

Introduction: Why Talk About Wine?

The primary purpose of wine is to provide pleasure and refreshment. It can do much more than that, but should never do less.

Eric Asimov, *How to Love Wine*

Human beings have been planting, harvesting, and fermenting grapes to make wine for centuries. Wine has been an important part of religious ceremonies, family celebrations, and even pagan sacrifices, since humans began establishing such rituals. Wine has also been used to wash down a rancid bowl of porridge, celebrate the storming of a castle, or to put on a good buzz to get through shitty historical moments, like the black plague or the Spanish Inquisition. Let us not forget, the primary reason humans have grown and fermented grapes into wine is to provide *pleasure and refreshment*.

It is easy to forget this basic fact given all the noise that surrounds the wine industry these days. Podcasts, trade shows, magazines, tasting notes, workshops, certifying courses and exams, advertising, websites, and the recalcitrant snob at your local wine store all add to the volume and intensity of how we talk about wine in varied and unique ways. This book is designed to help fellow wine enthusiasts navigate and make sense of this *wine noise* and come to a better understanding of the world of wine.

Over the past three years, I have become somewhat fixated and deeply passionate about wine. I have studied it, blind-tasted it, collected it, analyzed it, enjoyed it with friends, and spent a large amount of my “disposable” income on it. I have enjoyed the pleasure of wine

with meals, and spent countless hours in small, out-of-the-way wineries and wine stores searching for the next fabulous wine I have not tried. I have traveled to Europe, South America, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and across the United States to find new wines and up-and-coming wineries. During this time, I have come to realize there is a fine line between being a wine *enthusiast* and becoming a wine *obsessive*, and I have definitely wandered neurotically back and forth across this line many times over the last three years.

During my journey from wine novice to wine enthusiast, I have studied wine incessantly, memorizing detailed bits of information about wine regions, varietals, winemaking processes, vineyard management techniques, notable wines and wine producers, the history of wine, and wine-food pairings. I have read over one hundred books about wine and the wine profession. I have attended numerous wine tastings, both formal and informal, listened to countless hours of podcasts, watched most of the better-known wine movies, documentaries, and television series, and have spent many hours reading wine blogs to stay up-to-date with the current status of the wine industry. It has become clear to me that wine has begun to play a vital role in my life and my future.

Why Write This Book?

For the past twenty years, I have been a literacy educator, scholar, and researcher. In that time, I have spent most of my career studying how teachers and students talk about books, in particular children's picturebooks. I am now a tenured professor and I have decided to use my research skills to understand how people talk about wine, how they situate wine in their daily lives, and how various experts, critics, and sommeliers talk and write about this life-altering beverage. It is this focus on how we talk and write about wine that forms the

foundation of this book.

The impetus for this book occurred during my first wine certification course. On September 11 & 12, 2016, I attended a course for the Introductory Level of the *Court of Master Sommeliers* in Tucson, AZ. The course, and subsequent introductory exam, focused on basic wine theory, grape varietals, and various wine regions of the world. Most everything we needed to know for the exam was included in the handbook we were sent prior to the course and shared during class in a whirlwind of powerpoint presentations. During the two days of instruction we were required to try some blind tastings and learn to talk about wines using the *Court's Deductive Wine Tasting Method*.

During the wine tasting portion of the course, I asked one of the Master Sommeliers (no names are forthcoming) leading the group if there were any wine tasting groups near my home in Phoenix. I was interested in deepening my study of wine and wanted to find a community near home that would support my wine education. The Master Sommelier asked me about my level of knowledge concerning wine. At that moment, I was feeling a bit cocky so said I should be able to pass the introductory exam with no problem, and that I had been seriously drinking wine and studying it for a few months now. My confidence didn't seem to matter to him. He said almost everyone in attendance would pass the Introductory Course, and indeed, I ended up passing the introductory exam quite easily.

Then, he asked me if I had stood and shared my wine analysis in the "round-robin" deductive wine tasting exercise that was part of the two-day course. Each person was required to stand and share their analysis of a wine using the deductive wine tasting method. I explained that I hadn't shared my analysis yet, but my turn would be coming up shortly. He said bluntly, "I

will know what your level is after thirty seconds of you talking about wine. I can't recommend you for any tasting groups until I know your level of expertise."

Thirty seconds! That was all it would take. I was stunned. My academic mind began to spin. Was all this wine stuff about how I talked and acted, or what I knew about wine? Or was it about my evolving sense of taste? And, are these the same thing? It began to dawn on me that this whole wine enterprise had more to do with how I talked than what went on between me and a wine glass. All the places I had been and all the different wines I had experienced would only be helpful if I learned to talk in a particular way. The whole certificate process seemed to be more about the *talking* than about the *tasting*.

Since that eye-opening episode, I have come to believe there can be a bit of pomposity and social elitism that comes with one's accumulation of wine knowledge. Now don't get me wrong, I believe that people, in fact, do know more about things than other people and should be recognized as experts in their respective fields. In retrospect, I have built my whole career as a professor based on my extensive knowledge of literacy education and research. However, knowing things and beating people up with one's knowledge are completely different things. Herein, lies the conundrum. How do I share what I have learned about wine without sounding like a pompous ass?

Since completing the Introductory Course for the Court of Master Sommeliers in 2016, I have studied for and obtained three wine certificates, namely: 1) Certified Sommelier (Court of Master Sommeliers – CMS), 2) Certified Specialist of Wine (Society of Wine Educators – SWE), and 3) the Advanced Level 3 Award in Wines with Merit (Wine and Spirits Education Trust – WSET). I have collected my three pins and proudly carry them around in my backpack ready to

display them to anyone who asks. No one asks. But, I walk around at the ready armed with bits of possibly useless information about wine that I can share at a moment's notice.

Who is this Book For?

This book is intended for fellow wine enthusiasts to help them navigate the way we talk, act, think, study, and write about wine in contemporary society. It is intended for wine enthusiasts like me that enjoy reading books, articles, and blogs about wine and the culture that surrounds it. People just beginning their journey into the world of fine wine, and more experienced wine drinkers, are also invited to share in my journey. This book is for wine drinkers that don't think tasting groups are stupid. It is also for those wine enthusiasts that think the wines they haven't tried yet are as fascinating as their favorite bottles and aren't afraid to move out of their wine-drinking comfort zone from time to time. But most of all, it is intended for wine enthusiasts who want to believe that not all wine enthusiasts are rich, pompous assholes that talk down to everyone at the table.

The challenge in writing a book like this is to be simultaneously self-deprecating without being abusive or offensive to my fellow wine enthusiasts. However, I am sure there will be a few people whose feathers get ruffled a bit by some of the ideas in this book. Additionally, I am not trying to be snarky just for the sake of being snarky. I am not trying to sound smarter by putting people down that know more about wine than I do. And, there are many, many people that know more about wine than I do. I am just trying to suggest that some of the stuff we say, and some of the things we write about wine is pretty funny and outrageous and is worthy of consideration from a different point of view.

I believe there is a sense of *social elitism* that comes with being a wine expert that

doesn't seem to come with being, say, an expert on tadpoles or dung beetles. The moniker of the *wine snob* seems alive and well and rears its ugly head in the most usual, and unusual, places and times... in wine stores, at wine tastings, at Christmas parties, in wine seminars (definitely), and at fine restaurants. Hopefully, you will find my sense of humor engaging without being offensive.

At this time, and most likely into the future, I have no plans to go further down the wine certification highway. I don't have the time or the inclination, or more honestly the dedication and tasting skills, to pass the Advanced Sommelier exam from CMS, or the Level 4 Diploma in Wine from WSET. I am a Certified Sommelier, but not a working sommelier, or *somm*, for short. I spent 12 years of my life in the restaurant industry working as a bartender, waiter, and as a restaurant manager, but have no plans to work in a restaurant ever again. The wine and food service industry remains a young person's game with some exceptions of course. I did my time in the restaurant industry and enjoyed every minute of it. Now is the time to relax and enjoy the fruits, I mean grapes, of my labor.

One of the problems I faced when I started studying wine was the fact that there are no certificates directed towards older wine enthusiasts, like me, especially old guys whom no longer work in the wine industry. If there was a certificate awarded to cranky wine obsessives like me, I would have searched it out, studied for it, and that may have been enough. The problem is I cannot find anyone offering that certificate, anywhere. Maybe we need one. A certificate for people who collect, drink and talk about wine a lot, possibly too much. What about a *Certified Wine Enthusiast* (CWE) certification? That has a nice ring to it, but it doesn't exist. At least, not yet!

I continue to read lots of books about wine purely for enjoyment. I subscribe to numerous wine magazines and regularly peruse various wine blogs, websites, and newsletters. I am part of a few wine tasting groups here in Arizona, and I travel whenever I can to favorite wine regions. These days, I prefer to consume wine rather than serve it. I carry around a business card that displays my website (www.discourseofwine.com) and use it to introduce myself as a wine enthusiast when I visit wineries, restaurants, and wine shops. I like to consider myself wine “industry adjacent.” Just peeking over the fence into the world of wine. That may change in retirement, but that is still off in the distance.

How is the Book Organized?

I begin the book with a chapter entitled, “*My ‘How Wine Changed My Life!’ Story.*” In this opening chapter, I give a brief synopsis of how wine became such an important part of my life and its effects on my current worldview. After that chapter, I have divided the book into six sections, each focusing on a different aspect of wine and wine culture. The six sections, *Understanding Wine, Tasting Wine, Writing About Wine, Judging Wine, Studying Wine, and Wine and Culture*, cover the major areas most passionate wine enthusiasts would be, well, passionate about. I begin each section with an introductory chapter, what I have called the “101” chapter, for example Tasting 101, Studying 101 etc. These opening 101 chapters offer an overview of specific topics and provide a foundation for the ideas covered in the subsequent chapters of each section.

I end each and every chapter with a short section entitled “So What?” During all the doctoral dissertation defenses and masters’ theses I have chaired, I have always asked my students, “so what?” I think it is important to be able to explain why the things we study and

discuss matter. To that end, these short pieces are designed to summarize the chapter, provide some insights as to why these topics are important to consider, and offer some suggestions for moving forward. Every chapter will contain a list of resources and suggestions for further reading

Concluding Remarks

The question you need to ask yourself before reading further is, “Do you want to peek behind the label of the wine bottle you are drinking from?” Sometimes it is best not to know how the sausage is made. In my case, I am just too curious not to pull back the curtain and expose the wizard for all the world to see. Sometimes, we need to just enjoy a good book, a movie or a glass of wine without analyzing it to death. And, then there are times when our passions take over, and off we go!

In learning about wine there is no final destination, no finish line, just the next bottle of wine to try. You may complete the Master Sommelier or Master of Wine certification, which is certainly an amazing feat, but that doesn't mean you stop enjoying wine. Your journey into the world of wine may become more refined, your knowledge of wine more detailed and nuanced, but you progress on to the next glass, the next vineyard, or the next meal until you can no longer do so.

Wine is a lifelong pursuit with no real end to justify the means; it is the journey that matters. Marcel Proust was quoted as saying, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” From my perspective, the journey through the vineyards and bottles of life only matter if we focus on the glass or bottle that is in front of us, enjoying the company with keep, and being mindful of the sip that is in our mouths and the

enjoyment wine brings to the moment. So, open a nice bottle of wine, sit back and relax, and accompany me on my journey into the discourse of wine.

A Brief, But Important Warning

Throughout this book, wine and the wine industry will be placed on a pedestal at times like many books about wine have done before. This does not mean that alcohol hasn't reeked havoc on some people's lives. Alcohol, the intoxicating, sometimes lethal, element of wine, beer and spirits can be addictive and can lure people into unhealthy and tragic circumstances. I, myself have seen the devastating effects of alcohol on family members and friends. Anyone that partakes regularly with wine and other intoxicants has had a hangover and sworn to never drink again, but that is not what I am talking about here. I would be irresponsible if I didn't acknowledge the health and social risks of drinking excessively and hope that my readers take precautions if that occasions arises. The negative effects of alcohol are not to be taken lightly as we move forward on our journey into the discourse of wine.