

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

## Ray Isle: *The World in a Wineglass: The Insider's Guide to Artisanal, Sustainable, Extraordinary Wines to Drink Now*

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What if one could really taste the world in a wineglass? In over 700 pages of description and discovery, Ray Isle, Executive Wine Editor at *Food & Wine*, teases the reader of his new book to believe that identifying a place on Earth through a taste of wine is indeed possible. “One sip of a great wine,” Isle says, “will tell you what kind of grapes went into it, where they were grown, even what the weather was like that year” (p. 1).

After four introductory chapters laying the foundation for his reader, Isle offers a virtual exploration of the globe, traveling through Europe, across North America, and to the Southern Hemisphere. In each of these geographies, Isle examines countries, regions, and hundreds of wineries, where he argues that where a wine is produced and who makes it can provide essential insight into distinctive practices from that area of the world (*terroir*), which determines its taste—hence the title of the book.

Isle prefaces chapter 1, “There’s a World in Your Wineglass,” with a quote from Colette’s *Prisons et Paradis* (1932): “The vine makes the true savor of the earth intelligible to man. ... It senses, then expresses, in its clusters of fruit the secrets of the soil” (p. 1). This prepares the reader for the tone and tenor of the book, while allowing a platform for Isle to quickly and clearly proffer support for the main theme of his argument: wine is both art and agriculture. “At its best,” states Isle, “wine is an artisanal creation that edges toward, and possibly sometimes achieves, art. ... At its heart, wine is also an agricultural product” (p.1). And, as an agricultural product, Isle notes the shift in public perception in terms of the benefits of conventional farming resulting in a “transformation of ‘organic’ from a word implying poorly made ... to one implying an avoidance of chemicals ... [which] has recently pushed winegrowers even further along this path” (p. 7). Isle explains that he is looking for the wine he drinks to answer three questions: “Where does it come from? Who made it? How did they grow their grapes and make their wine?” (p. 11).

Chapter 2, “Sustainability, Organics, Biodynamics, Regenerative Agriculture, and More” seeks to address these questions across six topic areas: sustainability, organic viticulture and winemaking, biodynamics, regenerative agriculture, about natural wine,

and to certify or not to certify. It is in this chapter that Isle makes clear his environmental passion, and calls upon the wine industry and wine buyers to be more sustainable. That is, to avoid “the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain ecological balance ... [that] looks beyond the boundaries of farming to address climate and social issues” (pp. 14–15). After an overview of the distinction between organic viticulture (“Organic viticulture specifies what you can and cannot use in your vineyard” (p. 16).) and organic winemaking, Isle explains the philosophy of biodynamics. “The central point of biodynamics is to build life or vitality within the ecological whole of the farm ... Where biodynamics differs from other types of sustainable or organic farming is in its belief that farming can be attuned to the spiritual forces of the universe” (p. 19).

After this primer, with a basic understanding of sustainable farming, Isle invites the reader to discover regenerative farming, which requires farms to “reverse climate change by improving soil health, increasing carbon sequestration, promoting diversity, and employing other strategies. Broadly speaking the ambition of regenerative farming is to improve the land rather than damage it” (p. 21). Next, Isle discusses a brief history of natural wine’s “basic premise that less intervention is better” (p. 25) before concluding the chapter with a pro and con segment on certification of the above distinctions (i.e., sustainable, organic, biodynamic, regenerative) and a list of the certifying bodies in each category.

Then, in chapter 3, “How to Drink Wine,” Isle shares his beliefs on the challenges translating flavors and aromas into words, why that can leave the consumer questioning their own palate, and offers his advice: “Ignore the adjectives as much as possible. Just taste the wine” (p. 31). Isle then discusses point scores for wines, which “make wine shopping easier, no question” (p. 35). But, according to the author, the point system is an illogical attempt to number the quality of a wine because any wine critique’s judgment could not be objective and, moreover, one’s experience with wine is contextual, which informs the wine drinker’s perception of the taste and quality of the wine and cannot be tallied. “The truth is that the story of a wine – knowledge of the people behind it and the place it came from ... – can deeply affect your experience of a wine” (p. 34). This is why, states Isle, “rating wines with numerical scores is so bizarre” (p. 33).

Before wrapping up the chapter, Isle makes his final argument by sharing his own story. With his history and experience, the reader may be inclined to believe him. “I’ve tasted tens of thousands of wines. I’ve definitely traveled tens of thousands of miles, to almost every country that makes wine, to write about them” (p.36). Isle explains “this book is not a typical wine guide. I think of it more as a collection of stories” (p. 37). Chapter 4, “Who Is in This Book and How It Is Organized,” transitions the reader neatly to the next segment, and the bulk of his work, where Isle profiles local vintners across the globe to investigate the wines they produce and share their stories.

Over the next 631 pages, entitled “The Wineries,” Isle traverses Europe (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Georgia, and Lebanon), the United States (California, Oregon, and Washington), and the Southern Hemisphere (Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile, and South Africa). In each country, Isle highlights top wine producing regions and then zeroes in on selected wineries that have influenced his experience in the wine industry by offering “something *more*. ... something that expands beyond the direct chemical characteristics of flavor and aroma. That moreness [sic] might come from the winemaking or viticultural choices that went into making

a wine. It might come from the history of the people who made it, or the fact that the wine expresses a vineyard site or a sensibility or both. It might be the way that specific wine seems distinct from every other wine you've ever tasted. It might be found in the way a wine tells a story" (p. 36).

In these pages, the reader is transported to "independent wine producers around the world who farm sustainably, organically, or biodynamically and who make great wines that express the places they come from" (p. 39). With literally hundreds of wineries described here, Isle runs the risk of overwhelming the reader with information. After some time, however, the savvy reader, will notice the author's methodology: each section begins with a surface history of wine in the respective country, then a brief overview of the wine region's legacy, followed by a smattering of highlighted wineries that achieve Isle's concept of "more." My recommendation to the reader is to review these pages as a manual, and turn to specific geographies only by need and interest. For example, if a planned vacation to Portugal is imminent, turn to page 403 to enhance your base knowledge of quintessential regions and uncover boutique wineries you might visit.

In his introductory chapter, Isle writes, "my hope here is to celebrate a specific realm of wines: ones whose grapes are grown with care and with concern for the environment; ones that express the character of the place they are from and the sensibility of the person who made them; ones that, if you let them, offer rewards beyond simple flavor" (p. 11). If reading about wine alone isn't compelling enough, Isle knows how to keep the attention of his reader. With writing that is, at times, irreverent (by memory, there were at least five profanities printed in the About Natural Wine segment), often personal, and highly engaging, Isle's accessible and knowledgeable work seems to achieve his stated objective.