

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Dan Keeling: *Who's Afraid of Romanée-Conti? A Shortcut to Drinking Great Wines*

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Based on its title, you might think *Who's Afraid of Romanée-Conti?* is a book for the uninitiated and budget-constrained, people who want to drink great wine but are intimidated by fancy French words and unable to pay sky-high prices. That's not this book.

Who's Afraid? is a collection of essays by Dan Keeling, editor and co-founder of *Noble Rot*, a London-based wine and food magazine that, according to their website, is “a cork-popping, gut-busting, genre-disrupting ode to gastronomic pleasure.” The book's central premise is that far too many commercial wineries sacrifice taste for efficiency—wines that can get to market quickly and consistently. *Who's Afraid?* is a guide to distinctive wines made by “farming living soils, lowering yields, using native yeasts and putting the onus on somewhere-ness.” The book profiles winemakers admired by the author, often emphasizing their willingness to reject wine-making conventions in pursuit of quality and uniqueness.

Who's Afraid? is not an entry-level wine book. The essays, organized as stand-alone chapters, delve deeply into local characteristics of vineyards, production techniques, and insider information about winemakers. The material is sometimes dense and inaccessible, as in the following excerpt from a chapter on the Piedmont region of Italy:

Some, like Giulia Negri, who left home in Milan to take over her family's old estate high up in Barolo's Serradenari mountain, make regular pilgrimages to top vignerons such as Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey in Chassagne-Montrachet to learn, while Torinese college friends Luisa Sala and Lara Rocchetti spent harvests at Comtes Lafon and Cecile Tremblay while training at La Morra's benchmark Trediberri, prior to starting Lulu in 2019.

Who's Afraid? is also not a guide to “affordable” wines. Most chapters end with a list of recommended wines. As most of them were unfamiliar to me, I did a web search to investigate prices and availability. I randomly selected 12 wines out of about 150

recommendations, and I was able to find all of them on wine-searcher.com. For my sample, per bottle prices (averaged over vintages and exclusive of taxes and shipping charges) ranged from \$51 for Mai & Hodgson Les Aussigouins Chenin Blanc to \$2,242 for Emmanuel Houillon-Pierre Overnoy Arbois Pupillin Vin Jaune. Mean and median prices were \$449 and \$217 per bottle, respectively. Cheaper than Romanée-Conti, but still mostly out of reach for the typical wine consumer.

Although not a book for wine novices and bargain hunters, *Who's Afraid?* does offer fascinating glimpses of winemakers at the top of their craft. Half of the chapters are on French wine regions, a quarter on other European regions, with the remainder of the book devoted to assorted topics. The book's forward, by William Kelley, notes that many of the chapters are updated versions of essays previously published in *Noble Rot* and elsewhere, and, like a claim of innocence that precedes an accusation of guilt, states that the book is not just a compilation of articles. But it pretty much is. There is little connecting the chapters apart from the book's overarching theme that great wines can be found if you look for innovative, uncompromising producers.

The French chapters visit many of the well-known regions, but always with an eye out for the unconventional. The chapter on the Beaune appellation in Burgundy skips over large producers like Drouhin, Jadot, and Faiveley to highlight small up and coming wineries Domaine des Croix and Les Horées. The Bordeaux chapter contends that over the past two decades the region has "lost its crown," because top producers shifted to making overly concentrated wines more likely to receive high scores from the wine critic Robert Parker. Now, some wineries, like Cheval Blanc, have adopted regenerative farming techniques and are striving for finesse and individuality. At Troplong Mondot, in St-Émilion, they are abandoning Parker-style wines by harvesting earlier and decreasing the use of new oak. The author compares two wines made before and after the change in methods: "the previous regime's opaque, okay 2015 – with glycerine-rich tears clinging to the sides of the glass like wall-paper paste – lacks the finesse and attractive fresh perfume of crushed coriander seeds of de Gironde's (the new winemaker's) 2018." Chapters on the Champagne region focus on often-dismissed sparkling rosé and still wines from the Coteaux Champenois appellation. The author doesn't seem to find many great wines there.

The chapters on lesser-known French regions deliver some satisfying surprises. There is one on Château-Grillet in the northern Rhone Valley, at 3.8 hectares one of France's smallest appellations. The vineyards are owned by a single winery of the same name that produces only Viognier. The author reviews a number of vintages, all of which sound delicious ("a perfume of ripe apricots, orange pith, caramel and spice", "layers of gunflint, nuts, and mango"), but, alas, all of which are beyond my price range. Another chapter describes a quiet revolution taking place in Savoie, a region in the French Alps, where winemakers are producing quality wines with uncommon varietals like Gringet, Jacquère, and Mondeuse. Lastly, there is a chapter on wines from Corsica, the French island in the Mediterranean Sea. Here the Sciaccarellu grape is undergoing a renaissance at the hands of pioneering winemakers at Abbattucci and Vaccelli.

The longest chapter is on Romanée-Conti. The reader first learns some history of the 1.8-hectare vineyard, including that it has long been considered Burgundy's supreme property. The second half of its name comes from the Prince of Conti who purchased the vineyard in 1760. We are then treated to a description of a 2022 wine tasting the

author had the extreme good fortune to attend, featuring what were at the time of the tasting the previous 25 vintages of Romanée-Conti. The event was organized by Aubert de Villaine, co-owner of the winery, and held in what had been the Prince of Conti's barrel room. The author admits that one quickly reaches the limit of language when trying to describe Romanée-Conti—words like “peppery” and “minerality” are not sufficient—and resorts, instead, to describing physical reactions: “If getting my head around the first flight of wine was the olfactory challenge of my life, the second is the mother lode, my pleasure receptors working overtime to keep up with the onslaught.” The 2005 is especially impressive and the author predicts it will continue to improve over the next 75 years. Too bad a bottle currently sells for \$32,000.

The non-French chapters take the reader to wine-producing regions in Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and England. The Italian chapters showcase producers in Tuscany and the Piedmont region finding the best expression of Sangiovese and Nebbiolo grapes. A chapter on the Priorat region in Spain discusses how the area had faded from view until, in 1994, a glowing Robert Parker review brought renewed interest. In recent years, producers are finding success with Spanish varietals and farming techniques that preserve acidity, a challenge with the region's high temperatures. In a chapter on producers in the Valais region in the Swiss Alps, the author warns that you may need to travel there if you want to drink their wines, as only a tiny percentage are exported.

The remaining chapters focus on various topics, including what to look for in house wines at restaurants, pros and cons of drinking old wine, and advice on how to start a wine cellar. My interest was peaked by the chapter on the alcohol content of wines. I have often wondered why I can react so differently to low and high alcohol wines when the difference in alcohol by volume is only two or three percentage points. Or, in the author's words: “the difference the next day between polishing off, say, a 12.5% Chinon from the Loire Valley, and that bottle of 16.5% Amarone, is the difference between feeling like a normal human being, or like the Manson family is smoking crack in your head.” Unfortunately, the chapter does not offer any answers beyond the assertion that “quality wine does not give you a hangover.” I have disproved that claim on more than one occasion.

In sum, *Who's Afraid?* is a beautifully illustrated book that should appeal to knowledgeable wine drinkers looking to find new and exciting wines, with the financial means to achieve this goal.