In times of crisis, what’s the first thing to go? The luxuries, of course, life’s expensive pleasures, like grand dinners out, shopping sprees, and first-row tickets to Broadway shows. It’s not the cost, so much as the idea of taking time out for pleasure: suddenly, it seems inconsiderate to be spending, disrespectful to be enjoying.

Wine certainly falls into the category of “luxury”—we could, after all, live without it. But through all the turbulence of the last six millennia or so, winemakers have stuck it out, and wine drinkers have kept them going by buying their wares. What’s more, much investment has been made in improving the product. Wine is and isn’t as easy as fermenting grapes: It takes a lot of time, money, and energy to make good wine. What compels winemakers to persist?

Three recent books suggest answers in their exploration of the roles wine has played over the last century. A Century of Wine: The History of a Wine Revolution debates the roles of fashion and technology in a sweeping account of the battles waged on wine over the last hundred years. Wine & War: The French, The Nazis & The Battle for France’s Greatest Treasure takes a more intimate view, focused on wine’s social importance during World War II. American Vintage: The Rise of American Wine examines the question from every viewpoint as it traces the forces compelling the U.S. wine industry through its roller-coaster ups and downs. All make useful additions to the body of historical wine literature.

A Century of Wine takes on the formidable task of covering a hundred years in 192 photo-filled pages. The result, as you might expect, is history lite, but the book does provide a grounding in the major (and many minor) forces that have shaped wine industries around the world. The photos turn out to be a brilliant move: not only do they enliven a topic often thought drab, but a well-chosen picture can hit home in a way words often can’t and fill in spaces where the story runs thin. The sight of Lebanese vintner Serge Hochar amidst the ruins of bombed-out Beirut puts the existence of his fine, long-lived wines in stark relief; the brick wall upon which grown men gleefully smash bottles of wine is a metaphor for what American winemakers were up against during Prohibition. The fun and glamour of wine is pictured, too: a still of Marilyn Monroe clutching a bag of chips in one hand and a bottle of Champagne in the other says it all.

Some of the commissioned essays accompanying the photos are equally brilliant, but only when the topics are focused enough to cover in fifteen photo-filled pages or so. Andrew Jefford does a particularly admirable job in his essay on the effects of transportation on wine, effectively paring it down to two crucial elements: the ability to move wine, and the ability to move people, both of which irrevocably changed the face of wine. “Wine, Politics & Economics,” on the other hand, is just too broad a subject for neat treatment in the space allotted. The essay approach also works well when the authors are particularly adept: Tom Stevenson’s jam-packed eight pages on Champagne, for instance, seem almost like a condensation of his exhaustive Sotheby’s Guide to Champagne and Sparkling Wine; while James Halliday’s talent for writing and experience as a vintner yield a deep yet impressively readable investigation of advances in wine science and technology. It’s not so clear why British journalist Brian St. Pierre covers the U.S. and Canada, especially when Bob Thompson, the editor of the Oxford Companion to North American Wines, gets South America, but his essay captures the energy with which the American wine industry recovered after Repeal.
The problem with the book’s structure is the amount of repetition, which is annoying given the inevitable number of omissions necessitated by lack of space. A sense of déjà-vu is felt while reading the tale of the Aube uprising in Champagne in 1941; sure enough, the story was already told in the Transportation chapter, and mentioned prior to that by essayist Giles MacDonough. And by the third discussion of critic Robert Parker’s effect on the wine industry, we get the point, and don’t need to read about him another four times. On the other hand, the discussion MacDonough begins in “Wine, Politics & Economics” on the consolidation of Port companies might have been elaborated on in Mayson’s “Portugal,” but instead it’s only repeated, leaving untold the story of how this led to a proliferation of small, independent Portuguese producers making and bottling their own wines. Both shortcomings could have been handled by the editor, but he seems to prefer to let each essay stand on its own, making the book more an anthology than a coherent treatment. Or perhaps there was pressure to get the book on the market in time for the millennium hullabaloo: Why else release a book with “???” left unanswered in the index (entry for Arbois) and lame chapter titles like “Rest of France”?

What A Century of Wine does well is provide a sense of the monumental efforts made by the wine industry to keep forward momentum, and of how much progress has been made in what is, in the history of wine, a very short time. As Joanna Simon writes, “If this chapter had been written at the half-century, it would have told a story of disease, depression and difficult harvests, of struggle, despair, government intervention, regulation and not a lot else.” Though referring to the Loire, Rhône, and the south of France, the sentiment can be applied to almost every wine region in the world.

That today in wine stores we can find fine wines at decent prices from most every grape-growing country is testament to the work that vintners, enologists, viticulturalists, scientists, importers, governments, and writers have expended. What compelled that work is left to the reader to deduce; in A Century of Wine, there is little room for philosophizing.

Not so in Wine & War: The French, The Nazis & The Battle for France’s Greatest Treasure. The discovery of a half-million bottles of French wine locked away at Eagle’s Peak, Hitler’s wartime hideaway, opens this fascinating examination of one of the lesser-known battles waged during wwii. Throughout the war, the Germans were under orders to siphon out as much wine as they could from France, and the bottles at Eagle’s Peak represented only a fraction of their success. Hitler’s interest wasn’t personal—the man is said to have had little to no interest in drinking, unlike field marshal Göring and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, each of whom exhibited an appreciation for wine in their extensive personal collections. Rather, the Kladstrups argue, Hitler understood that though wine was important to the French economically, it was more centrally an integral part of their psyche. To drain the stocks from the French countryside would serve both to fatten up the Third Reich on profits from its sales and rob France of one of its treasures, ripping a hole in the national pride.

The fast-moving story unfolds in vivid, if sometimes purple, detail. The authors, a former television news correspondent and a freelance writer, base their story on the remembrances of five prominent winegrowing families in each of France’s most illustrious regions (Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, and the Loire). These are rounded out and supported by testimonies from the sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews of weinführers (a term coined by the French to refer to the French-wine importers to Germany appointed by the German generals), winegrowers, and restaurateurs, as well as by sources as diverse as wine historian Henry Claxton and a Burgundian stationmaster’s logbooks—all carefully referenced in the notes.

The tales the Kladstrups tell are sometimes comic, like the story of a troop of German soldiers seizing a cache of eau-de-Santenay, a laxative that they took to be gin. But more often they are suspenseful and dramatic. The war was disastrous for French winegrowers: between bad vintages, bombs, and lack of men, horses, fuel, and trucks, there was little a winegrower could do but guard the domaine’s reserves, knowing they would be integral to rebuilding business when the war was over. Vintners took chances to do so, concealing select vintages in anything from holes dug in the ground to elaborately disguised walls. The risks increased when vignerons fobbed off lesser wines to the weinführers. Some weinführers took chances as well; many had close ties to France in the prewar wine trade, and they had an interest in keeping their French friends alive, as well as in preserving business relationships for peacetime.

Cellars and châteaux set the scene for much wartime drama, too, becoming hiding places for Jews, downed airmen, and other endangered souls, with wine barrels serving as vehicles for refugees. In less fortunate circumstances, châteaux were transformed into billets for the Germans, who often pillaged them for all they were worth and carved swastikas in the walls.

While ww1 buffs may take issue with the light and narrow coverage of the war, and some readers may look askance at the liberty the authors take in turning second-hand accounts into first-person dialogues, either view would be missing the point. As the Kladstrups write, “Although this
is a book about wine and war, it is not a wine book, nor is it a book just about war. It is about people whose love of the grape and devotion to a way of life helped them survive and triumph over one of the darkest and most difficult chapters in French history.” Reading vigneron Gaston Huet’s recounting of a “wine fête” at the camp in which he spent five years, the meaning of this becomes painfully clear. As another concentration-camp survivor whom the Kladstrups quote wrote, “[Wines] were like a tree we could hang on to . . . a tree whose roots were deeply anchored in the soil of our country and whose branches spread throughout the world.”

That sentiment, of wine providing a connection to a place, a time, and to people close and far, surfaces again in Paul Lukacs’s book, American Vintage: The Rise of American Wine. As he ponders why American vintners bothered at all after the debacle of Prohibition and its depressing after-effects, Lukacs concludes, “… winemakers wanted nothing more than to create a tradition and establish a legacy. They believed that no accomplishment was too great for American nature, and they considered it their mission to make history from the fruit of that nature—American wine grown in American vineyards.”

Today we take it for granted that the U.S. has a thriving wine industry. But as Lukacs points out in great detail, it took a lot of determination to get here. His story opens in 1828, when Thomas Jefferson declared that Americans could make wine “doubtless as good” as the Europeans did. It’s Lukacs’s thesis, too, and this story is his proof of how and why.

Lukacs, the chair of the English Department at Loyola College in Washington, D.C., and wine columnist for the Washington Times, presents a book that reads more like a good novel than a history, with plenty of intriguing characters in dramatic situations. That’s not to say he treats his topic lightly: though there are no foot- or endnotes to prove it, the extent of Lukacs’s research is readily evident in the depth of detail provided. Who knew that Cincinnati was once called “the chief seat of wine manufacture in the United States,” as an 1851 British exhibition catalogue claimed? Or that the “founding father of American wine,” as Lukacs dubs Nicolas Longworth, was a bushy-browed, five-foot runaway who came to the Ohio River in 1803 and, continuously clad in black, found fortune while making wine?

It’s characters like Longworth who drive the plot, rather than a strict timeline of events, a technique that keeps the story lively and interesting. (The organization is problematic only in that information gets scattered throughout chapters, making for some repetition and some flipping about to find all the facts on a character or event.) Though Longworth’s role seems minor today, since phylloxera took Ohio’s wine industry out by 1880 and didn’t, in the end, do much to advance American wine, he serves as an inflection point for the tale. During Longworth’s lifetime, Lukacs points out, the ideal was a primarily agricultural society. “The common reasoning held that an agrarian life would provide cultural cohesion, as men and women of different geographic, religious, and ethnic origins became attached to their new homes by working the land,” he explains. However, agriculture soon loses that romantic innocence and becomes “speculative, mobile, and capitalistic.” Lukacs doesn’t shy away from implicating key characters in the devolution of the wine industry, and his careful picture of the tension among farmers, moneymakers, and zealots is one of the liveliest and most thoughtful I have read.

The arduous recovery from Prohibition includes another slew of visionaries like Martin Ray, who declared in the 1940s that he would make America’s best wine, and set about doing it in his own independent and largely successful way; or the Gallo brothers, determined to make their way in wine to leave behind a checkered past. But most interesting is Lukacs’s take on the famed Paris Tasting of ’76, where two California wines trumped eight well-respected French wines. This story is frequently referred to as the moment when American wine made it onto the world wine map, but Lukacs takes it further, suggesting that this was “a crucial moment of realization.” The realization was that wine could be great even if it didn’t hail from a hallowed vineyard, country, winemaker, or grape—American vintners did not have to try to imitate their French brethren. Instead, by refocusing their attention homeward, to their land, their fruit, and themselves, they had the chance to create something truly American, a legacy of the land and of themselves to pass on, and a tradition that could be continued. What more answer to the initial question, “Why make wine?” is needed? There are many ways to make one’s mark, but few can mark time (vintage), place (country, region, vineyard), person (winemaker), and history (age) in as pleasurable and profound a way as wine. It brings to mind the words of Hugh Johnson in his foreword to A Century of Wine: “The revolutions are by no means over. They never will be. Future generations will find new pleasures in new wines.”