

*The key to wine enjoyment
is having confidence in
your own choices.*

INTRODUCTION

Why “Plain Talk?”

About three years ago a good friend of mine dropped out of the Napa Valley Vintners Association because he thought it had gotten too serious, too political. All he wanted to do at the monthly meetings was eat, drink and have a good time.

While I remained in the Vintners Association, he and I created a new organization for the exclusive purpose of eating, drinking and frolicking. To make sure this group was accorded proper respect we named it the “Gastronomical Order for Nonsensical and Dissipatory Segregation.” We then invited vintners from ten of Napa Valley’s finest wineries to join us for a monthly lunch, each of us hosting once a year. Lunch sometimes goes on until 7 P.M. I usually learn more about what’s going on in the valley during that lunch than I do the rest of the month.

We even boast a club car, an unrestored, dirt-brown 1947 airport limo, the longest thing you have ever seen. In it we’re ferried to and from our gatherings.

There may be as much wine knowledge assembled at these get-togethers as anywhere in the world. But rarely do you hear descriptions about the “body, legs or audacity” of the wines on the table. To these guys wine is a staple! You can tell when one of the well-known vintners is truly impressed—he’ll stand up and say “This is a damned nice wine; I wish I’d made it.”

All of these vintners understand that wine production is a continuous, natural process that begins with planting the vine and goes on until the cork is pulled for drinking. If any step of the process is neglected or omitted, the product suffers. Therefore, this book does more than talk about drinking wine. It will address the entire process of wine production, from the vine itself to growing, crushing, fermentation and aging.

I wish my old dad would’ve had the foresight to leave me independently wealthy. Being a railroad laborer, he didn’t have much to leave. Since I have to work for a living, I can’t think of too many other things I’d rather be than a winegrower. I really enjoy my work. Wine has become my interest and my hobby. I look forward to going to work every day. I also look forward to a glass of wine and dinner with family and friends. Being a winegrower adds a dimension to that pleasure.

I sometimes wish I’d become as interested in a hobby or game as I am in wine. I’ve met people who can’t wait for the weekends to do what they really enjoy. While I do enjoy racquetball, bike riding, and fishing, it rarely occurs to me that I’d rather skip work and do one of the above. My life has been anything but dull. Fifteen years as a monk (a Christian Brother) and almost twenty-five years in the wine business, a marriage and family have helped make my first half century rewarding.

I assume that this book attracted your attention because you share my enthusiasm for wine. I want you to be as comfortable as I am with vino and with your choice of it.

When you hear the word wine, I hope it conjures up happy memories—maybe of a wonderful visit to the wine country, or of a great meal when the food and drink perfectly complemented each other; or maybe it was just a nice bottle of wine with a very special friend at a picnic.

Unfortunately, the subject might make some of you uneasy because of an unpleasant experience you've had. I'm certain there have been times when many of us have felt unsure about which wine to select from a restaurant list or which wine to take home for a special dinner. Or how about the wine steward, or maître d' who, after ridiculing your choice, condescendingly tells you what you really should have selected for that particular dish. Then there's that review you read that called your favorite wine "thin, lacking appeal, and, in short, detestable." Hopefully, these kinds of experiences and our resultant uncertainties haven't prevented us from choosing a wine to enhance our meal.

One thing I hope you'll learn in this book is that wine is really quite simple. It is a food to be enjoyed! Like art or music, the more you know about it, the more you can enjoy it, but you certainly don't need to know any five-syllable words for that.

I sometimes think that the wine cognoscenti, gurus, and snobs, have harmed the cause of vino as much as they have helped it. They speak a language that intimidates and confuses people, giving the impression that only a select minority can genuinely appreciate good wine. To them, I offer the wisdom of Lord Duff Cooper, who said: "There are two reasons for drinking wine: when you are not thirsty—to prevent it; when you are thirsty—to cure it; prevention is always better than cure."

I hope that PLAIN TALK will make you as comfortable with the "fruit of the vine" as you are with food, so that you will be able to select wines with confidence and enjoy them even more. That's not as easy as it sounds because here in America, we have no tradition of including wine in the daily meal. When I go to dinner with a group of friends, no one ever asks me to order their food. Frequently, however, the wine list is passed to me. It's true that I might be qualified to decide which is the best wine for the price, but some of my friends might not enjoy that choice any more than they would enjoy filet mignon if they were vegetarians. In the final analysis then, wine, like any food, is a matter of preference and taste. I have attempted to be simple and straightforward in order to help you understand better what you may already know about the subject. I also want to introduce some new and interesting information that will increase your appreciation of it.

For the past several years I have received, on a regular basis, voluminous questionnaires from prospective authors seeking material for books they want to write. I decided that the time had come for a professional winegrower to give his view of the wine world. I refer to myself as a "winegrower" because I have always been involved in the entire process, from the planting of the grapes to the bottling of the finished product. I dislike the term "winemaker" because to me it conjures up an image of manufacturing a product from various ingredients, whereas wine is a natural product. The fact that wine is a natural product is one of several factors which distinguishes it from other alcoholic beverages such as beer and hard liquor. More about that later. For now, suffice to say there are some genuine differences.

As a winegrower, I've had numerous occasions over the years to talk to people about wine. I've traveled around the country promoting my products and I've taught college courses in Wine

Appreciation. I've also consumed plenty of wine along the way! In any case, it's long been obvious to me there is a tremendous interest in wine. And the same questions keep coming up. I hope that PLAIN TALK will answer most of them.

As a teacher looking for a classroom text, I never found a book that presented the material quite the way I would have liked. First of all, it seemed to me that in a wine book a brief history is important in order to set the stage. Many texts lacked factual information on viticulture or grape growing. That's an important omission because no vintner on earth can produce a high-quality wine from low quality grapes.

To help you understand why some grapes are better than others, a discussion of the importance of climates, soils, grape varieties, cultural practices and even vine biochemistry is necessary. I want to show you how all these things must come together to produce fine grapes and, ultimately, fine wine.

Chapters 5 through 10 are technical, but don't be intimidated. They will give you solid information on the production of quality grapes and wine, which in turn should give you greater confidence in your choices. There are several ways to approach this book, but remember—a glass of wine in your hand will help what you're reading make a lot more sense.

You will see that my wine world is in the United States, primarily California. The focus is on California because it produces more than 90 percent of all the wine made in America. I'll use two regions, the Napa and Alexander Valleys, plus one variety, Cabernet Sauvignon, in many of my examples because they are what I know best. I wish to acknowledge the many outstanding varieties of wine being produced in other regions of California and in other states. References to foreign wines will be minimal. I have absolutely no desire to promote foreign wines.

Use this book to increase your knowledge and confidence. And enjoyment. If you come to trust your own judgment, I consider the book a success.

There are, of course, objective standards for judging whether a wine is properly made and technically correct. But very few made in California or the United States these days have obvious technical flaws. (For this, we can thank the schools of enology and viticulture at the University of California, Davis and Cal State University, Fresno).

Your subjective judgment of wine is useful and important! After all, your personal reactions are what make wine-tasting fun. Remember, then, that you are your own expert. This book and others, plus reviewers' opinions of wine, may serve as guides. But don't be intimidated if your preferences are different from mine or someone else's. Trust your palate—it is your truth.