

# Books

## Barolo and Barbaresco – The King and Queen of Italian wine

**Kerin O’Keefe**

University of California Press, £27.95



THE AMERICAN WRITER Kerin O’Keefe has been immersed in Italy’s wines for 25 years. Having examined Brunello di Montalcino in a previous book, she now turns to Barolo and Barbaresco. The opening chapters

discuss the history, the terroir, climate change, the move to single-vineyard bottlings and the contentious stylistic issues that have long raged in the two neighbouring zones. She has a tendency to repeat information, sometimes up to three times in different places, but this is a minor flaw, as is the publisher’s decision to reproduce her husband’s photographs in a barely visible putty-like grey.

The style wars of Barolo focus on how the wines are vinified and aged: traditionalists favour slow fermentations and long ageing in large casks, while modernists prefer shorter fermentations but high extraction and ageing in barriques. In practice many producers use both techniques, as O’Keefe readily acknowledges, and today few winemakers identify themselves as doctrinaire adherents of one camp or the other. The difficulty in this book, as in her Brunello book, is that O’Keefe is partisan, and not shy about admitting it: she dislikes Nebbiolo wines aged in new oak, arguing, reasonably, that the toastiness of French barrels imparts aromas and flavours that mask the typicity of the grape.

She is fully entitled to her preferences. Unfortunately it also pervades her selection of wineries in the main part of the book – a guide to producers within each commune. With hundreds of wineries to consider, selection is inevitable and necessary. She has judiciously included big names such as Gaja and Giacosa alongside tiny family properties she admires. But there are many excluded properties. There is no mention of Roberto Voerzio, Clerico, Bruno Rocca, Gresi,

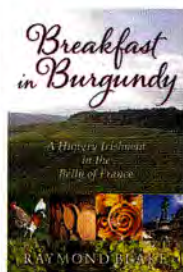
La Spinetta, Chiara Boschis, Pelissero, Vietti or Vajra. Perhaps O’Keefe doesn’t rate their wines highly or perhaps there was a limit to how many properties she could include. But were a writer on the Médoc to omit – I choose these names at random – Giscours, Palmer and Calon-Ségur, eyebrows would be raised.

So this is not a comprehensive study of the region and its wines, though it is an admirable and lucid introduction to mostly traditional wines from Barolo and Barbaresco. Nonetheless I would have liked O’Keefe to confront, however critically, estates that many regard very highly, even if she does not. *Stephen Brook*

## Breakfast in Burgundy

**Raymond Blake**

Skyhorse Publishing, £14.62



RAYMOND BLAKE, WINE editor of Ireland’s *Food & Wine* magazine, is a dashing Dubliner married to Fionnuala, the city’s premier classical violinist, to whom he has dedicated this book. Under the subtitle *A Hungry Irishman in the Belly of France*, he treats the reader to a two-decade romp through their first idea of buying a house in the Côte d’Or to becoming part of the Burgundy furniture. People, places, endless menus – some simple, some inspiring – and bottle upon bottle, all are recounted in a manner as gloriously coloured as the roof of the Hospices de Beaune. If you already own Jasper Morris MW’s approachable encyclopaedic tome *Inside Burgundy*, this will complete the picture, bringing Burgundy alive on a daily, seasonal basis.

Having shared the author’s passion for *la table* in the Veneto and a memorable dinner at Dublin’s Kildare Street & University Club (unsurprisingly he serves on the Wine Committee there), I knew what to expect: this is personal experience at an emotional level. When my wife and I lived in France in the 1970s, we, too, bought a house in the Côte d’Or – no running water and not much roof – and were there most weekends from Easter to the Hospices de

Beaune weekend in November. My memories of those years were fading until Blake brought them all flooding back. He says that ‘Burgundy must be enjoyed by the senses first, the intellect second.’ This is a book for the senses. *Steven Spurrier*

## Shadows in the Vineyard

**Maximillian Potter**

Hachette, £19.99 (hardback)



IT IS THE stuff of nightmares for wine lovers and auction houses, and the sort of real-life plot that writers dream about.

*Shadows in the Vineyard* tells of how world-famous Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC) was in 2010 held to ransom by an unknown assailant who threatened to poison its most precious vineyard, La Romanée-Conti.

This book takes a few pages to find its rhythm, and the description of DRC veers from respect to fawning at times. But the intrigue that any crime novel needs begins to mount when the as-yet anonymous arch-villain is introduced, creeping through the vines in the black of night.

A huge police investigation is mounted after DRC co-director Aubert de Villaine receives a capsule containing a map and a blackmail letter at his home address – a sequence of events made more gripping because this is no mere fiction.

It’s clear that Maximillian Potter, a confessed wine novice, spent considerable time absorbing Burgundy, the politics of DRC’s history and de Villaine’s character. He does a good job of including historical context and elementary information on Burgundy’s make-up, though this does risk breaking reader engagement with the core plot. One of the most illuminating sections is his recital of DRC’s leaner times, which subtly emphasises the cyclical and unpredictable nature of agriculture.

Of course, hindsight tells us that the outcome of this plot could have been worse. But, it makes a good tale, and more so by the fire with a glass in hand. Along the way, Potter exposes the fragility of France’s prized vineyards; the perpetrator himself wonders at the ease of access.

Potter also offers a rare take on de Villaine, who is presented as caring and considered, yet introspective. De Villaine told *Decanter* he wouldn’t read the book and would rather forget about the saga.

*Chris Mercer*

*‘This is not a comprehensive study of the region and its wines, though it is an admirable and lucid introduction to mostly traditional wines from Barolo and Barbaresco’*