traction. And despite the divide that structures both Veseth's book *Wine Wars* and Nossiter's film *Mondovino*—where one path leads to the expansion of industrial global wine and the other to a retrenchment into wine traditions—a fuller study of the way terroir works in today's economy reveals the importance of local branding within the global economy, a phenomenon scholars of consumption call *glocalization*.

Rather than a simple return to tradition, terroir offers a crowded wine industry much needed new markets. At the same time, terroir also serves the needs of consumers who have tired of mass production. To those of us looking for ever more effective means to distinguish ourselves through our personal tastes, wines of terroir can provide us with special boutique experiences.

Today, terroir is everywhere. Recently, in a local supermarket, I even saw a wine called Terroir. With so many promises being made in the market place, the question of truth in wine has returned to center stage. Science writer Jaime Goode and winemaker Sam Harrope address this



question head-on in their new book, *Authentic Wine* (2012), seeking to clear up the vague definitions of terroir and natural wine. They begin by arguing that moving towards minimal-intervention grape growing and winemaking is the best way to preserve the interesting diversity and complexity of wine, the very characteristics that differentiate it from other drinks.

The authors unfold the controversies of contemporary wine production, from pest control to irrigation to fermentation to the development of sustainable production sites. In the process, the reader learns that minimal invention is far from hands-off. It requires close engagement at every stage of production. So while the stated purpose of *Authentic Wine* is to resolutely lay out the case for natural wine, the project ends up doing even more than Veseth's book to problematize the way natural wine is currently conceived. The critical demeanor of Goode and Harrop's writing prevents them from falling for the romance of natural wine. Instead, they reveal naturalness to be the result of a series of careful choices based on site/place/territory of origin. They realize

that the touchstone of authentic wine, terroir, cannot be simply adjudicated, imported, or magically brought into being through ad campaigns. Their hands-on tour of winemaking shows how wines of terroir are made, in real time, through experiment and craft. In their book, the authenticity of wine is less a matter of nature than a matter of human intention.

Authentic Wine is part aesthetic treatise and part winemaking handbook. It speaks to a new breed of wine consumers keen to participate in winemaking decisions. By appealing to those interested in the inner workings of winemaking, Goode and Harrop can be seen as reviving the mission of one of California's most important wine scientists and wine writers, Maynard Amerine, (1911–1998), a professor at UC Davis who helped establish the modern California wine industry after Prohibition. Alongside his academic and industry work, Amerine's career is noteworthy for his efforts to communicate the complexity of wine science to the general public. Although he has been criticized by some proponents of the natural wine

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movement for his role in establishing the standards of modern scientific winemaking, his belief in the positive connection between one's knowledge of winemaking and one's appreciation of wine's pleasures resonates with today's consumer. In *Authentic Wine* and in Goode's earlier book, *The Science of Wine: from Vine to Glass* (University of California Press, 2006), this belief is extended with a new sense of urgency. By explaining the craft of authentic wine, this latest mode of wine writing not only bridges the divide between wine's nature and its science, it offers the disconnected

consumer a deeper, more personal form of engagement with wine. By showing precisely where the natural wine movement bumps up against the strictures of science and economics, this turn toward craft also provides today's wine enthusiast with a more effective means to share in the questions influencing contemporary California wine, a practical basis from which to ask: What interventions and practices are necessary to make an authentic wine in our time? And this deeper participation, in turn, leaves more in the glass to savor. **B**