



Planting the Vines

An Introduction

Fritz Allhoff

Socrates took his seat . . . and had his meal . . . When dinner was over, they poured a libation to the god, sang a hymn, and – in short – followed the whole ritual. Then they turned their attention to drinking. At that point, Pausanias addressed the group:

“Well gentlemen, how can we arrange to drink less tonight? To be honest, I still have a terrible hangover from yesterday, and I could really use a break. I daresay most of you could, too, since you were also part of the celebration. So let’s try not to overdo it.”

Plato (427–347 BCE), *Symposium* 176a2–176a1

Wine and philosophy have long had a symbiotic relationship, extending back toward the origins of both. Some of the earliest archeological evidence that we have for the existence of wine comes from the Neolithic period in modern Armenia and northern Iran; a pottery jar coated with wine residue has been dated to 5400 BCE. By 2500 BCE, wine was being cultivated on Crete, and probably on mainland Greece as well.¹ But the period of time that I want to call to attention is the fifth and fourth centuries BCE when Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, laid the foundations of what would become Western culture. Wine undoubtedly played an important social role during this time and, by extension, has had a significant impact on our own culture and history.

¹ Tom Standage, *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (New York: Walker and Co., 2005), pp. 47–8.



The most overt connection between wine and philosophy lies in the *symposia* that took place in ancient Greece: these were effectively wine parties that gave rise to profound philosophical dialogue. As alluded to in the epigraph, the Greeks did not drink wine during their dinner, but rather thereafter: following dinner, they would retire to an *andron*, which was a room largely dedicated to these events and one of the central architectural features of Greek homes. The ceremonies were initiated with toasts to the gods, fallen heroes, and one's ancestors, and then the drinking could begin in earnest. Greeks mixed their wine with water in a special bowl (called a *krater*); the mixtures could be adjusted depending on how serious the drinking was to be, but water was nearly always added in at least equal parts to the wine.² The revelry often extended late into the night, and philosophy was undoubtedly a focal point of conversation at many of the *symposia*.

What this shows, though, is that wine and philosophy were coincident: certainly wine catalyzed philosophical dialogues, but there is an important difference between wine as a social lubricant and wine *itself* as an object worthy of philosophical study. And, while I think that a strong tradition exists in the former regard, there has certainly been little tradition in the latter. This book, of course, aims to remedy that by looking at wine, along with its social and historical contexts, through a philosophical lens. To this end, the volume is composed of nineteen essays which explore various philosophical dimensions of wine. The contributors bring diverse backgrounds to this project: they comprise academics of different fields, as well as non-academics who are either winemakers or wine writers.

But, while wine certainly warrants more philosophical attention than it has previously been afforded, let us not lose sight of the fun and excitement that wine can bring to our lives. During the creation of this book, I have given a lot of thought to my own conception of and relationship to wine, and I think the following quote, from *Sideways*, helps to keep my thinking about wine in context:

I like to think about the life of wine, how it's a living thing. I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing, how the sun was shining that summer or if it rained . . . what the weather was like. I think about all those people who tended and picked the

² Ibid., pp. 56–7.



grapes, and if it's an old wine, how many of them must be dead by now. I love how wine continues to evolve, how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it on any other day. Because a bottle of wine is actually alive – it's constantly evolving and gaining complexity – like your '61 [Cheval Blanc] – and begins its steady, inevitable decline. And it tastes so fucking good.³



In the second part of this introduction, let me offer you a tour of what is going to happen in this volume, as well as sketch some of the issues that will be covered therein. There are six units: “The Art & Culture of Wine”; “Tasting & Talking about Wine”; “Wine & Its Critics”; “The Beauty of Wine”; “Wine & Metaphysics”; and “The Politics & Economics of Wine.” The first three units have been organized along the following lines: societies produce wine, then people drink it, and then people inevitably talk about it. The first unit, rather than addressing specific philosophical questions, serves to motivate the rest of the volume. The next five units, however, directly correspond to dominant and traditional areas of philosophical study: philosophy of language, philosophy of perception, aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics/political philosophy. In each case, the essays are accessible while also covering some serious philosophical ground; in many cases, they also defend novel (and sometimes controversial) positions. While I would suggest reading the first three units in order, I think that the last three may be mostly engaged independently, and I would encourage the reader to start with the essays that generate the most interest. In the rest of the introduction, I will speak specifically to the units and their constitutive essays.

The first unit, “The Art & Culture of Wine,” really does a lot of work setting up the rest of the volume. Whatever else we recognize wine to be, it is important to realize that our present wine practices are rooted in deep historical and cultural traditions. I think that, to have a good understanding of where we stand, we should think about some of the historical and cultural features that have gotten us here. So, then, we start toward the beginning, with ancient Greece. As mentioned

³ Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, *Sideways: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2004), pp. 76–7.



above, wine was an important part of ancient Greek culture, and it perhaps does not overextend the point to say that philosophy is the better off for the relationship: a lot of our philosophical tradition is indebted, at least in part, to the Greek *symposia* at which wine flowed freely. The first essay of the volume is by classicist Harold Tarrant, who talks about the culture of wine in ancient Greece as well as its manifestation in writings from the time (including those of thinkers like Homer and Plato). This is a great essay to start the volume, as it really establishes philosophical longevity and significance that should be afforded wine.

The second essay, by Jonathon Alsop, brings us through the current century: we know of the wine tradition owing to the Greeks, but could then wonder what sorts of influences wine has had on contemporary American culture.⁴ Alsop notices that Americans do not drink that much wine (ranking in the 30s for per capita consumption among countries); the Italians and the French drink, per capita, over five times what Americans drink.⁵ *Why* is this? Alsop starts with the passion for wine displayed by our third president, Thomas Jefferson, and then moves all the way through Prohibition and concludes with *Sideways* (2004) in trying to develop an accounting of American wine culture. Third, we have an essay by Kirsten Ditterich-Shilakes, who works with San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and Fine Art Museum. She is interested in the role that wine has played in motivating art. In her essay, she considers four wine vessels from across the globe and human history and shows how these containers go beyond mere utility to embody important cultural, philosophical, and artistic themes. Finally, the first unit concludes with an essay by Frederick Paola, a physician, who writes about the important health benefits of wine and, in particular, how empirical results can be viewed in relationship to Greek philosophies regarding virtues such as moderation. Given the near-ubiquity of claims purporting some link

⁴ The inclusion of this essay, by the way, is not meant to suggest that there are not interesting things to talk about regarding the relationship between wine and other countries' cultures. First, some of these will be discussed in Frederick Paola's essay (Chapter 4). And, second, America certainly has had (and, in some places, continues to have) strange attitudes toward alcohol that beg for some sort of explanation.

⁵ The Wine Institute, "Per Capita Wine Consumption in Listed Countries," www.wineinstitute.org/industry/keyfacts/per_capita_wine_consumption.php (accessed December 18, 2006).



between wine and health, Paola's essay serves an important function by both analyzing many of those claims and giving them some philosophical interpretation.

In the second unit, "Tasting & Talking about Wine," we start to explore philosophical questions pertaining to, well, just that: tasting and talking about wine. These things go together insofar as we often taste a wine, and then feel inclined to say something about what we just tasted. So, first, we might be interested in the event of tasting wine itself and, in particular, about what *kind* of experience this is. Certainly, some perceptual experiences are more cognitive than others: if you just look out the window, this might not significantly engage any sort of higher-level thinking. Alternatively, in reflecting upon some great work of art, there might be all sorts of cognitive elements that are brought into that experience. Which way does wine work? One obvious thing to say is that it can work either way, depending on what sorts of things the taster is trying to accomplish. In the first essay, though, John Dilworth argues that these sorts of cognitive (or, as he calls them, "analytical") approaches to tasting are defective insofar as they ignore important "imaginative" elements of tasting. He uses an evolutionary-based account of perceptual consciousness in order to motivate his views about wine tasting.

As I mentioned above, we frequently talk about wine after we have tasted it, and "wine language" plays an important part of this discourse. In the second essay, Kent Bach asks what *use* such language is, and wonders *why* we engage in these sorts of discourses. In particular, what are they good for? By asking this question, Bach is interested not in pragmatic consequences – such as being able to get the sommelier to suggest a wine that matches your palate – but rather in the prospects that such language has for increasing our *enjoyment* of wine. Ultimately, Bach argues that the ability to render verbal descriptions of wine does *not* contribute to our ability to sense, notice, and recognize wine's qualities; rather, he thinks that "great wines speak for themselves" and that language is not necessary to be able to appreciate them. The final essay in this unit is by Keith Lehrer and Adrienne Lehrer. Keith, a philosopher, has written about discourse and representation in painting,⁶ and Adrienne, a linguist, is the author of the

⁶ See, for example, Keith Lehrer, "Representation in Painting and Consciousness," *Philosophical Studies* 117.1–2 (2004): 1–14.



important *Wine and Conversation*,⁷ which analyzes wine discourse as well as the way that it has evolved across time. In their jointly authored essay, they combine their individual perspectives to develop an account of wine discourse and, in particular, one that is informed by the work in aesthetics and communication of Arnold Isenberg.

The third unit, “Wine & Its Critics,” moves into the role of the wine critic, as well as philosophical questions that arise from the purported expertise that such critics have. It is an obvious fact about our wine culture that wine critics bear a tremendous amount of influence: this is especially apparent through the 100-point rating system effected by Robert Parker, Jr. and thereafter promulgated by various media outlets, especially *Wine Spectator* magazine. These critics and publications have the power to make or break wines (or even whole vintages or regions), and there are certainly associative philosophical questions. First, *does* the wine critic have any authority? If a critic says that one wine is better than another, is this “true,” or rather just the expression of some subjective opinion of the critic? (Note that, even if we were to say that it is “true,” we would still have to say what that *meant*.) Second, if the critic does have such authority, *where* does it come from? Is it through special training, facility with language (e.g., for describing wines), or even for physiological reasons (e.g., sensitivity of taste)?

In the first essay of this unit, John Bender tries to help us understand what is at stake and, in particular, how to understand claims regarding the purported objectivity and subjectivity of wine criticism. Ultimately, he argues that *neither* of these modes fully captures what is going on, but rather that wine criticism is inherently both objective *and* subjective: there are objective features of wines that the critics are tracking, but each critic also brings certain subjective features into the tasting. The second essay, by Jamie Goode, covers a lot of ground. After talking about the practice of wine criticism, Goode reviews recent developments in the biology of flavor perception. From these results, he explores how we translate our tasting experience into language – as the wine critic invariably must do – and then returns to a discussion of intrasubjective differences in tasting and the debate between subjective and objective wine evaluation.

⁷ Adrienne Lehrer, *Wine and Conversation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983).



The fourth unit, “The Beauty of Wine,” takes an important area of philosophy, aesthetics, and raises the associative questions that pertain to wine. Aesthetics is a discipline that seeks to understand concepts like ‘beauty’, ‘art’, and ‘taste’. Most basically, we can ask *whether* wine should be regarded as an aesthetic object and, relatedly, whether its tasting should be regarded as an aesthetic practice (i.e., one in which we reflect upon various aesthetic properties, such as beauty, as then apply them to the object of our attention). For example, we uncontroversially regard paintings as art-objects, and we think that viewing paintings can be an aesthetic experience. However, can *wine* be such an object? For various reasons, philosophers, including Plato, have been reluctant to ascribe aesthetic status to objects that engage certain sensory modalities, such as taste. Other sorts of art, such as painting and symphony, are accessed through different sense modalities (i.e., sight and hearing) and, so various philosophical arguments have gone, are therefore entitled to aesthetic status in ways that wine (or, more traditionally, food) is not.⁸ The first essay in this unit, by Douglas Burnham and Ole Martin Skilleås, disputes these arguments. The authors defend the position that wine should be afforded aesthetic consideration and that (proper) wine tasting should be understood as an aesthetic practice.

Next comes an essay by George Gale. Though a professional philosopher, Gale is both an amateur winemaker and a former wine writer. We have all heard wine people (usually those trying to sell us wine) say things like “If you like it, then it’s good wine.” And, of course, this follows from some sort of purely subjective conception of wine experience (though note that this was a conception against which Bender argued in the preceding unit). But is this true? Do we always, as it were, get it right? Or could we like wines that are (objectively) bad wines and dislike ones that are (objectively) good wines? In the preceding unit, the essays explored similar questions regarding the relation between wine and language, but Gale’s essay uses these issues in an attempt to develop an account of wine aesthetics (as opposed to wine language).

⁸ For more on this, see Dave Monroe, “Can Food Be Art? The Problem of Consumption,” in Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe (eds.), *Food & Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).



Finally, this unit concludes with an essay by Steve Charters. Charters is both a Master of Wine (an extremely prestigious professional qualification) and occupier of perhaps the best job title one could think of: Chair of Champagne Management (at the Reims Management School). In this essay, he tries to get some *empirical* data regarding wine aesthetics: while philosophers often do their work in armchairs, Charters thinks that we can profitably elucidate some philosophical questions by actually talking to people.⁹ In particular, he documents the extent to which wine *is* often viewed as a proper object of aesthetic attention and to which wine tasting is viewed as an aesthetic practice. His research shows various ways in which opinions regarding wine and other art forms are coincident.

Our fifth unit, “Wine & Metaphysics,” is perhaps the most philosophically heady, though that property can at least be mitigated by the accessibility of the associative essays, two of which are by non-philosophers. The first is by Kevin Sweeney, an aesthete, who talks about the extent to which certain flavors can be properly said to be *part* of a wine. To motivate this discussion, consider some tasting note which might say that a wine “is redolent of tar and roses.” What does this *mean*? Certainly nobody has put tar or roses into the wine, so we might wonder what relationship these entities bear to the perceptual states effected by the wines. Is there some meaningful sense in which these flavors are *in* the wine or not? As with Bender’s earlier essay, Sweeney thinks that this is a false dichotomy, and he ends up defending a more nuanced view.

The next two essays are among my favorites in the volume. The first is by Bonny Doon winemaker Randall Grahm, who studied philosophy as an undergraduate, and the second is by Matt Kramer, who has written extensively about wine and is a regular columnist for *Wine Spectator*. Grahm talks about what can make wines meaningful and, in particular, what it means for a wine to have *soul*. He motivates this discussion with an experience that he had with an Alsatian riesling, which he found to be qualitatively different from some California wines that were also part of the tasting. In his essay, Grahm tells us what it means for wines to have the sort of special character that

⁹ While, historically, this might not have been a popular stance to take, it is one that has gained increasing attention and adherents in recent years under the guise of “experimental philosophy.”



makes them deserving of high praise as against others that are simply “there to please.”

The following essay by Kramer is excerpted from his important work *Making Sense of Burgundy*.¹⁰ Kramer tackles the elusive notion of *terroir*. While the English translation is something like “sense of place” (or, to use Kramer’s more colloquial expression, “some-where-ness”), it is less than clear exactly what this amounts to and whether wines can meaningfully be said to express such a thing. If, for example, *terroir* admits of things like soils, microclimates, clonal variants, and so on, it is at least possible that such *terroir* *might* be replicated in other locales. (One sometimes hears “*terroir* cynics” derisively saying that *terroir* can be emulated just by throwing some rocks into the aging barrel.) However, a more robust conception of *terroir* includes various social and cultural features that go into winemaking, and perhaps these are less exportable. Or perhaps the physical features will, practically, not be exportable either. Kramer tries to vindicate the notion of *terroir* by considering Burgundy, which is often taken to offer its most hallowed expression, as a motivating case.

The final unit, “The Politics & Economics of Wine,” starts with another pair of outstanding essays. Both of these are related to one of the most important events in the history of American wine, the so-called “1976 Judgment of Paris.” In this tasting, California cabernets and chardonnays were put up against some of the top red Bordeaux and white Burgundies, respectively, in a blind tasting. The results both shocked the world and catalyzed the California wine industry: the winners were, in the red category, the 1973 Stag’s Leap Cellars S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon and, in the white category, the 1973 Château Montelena Chardonnay. This event immediately had a tremendous worldwide impact on wine consciousness, yet it was covered by only a single reporter, George Taber (who was living in Paris as a correspondent for *Time* magazine). Taber went on to write an invaluable book about this topic, and it is a privilege to have him contribute to this volume.¹¹ In his essay, Taber teams up with Princeton economists Orley Ashenfelter and Richard Quandt to talk more about the competition and to analyze some of the data that

¹⁰ Matt Kramer, *Making Sense of Burgundy* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

¹¹ George Taber, *Judgment of Paris: California versus France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting that Revolutionized Wine* (New York: Scribner, 2005).



came out of it. In particular, they talk about the statistical methods that were used to analyze the tasting and suggest that alternative methods would have been more appropriate (though they argue that the results, at least in the red category, would have been the same). The next essay in this unit is by Warren Winiarski, the winemaker at Stag's Leap Cellars, and the same one who made the 1973 Stag's Leap Cellars S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon that won the competition. Winiarski writes about purported differences between Old World and New World wines. The fact that his cabernet bested the top Bordeaux châteaux has shown that American wines, at least in some cases, have achieved a stature comparable to that of European wines. He then goes on to wonder what it means to make such comparisons and, in particular, whether the differences between the different types of wine are as great as has been alleged.

The final two essays of the book are by Justin Weinberg and Drew Massey, respectively. Weinberg, a philosopher, is interested in the relationship between demand for (expensive) wines and their prices. Consider his example, the 1997 Screaming Eagle, which currently goes for about \$2,500. Weinberg argues that our interest in wines like this does not merely increase as the price increases, but rather increases precisely *because* the price increases. No doubt this is a great wine – it was given 100 points by Robert Parker, Jr. and lauded as “a perfect wine”¹² – but there seems to be some sort of irrationality in play if demand increases with price. In his essay, Weinberg argues that demand for wines does behave in this way (i.e., that wines often function as Veblen goods), and then goes on to ask what implications this has for our assessment of wine culture.

The last essay is by Drew Massey, a lawyer, who writes about a topic that seemed essential for this volume: wine and the law. In particular, it seemed there should be some lucid presentation of the legal (and associative philosophical) issues that attend to interstate wine shipping and why it can be so hard for residents of one state to get wines from another state. To be sure, bans on interstate wine shipping have been falling at a fairly rapid rate over the past few years, though there are still some recalcitrant states and some other states which have very complicated legislation. Massey does an admirable

¹² Robert Parker, *Wine Advocate* 126 (2000), January 1.



job explaining the history of American wine law as well as its current standing. The crux of the debate hinges upon the relationship between the dormant Commerce Clause, which seems to provide for “free and untrammelled” interstate commerce, and the 21st Amendment, which repeals Prohibition and appears to allow for local control over alcohol-related commerce. The (alleged) tension between these two parts of the Constitution has been the subject of ongoing litigation, and Massey closes the volume by helping us to understand these, and related, issues.



As I hope the introduction has made clear, this volume has a lot to offer. There is coverage of a wide range of philosophically interesting topics, and the contributors have done a wonderful job in presenting these topics clearly and accessibly. Most fundamentally, I hope that the volume comprises engaging essays that are rewarding to read, but I should also point out a secondary aspiration, which is that it helps to contribute to a rising interest in the philosophical dimensions of wine. By the time this book is published, there will have already been two substantial professional meetings on philosophy and wine, one other important volume, and at least one academic journal dedicated to wine.¹³ I think that the attention paid to the relationship between wine and philosophy legitimizes some of the questions that are being asked, and makes me optimistic for greater future discussion.

But, again, the primary goal of this volume is to be engaging, and I hope that the essays herein satisfy that desideratum. The contributors – who are drawn from six different countries and myriad

¹³ The first wine and philosophy conference, organized by Barry Smith, was held at London University in 2004. At the 2007 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Francisco, Kent Bach (a contributor to this volume) organized a one-day symposium on wine and philosophy, at which several papers from this volume were presented. The book that I mention is Barry Smith’s *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine* (London: Signal Books, 2007), which certainly warrants attention. Finally, I would suggest the *Journal of Wine Economics*, which has recently been launched. This journal has broader coverage than its name indicates and is worth a look.



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academic and non-academic disciplines – do an admirable job with all of their essays, and I thank them both for their contributions and for their efforts in response to editorial feedback. I hope that you enjoy the volume, and that it fosters your interest in both wine and philosophy. Cheers!

