

Poring over a story, not a score

Wine

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If you have ever read anything about wine, you've surely noticed the backlash — the veritable revolution — that has been waged against critics who rate wines with numbers. A new wave of sommeliers, bloggers and wine journalists directs venom at Robert Parker, at Wine Spectator, at any entity that sips and spits and scores.

Wine blogs and their comments sections are filled with would-be revolutionaries, trembling with indignation at the injustice of the 100-point scale. These wine-soaked Che Guevaras declare that the influence of the 100-point scale, such as the one Parker pioneered in his Wine Advocate in the early 1980s, is at long last on the wane. Or soon will be. Maybe. Someday.

The revolution, they tell us, is coming and it will be beautiful. We presumably will all hold hands in the liquor store and sing "Kumbaya," and no one will ever again buy a wine simply because it was rated at 90-plus points.

Now, I'm no fan of scores either, but the reality is that change is still far away. Shelf talkers in almost every wine-store aisle still tout the critics' numbers, and consumers still buy wines based on those numbers. The reason people cling to scores is fairly obvious: What is their alternative? Obscure tasting notes about aromas and flavors? How does the average drinker choose wines in a post-score world? Wine critics around the world seem to be searching for the answer.

In Italy, the Slow Food movement published its first English-language guide to Italian wines, "Slow Wine 2012: A Year in the Life of Italy's Vineyards and Wines," the second edition of which will be published by Slow Food Editore and distributed by Chelsea Green late next month.

"Slow Wine" introduces readers to more than 400 wine producers and more than 3,000 wines.

"We have abandoned the very easy-to-understand, but ultimately also trivializing, method of awarding points and sought to look beyond the glass," write Giancarlo Gariglio and Fabio Giavedoni, the editors, in their introduction to the "Slow Wine 2012" guide. "What matters is wine's soul."

So what is "Slow Wine's" revolutionary methodology? Wineries are rated with a rather confusing array of symbols: snails (for exemplifying Slow Food values), bottles (for excellent quality) and coins (for good value). And then there is a short narrative broken into three sections: People, Vineyards and Wines. "Story-telling is the key concept underpinning our approach," write Gariglio and Giavedoni.

Storytelling is Slow Food's stock in trade. The 130,000-member worldwide organization, as many know, was started by activist Carlo Petrini in the late 1980s in response to the opening of a McDonald's near the Spanish Steps in Rome. The Slow Food manifesto calls for a "good, clean and fair" model of food production and protests fast food, industrial food and homogenization. Its logo, the snail, has become a sort of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval for the eco-gastronomy set.

So what is a slow wine? That's a little hard to pin down. I met Giavedoni at Slow Food's biennial Salone del Gusto in fall 2010 when the Italian edition was launched, and he told me then: "For a wine to be a slow wine, it doesn't just transmit taste. It must also transmit values. They have two kinds of complexity, both in the glass and outside the glass."

"Slow Wine's" editors want to make clear that storytelling did not trump rigor. The book

represents 2,000 winery visits and 6,000 hours of work by a staff of about 200 who visit every winery. "We are journalists, not novelists," Gariglio wrote via e-mail. "We don't try to make things look pretty, we don't seek out the folkloristic side."

That is true about the prose. The 2013 entry for Antonelli San Marco (awarded a snail), which I visited recently in Montefalco, Umbria: "Filippo Antonelli always keeps a careful eye on the future, interpreting modern times while preserving the charm of the past. Which is why his cellar is one of the finest expressions of the Umbrian winemaking tradition." I'm not certain that sort of vague prose tells me much more than a point rating would. I know it doesn't begin to capture Filippo Antonelli, whom I've also met, and who told me hilarious stories of how he worries about

Recommendations

Prices are approximate. Check Winesearcher.com to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through a distributor.

The "Slow Wine" guide is at its best when introducing readers to Italy's diversity of grapes. Here a few producers from the book's pages that are available locally.

— J.W.

Vietti Tre Vigne Barbera d'Asti 2010

Piedmont, Italy, \$18

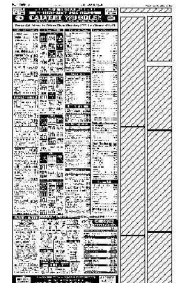
Vietti is well known for its pricier, nebbiolo-based wines. But this more budget-minded offering is great with pizza and pasta. Big, bold and dark, but with the oak in check.

Dalla Terra: Available in the District at Bell Wine & Spirits, Calvert Woodley, MacArthur Beverages; on the list at Dino, Cork Wine Bar. Available in Virginia at Chain Bridge Cellars in McLean.

Foradori Teroldego 2009

Trentino, Italy, \$22

Is the red teroldego grape obscure? Yup. Complex? Earthy on the nose; frisky and fresh with smoke and minerality in the mouth, with a long



finish that's great with so many dishes. Excellent value? For sure. Louis Dressner: Available in the District at MacArthur Beverages. Available in Virginia at Frenchman's Cellar in Culpeper.

Antonelli San Marco Grechetto 2011

Umbria, Italy, \$15

Grechetto is a relatively obscure white grape with floral aromas and rich notes of melon, peach and almond.

Omni: Available in the District at MacArthur Beverages. Available in Maryland at Wells Discount Liquors in Baltimore. Available in Virginia at Frenchman's Cellar in Culpeper.

Pieropan Soave Classico 2010

Veneto, Italy, \$17

Forget about the soave they drank in the 1970s. This one is tart and juicy, balanced by almond notes, a mineral quality and a crisp, clean finish.

Trembath and Taylor: Available in the District at Bell Wine & Spirits, Calvert Woodley, Schneider's of Capitol Hill, Sherry's Fine Wine and Spirits. Available in Maryland at Bin 201 Wine Sellers in Annapolis, Wegmans in Lanham. Available in Virginia at Wegmans in Fairfax, Total Wine & More in McLean.

Abbazia di Novacella Kerner 2010

Alto Adige, Italy, \$17

Kerner is a hybrid of Riesling and schiava, grown in Italy's northernmost, German-speaking region. It is full-bodied and creamy, with just enough acidity to make a perfect match with rich winter food.

Vintage Epicure: Available in the District at Calvert Woodley, Schneider's of Capitol Hill; on the list at Dino, Proof. Available in Maryland at Bin 604 Wine Sellers in Baltimore, Bin 201 Wine Sellers in Annapolis. Available in Virginia at Frenchman's Cellar in Culpeper.

Damilano Barbera d'Alba 2010

Piedmont, Italy, \$20

Fresh and easy drinking despite 16 months in the barrel. Cherry and balsamic aromas with dark-plum flavors.

Vias Imports: Available in the District at Pearson's. Available in Maryland at Wegmans in Lanham. Available in Virginia at Wegmans in Fairfax, Frenchman's Cellar in Culpeper.

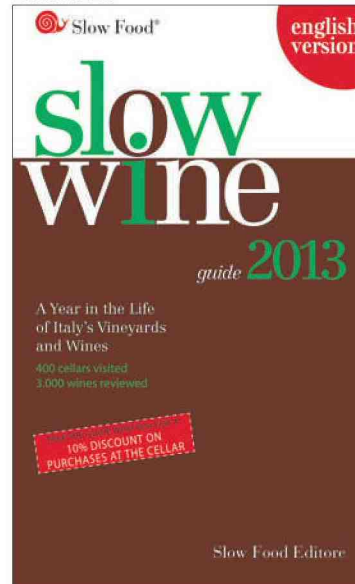
his older children who — like a lot of young Italians — don't drink wine and “love the stupid Justin Bieber.”

Likewise, “Slow Wine” describes Antonelli's Contrario 2009, a modern, fresh bottling of the Sagrantino grape, by saying it “represents an interesting experiment with the variety. It manages to bring out all the grape's fruity character without interfering with the tannins.”

Ahem. I'll give that description an 82.

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“Slow Wine” catalogues more than 3,000 Italian wines.