Wine, Wine, Wine and Moderation

by Paul Roberts, Editor

Vintage: The Story of Wine
By Hugh Johnson

A History of Wine in America: From the Beginnings to Prohibition
By Thomas Pinney

Hardly a morning paper passes anymore, it seems, without new reports on America's holy war against alcohol, tobacco and drugs. It makes me a little nervous to write about it, at least in the way I'm going to, so I only hope people believe me: I am anti-drunkness, anti-chain smoking and anti-abuse of narcotics. As for the millions who see such views as a belaboring of the obvious, I don't mean to be condescending.

It also seems that media reports about these three things being bad usually feature an absence of support for any of the trio in moderation. Maybe the studies or latest "awareness campaigns" sponsored by the various pressure groups do in fact address moderation, but that part doesn't make it into the papers. At any rate, the actions of these pressure groups, religious fundamentalists, and certain elected representatives and police agencies in various locales are not directly linked, of course, but in total they seem to suggest a crusade. This one is run primarily by well-educated, well-meaning, reform-minded people — they lead most crusades — who are concerned by all the drunk driving deaths, lung cancer and drug addiction. All of these are horrible — horrible, and worth trying to do something about.

But I suspect that abuse of alcohol, tobacco and drugs is more often a symptom, rather than the cause, of our problems. More pressing are social and economic conditions that factor into why too many Americans over-indulge, in lots of ways. Trying to dramatically reduce the underlying reasons for such excessive and abusive behavior, however, would be very expensive and would probably require changing what makes America America. It is a complex situation in no way suited to simplistic tactics, and so one is tempted to assume all the moral absolutism will pass, like any social movement whose failure makes it a fad.

But then there was Prohibition. I just hope a whole lot of people will read these two books on wine history. History has the power, perhaps above all, to place current events in perspective, and I feel certain that if more Americans understood wine's past, since the very beginning of organized human activity, some of the saber-rattling over alcohol might quiet down. I have developed a fearsome aversion to panaceas, so I'm not saying to just drink two glasses of wine at dinner. A majority of Americans don't have the sort of life that would make that possible. But wine does have an ancient reputation, thought in many cultures to border on the magical, as the beverage that goes with relaxing, conversing and creating goodwill in good company. Without an enhanced appreciation for such goings-on (or perhaps just more time to do them), I fear we will always be vulnerable to the extremism that Thomas Pinney addresses in his last chapter, on Prohibition. In recounting the way temperance forces, the "Drys," consolidated power during three decades of organizing, one statement stood out for its contemporary application. "It almost seems," Pinney writes (page 436), "that the sharper and shrewder the Drys grew in political experience, the more simple-minded they grew in moral perception."

Wine has been important in international culture and commerce for several centuries, but comprehensive study of the subject has been slow in coming. Both books fill an enormous hole. While Hugh Johnson aims for a popular audience — his style is pure narrative — Thomas Pinney's Wine in America is just as engaging but his course is less linear, his analysis more incisive. Johnson, a Brit who is the world's most authoritative and prolific wine writer, is no historian but rather a kind of new-fangled European man of letters. In the Story of Wine, he shows a staggering grasp of and enthusiasm for the currents of ancient history; a lot of his knowledge seems to have come from visiting the places where the oldest vineyards and provincial wine towns were, in Europe anyway. Johnson shows that controlling or securing access to good vineyard land, and shipping and selling wine, have been gigantic and integral parts of global economic development. His early chapters, covering wine's place in western societies during the murky transition from pagan to Judeo-
Christain times, are especially rich, and I think can be recommended for their sort of public television-style approach as a general history, regardless of the wine stuff. Read it for the wine and for the history.

Johnson has done segments for public television on wine appreciation and history, and this blend is what makes his work so good. He first and foremost appreciates the aesthetics of wine, so his history is marked by equal attention to what earlier wines may have tasted like, how they were made and aged, what grapes were used, whether they were fortified with brandy. While he has a real knack for boiling complex historical events down to delectable morsels, he never loses sight of the fact that he’s writing about a drink. His description of the mystical properties assigned to wine in pagan ritual, its resulting symbolic importance in religious ceremony, and its use as a water purifier, as an aphrodisiac, and in every sort of social celebration, move the narrative smoothly from one epoch to the next. “For 2,000 years of medical and surgical history it was the universal and unique antiseptic... indispensable until the late 19th century,” he notes (page 11). “In the words of the Jewish Talmud, ‘Wherever wine is lacking, drugs become necessary.’”

The book is not exactly a scholarly work. Johnson’s bibliography is packed with most of the previous books about wine, including the few published by academic professionals, and with history volumes about regions or empires that are nearly as general as the one he has produced. But he relied little on primary historical sources, or on narrow academic-style articles and books about relevant cultural history with no clear connections to wine. Still, Johnson uses personal observations of wine lands as highly original primary sources — what he sees or hears about the landscape, architecture, and other aspects of the extant environment — to achieve a synthesis that is two parts amateur but well-done history-telling, and one part Renaissance man sensiti-

As you may have gathered, I like wine. It is a wonderful way to learn about history, weather, geography, science, business, other cultures. With all these things to consider, wine appreciation teaches the integration of disparate sources of opinion and knowledge. (Peynaud: “It only requires a little imagination to find in wines the whole, rich and complex world of familiar smells... Developed from living cells, it contains, in a diluted state it is true, all that is necessary for life.”) Far from what federally mandated labels on wine bottles suggest, research indicates that moderate alcohol consumption, say a drink or two a day, is a sort of general elixir for the circulatory system and is probably good for healthy people. (Most wines contain natural and added sulphites that people on medication or with respiratory conditions should be wary of, however.) Wine is full of vitamins, minerals and acids essential for proper digestion and handy against stress. And enjoying it is very nearly an aesthetically complete experience. One uses sight, smell, taste, even touch — all the senses except hearing; I think this makes wine unique among the forms of aesthetic appreciation.

The rest of this essay discusses the creep of the cultivated vine across America and aspects of wine evaluation intwined in that history. Then I will dwell on one berry, a little-known blue-black grape whose colorful story on the western frontier began 150 years ago and stretches to the present.

Most people know about Leif Ericsson dubbing the continent he discovered “Wineland,” in honor of all the wild grapes he saw and of the land’s potential for winemaking. But as befits the tangled saga of the grape in North America, Pinney notes that the fruit Ericsson found, probably on the northern coast of Newfoundland, was likely the wild cranberry, not a grape. It would take another five centuries for the English to confirm Ericsson’s suspicion; in the Piedmont area of Virginia, first, and eventually up and down the eastern coast, the English
observed that “the grape rioted in profusion and variety.”

They observed this wild thing with glee. The royal court was intent upon developing the new colony into a vast vineyard. “Wine and silk, those two luxurious products,” Pinney writes (13), “were constantly linked in the English imagination as the most desirable products (other than gold) that America could yield...” King James I, Pinney says, abominated tobacco, and urged the Virginia Company to grow grapes at its expense. By no later than 1609, the English had planted vineyards. How much wine they actually made and when it first reached London was hard to document, but that matters little, because for nearly two centuries no appreciable amounts flowed, although the British nearly went mad sending winemakers and vineyard managers, mostly Frenchmen, to the New World.

There are approximately 50 species of grapes, and on each continent, grapes, like other plants, have adapted to their native soils, climate, topography, and to other plant and animal competitors. Grapes grow voraciously; most will try to reproduce with practically anything that grows. The Europeans saw straight away the two possible roads: select the best and most easily tamed native varieties in America’s woods and cultivate them into an industry, or import European varieties. What the Europeans didn’t understand, a few hundred odd years before scientific inquiry would show them, were the big obstacles to growing Vitis vinifera, the native European vine, in a place where various other vines thrived. Anyway, the Europeans mainly decided to plant the grapes they knew. Vinifera after vinifera vineyard croaked, overrun by fungi that covered the fruit with mold, or by diseases that wilted leaves and stems, slowly suffocating the poor plants. The latter was blamed 250 years later on a tiny bug called phylloxera, a native of America which devoured foreign but not native vine roots. Wherever the Europeans ventured, they methodically planted vinifera, watched the same unexplainable diseases appear in two or three years, pulled them up in favor of whatever local variety seemed viable, made some really bad wine two or three years after that, and within a decade gave up altogether at that settlement. Surely it was a maddening cycle: wine could not be made in Wineland!

This story was repeated at nearly every important frontier town, including Pittsburgh, where the French grew grapes at Fort Duquesne. (Pennsylvania, incidentally, was a key state in the story through the early 1800s.) Downstream on the Ohio River from Pittsburgh, at Gallipolis, a French historian found settlers and soldiers referring to the local vintage as “méchant Suresnes.” Pinney (116): “The wines of Suresnes, near Paris, were a byword for sourness; a méchant Suresnes would thus be a superlatively thin and sour wine.” Pinney’s narrative is laced with deft humor, though sometimes the story is downright sad. Such is the case with one exasperated Frenchman, Peter Legaux, of this nation’s first commercial wine industry in eastern America by cultivating native grapes. Pinney spends three chapters on the pioneering plant botanists who used the grape’s reproductive appetite to create thousands of hybrids: vinifera crossed with a native, with another, with another vinifera, and then with resulting hybrids, etc. Then the best varieties were sorted out.

By the mid-1800s, adventurers had found that vinifera would grow in the far West, with climates and soils different than the East’s. With that discovery, and with railroads spinning a transportation web, the race was on to see which region, east or west of the Rockies, would dominate the continent’s wine trade. California won, as you may have heard. With so much already published on the West’s wine history, Pinney’s chapters offer fewer insights than his chapters on less well known wine states. (His writing on Kentucky as an early wine state and on New York’s progressive, long-term government commitment to scientific research are especially fascinating.) All told, wine illuminates some key themes in early U.S. history: the efforts of newcomers to adapt to their new world, the cultural traditions they brought to the task, the impact of technological and scientific advances, and the westward creep of such knowledge and the population in general.

Pinney’s is not the typical narrative history. Mercifully, no schools of thought exist to provide codified terms for the study of wine’s social history; this fact, partly, helps free Pinney from attention to the usual academic jargon. But the greater tribute surely goes to him directly: sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, achieves that elusive blend of precision and freshness of thought. His style is strengthened further by venerable tactics from Basic Composition: every two chapters or so, and sometimes within chapters, he reviews his themes, while nudging and pulling the reader from one part of the story to the next.

To appreciate wine fully, and to see its traditional role in most other
civilized societies besides America, is to appreciate the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said: “No nation is drunken where wine is cheap.” Jefferson was the leading advocate of American wine among the founding fathers. With his attachment to agriculture, he spent decades encouraging many failed attempts at winemaking in his native Virginia. He was also a big wine drinker and collector, and could afford the world’s most expensive wines, from the most famous vineyards of his day. But his writings on wine suggest he also appreciated its history: nearly all of Europe’s wine regions got started in the pursuit of sound, inexpensive drink for everyday use, and some later developed more expensive products, primarily for export. Here the American experience was very different, the most important difference of all, I think. Pinney seems to see this difference but never explicitly addresses it, except to suggest why whiskey was the preferred daily table drink of the American masses. But while peoples’ tastes are greatly influenced by what is cheap and available, early American winemakers never seemed too concerned with changing the tastes of the proletariat. My point is to put a little class analysis into the social history of wine, which is really about two different things: wine for everyday use, and the really fine, vintage-dated, and at least moderately expensive stuff.

The career of Nicholas Longworth is instructive. He was the first to make a commercial success in American winemaking, at mid-century around Cincinnati, with a sparkling wine from an American hybrid grape, Catawba. (It was a crude champagne, sort of the Great Western brand of its day.) During a 15-year period, Longworth and a few imitators got wealthy selling their wine at the astronomical price (for the 1840s) of $10 to $12 a case. Right from the start, American wine was aimed at a moneyed audience. This helps explain why drinking wine in this country is foolishly thought of still as an “upscale” act, shrouded in mystery and elitist overtones. Plus, there’s the fact that wine is expensive in America, more expensive than in any other western country.

A full exposition on the U.S. wine industry as an anomaly is way beyond the scope of this essay, but it is a subject worthy of much greater study. Wine has always been business, but to many Europeans, it was also part art. In America, though, the businessmen prevailed over the artists. Wine’s early history here was marked repeatedly by get-rich-quick schemes — an unwillingness or inability to slowly build an industry on reasonably good wine at reasonable prices — and by men who cared little for the unique artistic tradition of winemaking that would have fostered the development of great wines and their appreciation. From Jefferson to Longworth, to countless others later in the century, many talked about this or that native wine equaling “the finest that Europe can offer.” But there seems little evidence that this was more than ad talk and boosterism. “European quality at domestic prices” was as much sales talk then as it is today.

Pinney notes that American wines did win numerous medals in international tastings in Europe. But such competitions, then as now, were undoubtedly highly politicized and often rigged to assure an avalanche of awards. I used to be a wine judge, and usually the main goal of a contest was to publicize the sponsoring organization, exposition or agricultural fair, and by extension, the wine industry. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of awards are handed out at wine competitions because fewer would inflame competitive tensions among producers, ensure bad publicity about overall quality, and complicate next year’s event planning with the specter of too few entries for a genuine extravaganza.

Time and again in visits to U.S. wineries I am struck by the incredible blandness of the wines. One influential wine writer, Robert Parker, has decried the standardized taste of too many California wines, but I am speaking more of other regions’ wines, from east of the Rockies, mostly of red wines, since that’s what I like best; and mostly of vintage-dated wines in which excellence, not everydayness, is the goal. Most often, the blandness is born in the grapes. There are only a handful of truly noble varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir (some people place Syrah, Merlot and even Zinfandel in the list of super-quality red grapes); for white wine — Chardonnay, Riesling, and Semillon. These European vinifera grapes grow well in relatively few places in the world, with California and the Pacific Northwest being among those places. Americans are used to seeing these grape names on the labels of wines made in this country. The tradition in Europe, however, is to label wines based on the region they come from, without naming the grapes, partly because most fine European wines are made from two or more grapes, so displaying the varietal on the label is not practical. Yet in the United States, a single variety named on the label implies quality and distinctiveness, while our cheapest jug wines, blends of several grape varieties, are called Burgundy and Chablis. This is an insult that the French in those great wine regions detest us for.

I am by no means the first to list the only noble grapes. In places where they grow best, wines unmatched in richness, flavor and finesse result. There are, of course, exceptions of all kinds. Many outstanding wines of the St. Emilion district in France’s Bordeaux region are made with high percentages of Cabernet Franc, cousin to Cabernet Sauvignon. A fabulous red wine is made at Chateau Rayas in France’s Rhone Valley with Grenache, a grape
of middling merit elsewhere. And one of the best Chardonnays I've ever had was the 1985 from Markko Vineyards, in northern Ohio, not predictable vinifera territory. With the modern understanding of vinifera's enemies, they are grown in more places, but few if any great wines result from vinifera in Bulgaria, Rumania, or Yugoslavia, and get this, in Arkansas or Virginia.

This means that most winemakers, in most parts of the world, rely on a second and third group of grapes to make premium wine. In the Rioja district of Spain, for instance, that native grape of choice is Tempranillo. It is the dominant grape in a blend with several other locals, generally of lesser quality, that makes sometimes fine, delicate and original reds. The Sangiovese grape is to quality in parts of Italy what Tempranillo is to Rioja. In parts of the Rhone Valley, the star is Syrah; in still other parts of the valley it's Mourvèdre. In southern Portugal, it's the Perequita; in Greece, it's Mavrud (probably the same grape as Mourvèdre). Some countries with wine industries in more than one region have a workhorse grape in each district. But few knowable-wise wine drinkers would suggest that a top-flight Rioja or Italian Chianti or Rhone can match the depth of flavor and beautiful harmony of, for instance, a great Bordeaux, or even the best wines of California and Australia. The difference is in the grape: the Bordelais, Californians and Aussies rely principally on Cabernet Sauvignon-based blends for their best red wines.

All the talk about greatness, however, obscures what makes wine so fun: its variety, and the chance of seeing human intellect work with nature. I live on Pittsburgh's Southside, and as I'm driving or walking across the Birmingham Bridge after work, I often get a yen for a particular wine, or even for the taste of a particular grape. Wines of a favorite year, or region, or winery are like old friends. If you're hanging out with one you really enjoy, you're not constantly thinking of another close friend who's not there. Each

has special bits of personality that you prize. I find this to be especially true with some Rhone or Italian reds, made from unusual and often several kinds of grapes, and brimming with the winemaker's soul and sense of wine history. And although art appreciation doctrine teaches the supreme value of understatement, restraint, the sublime — objectives that influence French winemakers most of all — the Californians sometimes achieve a different kind of artistry in the even temperament, direct if uncomplicated explosion of flavor, and the warm, broad sensuousness of their red wines. (This philosophical difference, I think, is evident in many other dimensions besides winemaking.) What's more, evaluating wine without food is kind of goofy because good wine is often made with the local cuisine in mind, and vice-versa. A simple example: spicy Spanish and Italian tomato-based dishes are complimented by the high acidity of Rioja and Chianti wines, while a good California Cabernet, with its sweetish, ripe fruit flavors, does not work half as well.

All that said, the fact remains that in most cases blending of different grape varieties is practiced because the dominant grape variety has certain defects, and other grapes supply necessary flavor or even

Nature requires that the world's best wines be made from a blend of several grape varieties.

chemical components that take up the slack. In parts of the Rhone Valley, for instance, more than a dozen grape varieties are allowed by law in the blend, and most wines contain at least four of five.

Hugh Johnson hits this point. The noble grapes will grow in Italy and Spain, where a few tremendous wines are now being made from them, but "what a tragedy it would be," he warns (463), if winegrowers there "let all their ancient alternatives, their varieties dating back to colonists from Greece or Phoenicia, fall by the wayside. It is not a thought that their best winemakers can contemplate. What they are doing is walking the tightrope between the old and the new.... But their long-term goal is to find, propagate and perfect the cream of their countries' native vines."

With Johnson's observation fresh, I will bring this back to my original point about the blandness of U.S. regional wines. In most of America, the noble varieties do not thrive. The simple conclusion to draw, I submit, is that we need to concentrate on blending to make unusual, fine, vintage red wines — especially blending our own wines, whose flavors, by dint of being native to North America, are unique. This is less the case with white wines, but the point still holds. Others have mentioned this focus on blending in the wine industry's technical press, and in a few books, but the idea has not caught on. The line of thinking has a sad history, with some factors being beyond control and some due, I think, especially post-Prohibition thinking, to American provincialism — a dim recognition of the philosophies in other parts of the world behind the art and craft of making fine wines. How was asked at the expense of why too often.

In the last century, during the experimental days of regional wine trades in America, there were only mediocre varieties from which to make a good red table wine. Today, there a number of good varieties, but no real great ones. The three favored grapes for quality red wine production away from the West Coast are Marechal Foch, Chancellor and Chambourcin. All are modern scientific wonders developed in this century in botany laboratories, mainly in France, where vinifera grapes were crossed with varieties containing substantial amounts of native American genetic material. I have tasted hundreds of these "French hybrid" wines, from probably two dozen states, and al-
though there are wide variances in quality, one could shuffle my tasting notes, throw them up in the air, hand them back to the wineries in scrambled order, and no one would notice much difference. From Michigan to Long Island, Georgia to Arkansas, and everywhere in between, wineries make a Chancellor, a Chambourcin or a Foch, and even if the wine has enough fruitiness, which half the time it doesn’t, it is rarely more exciting than California “mountain burgundy” costing one-third as much. I know many fine folks making these wines, so I hate to say it, but there are too many simpleton Chambourcins selling for $7, and their sale at such prices constitutes a major hoax on the locals and tourists who buy most of it.

There is a body of thought, however, that the way the grapes are grown in America has much to do with the wine quality. In general, U.S. growers plant with an eye toward ease of cultivation. An exception is a Pennsylvania success story. Chaddsford Winery, in the southeast part of the state, makes excellent and often distinctive wines from French hybrid grapes. When asked why, the first reason winemaker Eric Miller gives is that he prefers grapes grown European-style: more densely per acre, with less space between vines, which requires more human handwork with more vines. (Americans and Europeans argue back and forth about whether these techniques improve quality.) Miller also does a practically unheard of thing: he blends the three most popular French hybrid white varieties. The resulting Proprietor’s Reserve White costs one-third as much as popular European dinner wines, and is consistently their equal in head-to-head tastings. Miller’s Chambourcin-based reds are fruity and racy, the best ones I’ve tasted.

Fine wine should not only be technically acceptable — most everything nowadays seems to be done well technically — but it should also have personality, some spirit. Not having personality is no great crime, but mediocre table wine should be sold at corresponding prices. (And a screw-top is fine!) “Most winemakers do not regularly taste great wines,” Miller said. “And it shows in their wines.”

There is a wine from Rhode Island called Sakonnet Red that is the most interesting red in non-California America, and it makes my point. Its rose scent and snappy cherry flavors result from a blend of the hybrid Chambourcin, with the Pinot Noir which grows well if not always reliably in the coastal sand. The winemaker took a noble variety and blended it with a lesser grape. It sells in good East Coast wine stores — not in Pennsylvania, of course, with its state monopoly — for about $7 a bottle. The quality is high and no wine from Europe or anywhere else in America resembles it. Similarly, winemakers along Ohio’s Lake Erie shore have started to blend Chambourcin to interesting effect with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot.

I intend to digress a little more, and — can you believe it? — to get back to the histories at hand. There is a variety in Missouri called Norton that is one of the few native grapes for fine red wine to emerge from all of the nineteenth century experimentation. (Related is Cynthiana, a grape so similar to Norton that their names are often used interchangeably. Cynthiana is produced in northwest Arkansas and in southern Missouri. Still another similar or identical grape goes by the name Virginia Seedling, and is grown in Missouri, Illinois and Virginia.)

Norton’s story is fascinating, mainly a mystery, with many twists that mirror America’s general history in the last century. The most recent research (John McGrew, American Wine Society Journal 18, Fall 1986, 85), holds that Norton was born by an accidental crossing of a vinifera and an American grape in about 1815 near Richmond, and then was developed for commercial distribution at a leading Long Island nursery. The Arkansas wing of the family insists that Cynthiana was found growing in the woods of that state. At any rate, the first U.S. winegrower to achieve broad commercial success, Longworth, tried Norton around Cincinnati, which by the 1830s was an important frontier river city. Norton does not grow readily from cuttings, and Longworth’s efforts flopped. He pronounced the grape worthless. Like many characters whose stay in a frontier town didn’t work out, Norton headed further west.

Pinney tells the story nicely, beginning on page 174:

The flow of German emigration that reached Cincinnati in the 1820s moved through and beyond it to St. Louis and the Missouri River Valley in the next decade. A large part of it had been attracted there by the idealized, romantic description of the region published in 1829 by Gottfried Duden, a wealthy German who was convinced of the evils of overpopulation in the Old World and sought a new beginning in the American West.
early settlers did not trouble themselves to put up a church building, though they were quick to establish a theatrical society and to build a music hall.”

An unusually high percentage of these early settlers were college-educated, cosmopolitan people from southwestern Germany and bordering areas of Switzerland. Duden had not bothered much with the particulars of pastoral beauty, and so when these “Latin peasants” — farmers who could read the learned languages — arrived, they found stony, hilly ground unfit for the row crops they had in mind. It is simplistic to say the area looked like the Rhine River Valley, but there is symbolic value to the comparison, for the Germans did what was done along the Rhine: they planted grapes on the stony hills.

Pinney says that many of the settlers were not from a part of Germany with a tradition of wine-growing, and so were not guided and later ruined by Old World insistence on European varieties. So, after vinifera were tried, “almost as a ritual gesture, it seems,” the Germans switched right away to native hybrids. A far more detailed study by Walter Kamphoefner (The Westfalians: From Germany to Missouri, Princeton: 1987) reveals that men from wine-producing regions of Germany, while not a majority of the overall pioneer population at Hermann and nearby Augusta, did in fact dominate the early wine industry there. Pinney does not cite Kamphoefner, although both reach the same general conclusion: the Germans were an ingenious lot, not enslaved by European tradition. In fact, even though Longworth had signed Norton’s death warrant, the free-thinking Germans gave the outlaw another chance. Using Norton, they developed by 1870 one of the country’s few fine red wine industries east of the Rockies, to this date.

Missouri’s wine industry was by then the country’s second largest. “No red wine has ever been produced in America,” noted one taster (177), just returned from California, “equal to that made by the Germans of Missouri” from Norton. Such comments were the rule. The industry produced several authorities on late-nineteenth century viticulture, and paved the way for many Germans into the halls of power in midwestern politics and business, especially in St. Louis. Most importantly, a major plant nursery industry grew to support the wine trade. When the phylloxera bug infested Europe from Germany to Italy, resistant native vines were sent across the Atlantic from Missouri; grafting them to the European vines is universally credited with saving Europe’s vineyards late last century.

Pinney mentions Norton several times in his book, though I wonder if he is aware how much. He refers to an eminently turn-of-the-century expert, U.P. Hedrick, who called it “the best American grape for red wine.” Every mid-American state that tried it, as far south as South Carolina, had documented success with the grape. Like most native hybrids, it was susceptible to a fungus disease called black rot, which was not controlled until a copper sulphate and lime spray was developed in 1885 in France. By the time the spray was popularized in America, the fungus had seriously injured the Norton vineyards of Missouri and other states.

After Prohibition’s repeal, it seems Norton was practically forgotten. It is a hard to figure. Philip Wagner, a newspaper man from Baltimore who became the leading authority on grape growing in eastern America as the industry struggled to its feet after Prohibition, recommended Norton in his highly influential Wine Grapes: Their Selection, Cultivation and Enjoyment (New York: 1937). But Wagner was equally interested in encouraging American growers to plant modern hybrids — mostly those developed in France and popularized at roughly the same time Wagner’s own knowledge and interest were growing. This is not to denigrate Wagner, whose books educated and directed hundreds of winemakers. (Pinney reserves the final paragraph of his preface for Wagner.) The disease that finally killed the Norton was Prohibition. Technology beat black rot, but by the time new plantings were made after World War II, all of the old-timers from Norton’s heyday in Missouri, and in Virginia, where Norton was also widely planted, were long gone. In Pinney’s last chapter, he points out that the worst effect of Prohibition was a 25-year gap in the accumulation of technical knowledge in winemaking.

I grew up in Missouri, and someone is going to have to show me why Norton cannot be America’s great red wine grape. I helped make wine from it a couple of times, and I have studied it for almost 10 years, since I tasted the Norton made by Stone Hill Winery in Hermann. Norton has all the attributes of a premium red wine, without the odd flavors of many native American hybrids. Its deep berry fruitiness reminds me of Syrah, and when I smelled a Norton wine again last summer, I swear I smelled Brunello, the top grape of Tuscany. And yet Norton is unique, with a subtle coffee-tinged aroma and a lovely purplish-maroon color that fades to blue on the edges in a goblet. I have seen nearly every modern critical assessment of its wine, and not a single mention has been unfavorable. Stone Hill began producing rich, heavyweight examples of the wine in the mid-1970s, and a half-dozen other wineries make the wine, but none of them are outstanding. Leon Adams, a writer as well versed as anyone on the full range of Amer-

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\text{Blends of European varieties with grapes of native American origin hold great potential as our most distinctive wines.}
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(177)
ica’s wines, has praised Norton’s potential in his three editions of The Wines of America. And Lucie Norton, in her quirky yet excellent Winegrowing in Eastern America (Ithaca, 1985), says that in Norton blends rest the “best potential for cellared-aged wines made from pure native American grapes.”

But what to blend with it?

Nineteenth century winemakers had only one complaint with Norton, and Wagner noted it in 1937: “The fact is its wine has excellent color, bouquet, plenty of tannin and acidity, and good alcoholic content. Its only defect, as a matter of fact, is that when made pure it is apt to have all of these characteristics in too much abundance....” The Germans of the Missouri River Valley had found their good grape with obvious defects, just as the Italians had Sangiovese and the Spanish had Tempranillo. And what did these Germans use for blending with Norton, to make it a better wine than it could be in its pure form? Water. No reliable hybrids existed for this purpose, although by the 1870s at least one Missouri producer had developed a hybrid called Montefiore in his internationally acclaimed Norton blend. Today, I don’t think any popular hybrids can

match Norton’s flavor quality, but for various reasons, none of them seem right for blending either.

One reason Chancellor, Chambourcin, and Foch are more popular than Norton is that they are easier to grow over a wider part of middle and eastern America. (Experiments in the last century showed Norton does not grow well on the West Coast.) Like most premium red grapes, Norton requires a long, warm growing season, generally south of a line drawn east from Kansas City. Yet, I still wonder if the grape has been given a modern chance in many places. Few mid-Atlantic growers, for instance, seem to know about it, yet its adaptiveness is quietly legendary. Stone Hill revived its Norton wine after finding 80-year-old vines growing untended on its property. I know one grower who bulldozed several acres near Hermann before he saw the pattern of a vineyard in the underbrush and realized that what he thought were trees were actually giant Norton vines, in their 120th year on the hillside. They had survived all diseases and were cheerfully producing fruit. That vineyard is being cultivated again.

Modern hybrids were developed to create wine industries where grapes weren’t normally cultivated. Many of them are like those orangish things they call tomatoes in the winter, or to stretch the point a bit further, like aluminum siding: their development has more to do with market demands, high yields, and low maintenance than with good taste. That’s fine, but passing off ordinary wines at fancy prices will, in the end, benefit no one, although many wineries are too entranced by the short-term gains to see this. Wines that aren’t unique should hold their fans through reasonable prices; high prices drive away everyday consumers, and perpetuate wine snobbery that is no good for anyone.

This is where enlightened federal policy on wine could square with what historically has been among our government’s principal goals: to make it easier for business to do business, and to promote economic development by increasing demand for certain products. President Bush proposed increasing federal taxes on wine from 3 cents to 76 cents on a standard 750 milli-liter bottle, calling it a “luxury tax.” (Congress settled on a 21 cent tax per bottle.) I won’t argue against the luxury label for wines with $15, $20, or $100 price tags. But substantially lower taxes for domestically produced everyday wines might push the industry to place more emphasis on them, and stimulate consumer demand for them. More demand for fairly priced regional wines could help many economically depressed rural regions where the grapes are grown.

All this would require a few politicians who want to invigorate the wine industry instead of choosing the easier predatory approach that plays to neo-Prohibitionist sentiment and narrow-mindedness about alcohol use. In this dream world more people could appreciate wine, its history, and moderation in general. It would take a few years, and the idea is not compatible with TV at dinner or short-term political and financial gain. It would probably take a Jefferson, and that is probably why it won’t happen.

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The Politics of Plant Closings
By John Portz
Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1990. Pp. 214. $29.95, $12.95 paperback

This book examines the response of local governments to three plant closings: the Brown & Williamson cigarette plant in Louisville, Kentucky; the Rath meat packing plant in Waterloo, Iowa; and U.S. Steel’s Dorothy 6 blast furnace in Duquesne, Pennsylvania. The author ranges beyond these three case studies with crisp vignettes of many other plant closings, like those of Youngstown, Ohio steel mills. Throughout, the book’s project is to define the policy options available to local governments.

The political science terminology in which the analysis is cast may be opaque for some readers. However, veterans of the campaign to save Dorothy 6 will find the narrative, which is based on interviews with more than 30 protagonists as well as published sources, to be both balanced and accurate. This