

The majestic return of a faithful companion: From abboccato to zymase

Jancis Robinson MW and Julia Harding MW (editors) *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (fourth edition)

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It weighs 6lb (2.8kg) and contains the entire world—viewed through the prism of wine. It's the fourth edition of *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, which first appeared in 1994 and had its previous (third) revision in 2006—which, incidentally, weighs in at 6.5lb (2.9kg). My own third edition is worn, frayed from the countless times it has been taken off the shelf. Its spine is loose from frequent use; and various bookmarks, deliberate dog-ears, and yellow Post-It stickers are reminders of past study and vinous essay questions: soil acidity, phloem, black foot... Its entry headings are like little black holes; before you know it, you have spent an hour looking up the cross-references. You may not have finished your essay or met your deadline, but you have traveled in your mind to wider shores of knowledge and gained a sense that this is indeed an endless journey. Thus all the more respect is due to editor Jancis Robinson MW, her assistant editor Julia Harding MW, and the advisory editors for viticulture and enology Richard Smart, Valérie Lavigne, and Denis Dubordieu, respectively. What a task to take on. The list of 187 contributors, of which 50 are new, reads like a rollcall of wine-related eminence that shows the

intellectual, interdisciplinary, and international scope of this new edition.

A thorough revision

In her preface, Robinson calls this “by far the most thorough” revision, with every entry “under intense scrutiny.” In a promotional video to the *Companion*, Robinson sums the challenge up as “nine years of change in the world of wine—boy, was it needed! We have revised over 60 percent of the 4,000 entries [4,104, in fact] and in many cases completely rewritten because the wine world has changed so much. The science of wine has advanced so much, so we have hundreds of new developments.” The new edition also contains 300 completely new entries, neatly presented in a list. What a joy to spot Carricante, my favorite white Sicilian variety, among them, in the good company of geosmin, vandalism, proximal sensing, kegs, and pet-nat—the guide is nothing if not current.

Among the new entries, Robinson herself chooses to single out social media, orange wine, and what she calls the “topic du jour: minerality.” She also points out that “We have completely rewritten all the entries on geology, for instance.” Dwelling for a moment on the list of new entries, apart from chronicling scientific advance, they certainly express the zeitgeist: Authentication has been included as a companion piece to the equally new entry on counterfeit wine. Humble concrete at long last gets its own entry, complete with a photograph of a shapely concrete egg, marking its full comeback as a quality material for wine vessels. *En rama*, previously obscure, has now become a fashionable term, at least among Sherry-loving, metropolitan elites. Changing wine geography also gets its due, in both the Old and the New World. How wonderful, exciting, and

encouraging to read in so much more depth about the developments in Turkey. The same is true for Argentina. The new maps are now colored and, in some instances, also far more detailed.

Tellingly, the Champagne entry has now been expanded to discuss the fashion for lower *dosage*; the entry on whole-bunch fermentation discusses pros and cons; while the entry on Spätburgunder is shorter but completely reflects the changed fortune of the grape. Some of the new entries are very short, but as a former “cellar rat” myself, I hugely appreciate this glorious job title’s inclusion. New horrors like the dreaded *Drosophila suzukii*, a spotted-winged fruit fly of Japanese origin that now causes havoc in both European and American vineyards, are also present.

Very rarely, there are unchanged opinions that, though desirable, have not (yet) come to pass: “It is not far-fetched to suggest that Syrah/Shiraz may soon be as popularly familiar a name as Cabernet.” This new edition, despite citing misuse before, makes a brave stand for grammar and now bluntly states that the term “varietal” is an adjective rather than a noun.

An unparalleled reference work

Thousands of wine students across the globe will rejoice in this unparalleled work of reference and see it as an essential starting point for further study. As a source of well-honed, succinct definitions, the *Companion* is invaluable. Take this, for example: “Clarification—progressive winemaking operation which removes suspended and insoluble material from grape juice, or new wine.” Or the entry for that slippery and much-overused word “terroir”: “Much-discussed term for the total natural environment of any viticultural site.” Indeed, succinctness and plain language are two of the *Companion*’s many virtues. Any non-scientist who has ever had to look up the fundamental process of photosynthesis in a volume of biochemistry will appreciate the clean-cut, easily comprehensible, but absolutely not dumbed-down entry here. Whoever needs more information,

Opposite: *The Companion*, with editor Jancis Robinson MW and assistant editor Julia Harding MW (bottom)

and serious students do, will go on to more specialized publications—but at least the *Companion* introduces the main facts and arguments with exemplary clarity. Robinson and her team have clearly achieved what they set out to do: “What we always want to do with each new edition is to provide the most up-to-date, single-volume, comprehensive reference for any wine student, wine professional, or just wine lover,” she says in her video. Wine is the ultimate interdisciplinary subject that forces the editors and contributors to grapple with horticulture, history, geology, botany, politics, law, chemistry, architecture, economics, biology, and so on.

Rigor, humanity, and humor

The revisions for this new edition have been admirably and impeccably thorough. Comparing the previous and current editions is enlightening and shows that scholarly rigor has been tempered by humanity. Here, the newly

added concluding words from the entry on “health, effects of wine consumption on”: “A final word, which won’t appear in studies of mortality. The healthy can enjoy a drink, but for those whose lives are restricted by chronic disease a glass of wine may be one of the few pleasures left. That is a substantial health benefit.” The *Companion* will also find ready use as a settler of dinner-party arguments with its “Appendix of Controlled Appellations and their Permitted Grape Varieties.” Yes, Petit Meslier is allowed in Champagne; and no, Frascati is not a grape variety. Cruel minds will find it a treasure trove for setting tricky quiz questions that will lead any self-professed or well-tested wine expert on to thin ice.

There also is plenty of humor, a quality often lacking in reference works. The definition of “wine writing,” for example, reads: “a parasitical activity undertaken by wine writers enabled by vine-growing and winemaking but more usually associated with wine tasting.”

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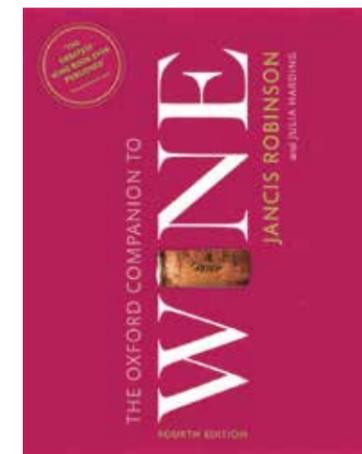
Nonetheless, where the third edition concluded this entry with the rather cynical observation that “wine writing really has almost become wine tasting,” the fourth edition is more upbeat: “Buyer’s guides, typically annual, proliferate, and for a while more and more of the words written about wine resembled shopping lists with scores rather than literature. But specialist wine books have been striking back.” The delicious entry on “bore, wine” thankfully survived the excision of material “that might be deemed incidental, marginal or arguably otiose.” It is happily cross-referenced with “connoisseurship,” “a (disappearing) art in search of a less emotive name.” This perspicacious entry should be required preparatory reading for any kind of wine education, formalized or otherwise. The entry on “cooking with wine” hints at the essential and irrepressible streak of hedonism at the heart of every true wine lover. (On a completely different note, it is pleasing to see how many articles from *The World of Fine Wine* are cited as references in numerous entries.)

Even if your bookshelf already groans under the weight of the previous edition, purchasing this revision will be money well spent. In the case of wine, as in so many other spheres, knowledge increases enjoyment exponentially. Quite apart from being such a splendid reference work, the book feeds curiosity—now there’s a term that would merit inclusion in a forthcoming edition as an essential prerequisite to wine appreciation.

As much as anything else, perhaps, the *Companion* shows us how little we know and how much there is to know. It is proof that the only thing we ever really learn is how much there still is to be discovered—by ourselves and by science at large—as the wine world continues to evolve around us.



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