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When wine was almost wiped out

Reviewed by Julie Foster
Sunday, March 27, 2005

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The Botanist and the Vintner

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How Wine Was Saved

for the World

By Christy Campbell

ALGONQUIN; 352 PAGES; \$24.95



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Like a beautiful woman who causes a commotion when she enters a crowded room, Australia has turned the heads of the wine world. With wines boasting lush fruit flavors and capitalizing on a reputation for friendliness, Australian winemakers have embarked on a marketing campaign featuring little kangaroos and boomerangs. Australian wines are the hot new thing in a global market. Still, in 2004, U.S. wine exports hit record highs. Sales were close to \$800 million, with California supplying the bulk of the product.

At the once-undisputed center of the wine world, this new environment is unsettling. With the average French citizen consuming half of what he did in 1961, vintners may be forced to distill high-quality wines into industrial alcohol. During a recent demonstration in Paris, beleaguered French vintners paraded through the streets, appealing for government help. Many carried coffins bearing the words, "Here lies the last wine grower."

Yet once before, French vintners faced a major crisis and survived.

"The Botanist and the Vintner: How Wine Was Saved for the World" by British journalist Christy Campbell tells the story of the how 19th century scientists and vintners saved the vineyards of France. The tiny insect phylloxera, or "the dry-leaf devastator," was first noted on grapevines in Roquemaure, France, in 1864. It ravaged the vineyards of France for nearly 20 years. The insect also spread across Europe, reaching Portugal and Austria in 1872. It appeared in Australia by 1875 and emerged in South Africa in 1886.

Being an accomplished journalist, Campbell did his homework researching the immense body of literature available on phylloxera. He has chosen a stimulating historical topic and cleverly linked it to recent events.

Campbell begins his story in California after phylloxera was detected in vineyards in Napa and Sonoma counties a decade ago. Thousands of acres of vineyards were destroyed, for which American wine growers were seeking an explanation. "The search for an answer went into the upper atmosphere. In the early 1990s scientists from the University of California and the Robert Mondavi company began working with NASA's

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Office of Advanced Concepts and Technology, which provided the aircraft, remote sensing and computer imaging. The programme was called GRAPES -- the Grapevine Remote-sensing Analysis of Phylloxera Early Stress."

He patiently leads the reader through the theories and experiments that 19th century scientists developed to identify the problem, understand the life cycle of the insect, formulate a remedy for the disease and, finally, return the vineyards to production. Campbell exhaustively covers the unruly debate that raged throughout France for two decades between those who thought that vines could be saved by various chemical treatments and those who promoted the grafting of disease-resistant American vines to French ones. The French also had to contend with what they perceived as the inferior taste of American wines. Would this "foxiness" taint French wine after the grafting process took hold?

"In spite of the horrors of the tasting of American wines at the Montpellier Congrès Viticole of 1874, four years later millions of American vines had been and were continuing to be planted in the soil" of the Mediterranean south. Campbell includes maps, a glossary of terms, a chronology of events covering 200 years, footnotes, illustrations and a list of sources plus his bibliography.

He is a master of inserting quirky tidbits unearthed during his extensive research. In a chapter discussing the Victorian passion for the new science of classification of exotic plants and animals, he offers a revealing peek into the later life of Charles Darwin. "In mid-life the bold explorer-naturalist of the Beagle had become a snuff-dosed invalid. His garden however became a laboratory as well as a retreat. Living specimens arrived in sealed glazed cases to be observed and experimented upon."

If there's a problem with "The Botanist and the Vintner," it might be that Campbell has included too much information. He drowns the reader in details, recounting how phylloxera rampages through each region, when a narrower focus on one locale would have sufficed.

His cast of characters is overwhelming. Many are mentioned once and disappear. This overstuffed style results in a repetitive, confusing amalgam of characters, places, agencies, organizations and agricultural statistics that is closer to a report than a smooth nonfiction read. But for those who persevere through "The Botanist and the Vintner," the rewards are there.

Julie Foster is a Sacramento writer.

This article appeared on page E - 3 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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