Hucksters had a field day with everyone, selling treatments as bizarre as dried human urine (which they sold for much more money than the cost of collection). Rifts opened up along societal lines: the rich could afford to protect their pride in French vines for far longer than poorer vintners, who were more likely to plant American vines or flee to unphylloxerated parts of the world.

In every line of the book, Campbell captures the urgency of the situation and the widespread frustration of the world’s inability to stop phylloxera. He draws deeply on a wide variety of texts that help to give the story both its credibility and its sense of suspense as people get closer to answers (or further away, which seems to be just as common an occurrence). Notes from early scientific journals give a clear feel of an industry at once charged and excited by the challenge of the bug and frustrated by infighting and inflated egos. Quotes pulled from personal correspondence illuminate flashes of brilliance we can only wish had been heard earlier—in the 1870s, for instance, when Isador Bush, an American farmer with some phylloxera-infected vines he had imported from Austria, declared with certainty that they were “the principal reason why the culture of European vines has been an absolute failure in our country.” Campbell also pulls out such pithy documents as a Burgundian report that deemed phylloxera “just punishment” for the vine growers of southern France, who Burgundians considered greedy for their large yields. By that way of thinking, it was just punishment for such a statement that the insect started munching its way through Burgundy soon after.

Like a great mystery writer, Campbell builds the story up to a point of resolution: vintners around the world graft their vinifera vines onto American rootstock safe from phylloxera and continue once again putting out tasty wines. But he also leaves the reader on an uneasy note, describing how quickly we can forget what we’ve learned when it’s convenient, as we did after Prohibition. Vintners, of course, were eager to get up and running again, so they planted vines on American rootstock—a hybrid known to be somewhat susceptible to phylloxera but given to higher yields than the one popular before Prohibition. In the 1990s the first breakouts of phylloxera in California were greeted with shock, anger, and—it being the 1990s instead of the 1890s—lawsuits instead of marches. Exploration of chemical means to control the pest was paired with incredulity that there wasn’t yet any such means. Furadan was used until too many birds died, Campbell reports. Scientists responded with an interest in genetically modifying the grapevines.

Campbell describes the wine world as dividing between terriorists—those who believe in the importance of wine having a flavor particular to the place it’s grown, which they fear may be altered or obliterated by genetically modified vines—and the genetic scientists. The wine world remains divided to this day. Regardless of one’s feeling on GMOs, it’s hard not to admit that the scene feels awfully similar to the one that played out in late nineteenth-century France. But, as Campbell writes, that we have wine to drink today is reason enough to raise a glass to the botanists and the vintners who saved it for the world.

—Tara Q. Thomas, Wine & Spirits

The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol
Eric Burns
352 pp. $54.50 (cloth)

Most if not all societies partake of substances that provoke derangement, indulging in everything from the Aztec hallucinogen known as ololiuhqui to the measured concoction of gin and vermouth known as a martini. Yet most if not all societies also have complex relationships with their chosen substances, damning and accepting them in equal measure. (And consequently most societies also, in one way or another, attempt to regulate the use of those substances.) Eric Burns’s The Spirits of America provides a lively jaunt through the United States’ lengthy and dysfunctional relationship with its favored medium of mild derangement, alcohol.

Burns, a broadcast journalist for Fox News and, as he puts it, “not, by training, a historian” (p.301), works in a more anecdotal than academic mode. His prose is breezy and energetic, and he comes across more storyteller than scholar—not a bad role to be in if your job is to describe the loopy dance that America and booze have enjoyed together over the past few centuries.

Burns wisely chooses to track the larger forces at work through the lives of individual people; wisely, because the people who populate the narrative of booze in America are such an outlandish collection of zealots, crackpots, and criminals (and, occasionally, beleaguered sane people). The early temperance advocate Dr. Benjamin Rush, for example, proposed that abuse of spirits caused everything from “frequent and disgusting belchings” to scurvy and liver disorders to, in extreme cases, spontaneous combustion; Rush claimed to have witnessed a particularly drunken man belch—disgustingly, one can only assume—near a candle and become “suddenly destroyed” (p.58). On the prodrinking side it’s impossible not to be both horrified and amused by the
owners of one distillery in Kentucky, who, in 1913, offered
to help the Keeley sanitarium in Chicago keep its wards full
by selling it “a mailing list of over 50,000 individual con-
sumers of liquor,” adding, “The list of names is new, live,
and active” (p.172).

These colorful anecdotes and portraits plot the pendulum
swings of America’s love affair with the idea of temperance,
a passion nearly equal to its love of booze. From individual
reformers like Rush to the national temperance movement
that predated the Civil War to the rise of the Women’s
Christian Temperance Union after the war, the pendulum
swings back and forth, until finally it reaches the Anti-Saloon
League, under the capable (and monomaniacal) leadership
of Wayne Wheeler.

No single person can bear responsibility for Prohibition,
“perhaps the worst idea ever proposed by a legislative body
anywhere in the world for the ostensible goal of a better
society,” as Burns puts it (p.5). Nevertheless, Wayne Wheeler
comes close, and Burns’s narration of his campaign to ban
drinking—the political maneuverings, the influence trad-
ing, the sheer dogged obstinate absolutism—that resulted in
the Eighteenth Amendment’s being passed is impressive. (And
as a portrait of a successful attempt by a zealous, moralistic
minority to rewrite national law, it’s salutary reading for any-
one not yet sufficiently perturbed by the Christian right’s
influence on Washington today.)

Of course, illegalizing the sale of alcohol was one thing;
stopping Americans from drinking proved quite another. People
continued to drink during Prohibition; they simply bought
and poured their drinks out of sight. But, as Burns notes,
they took far more risks in doing so, and he’s not overstating
the matter when he writes, “Poisoned booze was the great,
unsung tragedy of Prohibition” (p.224). In the song The Jake
Walk Blues from 1930, the Allen Brothers took better inspiration
from the destructive neural palsy called Jake Leg:

I can’t eat, I can’t talk
Been drinkin’ mean jake, Lord, now can’t walk
Ain’t got nothin’ now to lose
Cause I’m a jake walkin’ papa with the jake walk blues.

Over time Jake Leg affected thousands of people, mostly poor,
throughout the South and the Midwest. It was
eventually determined to have been caused by Jamaican
ginger extract—a popular Prohibition hooch, being nearly
80 percent alcohol—that had been adulterated with tri-
ortho-cresyl phosphate, an industrial chemical used
primarily as a hydraulic fluid. Burns describes a menagerie
of other horrific forms of rotgut for good measure, among
them “a Chicago specialty…Yack Yack Bourbon—main
ingredient, iodine—and a Philadelphia favorite called Soda
Pop Moon, sold in soft drink bottles, [which] depended
for its insidious impact on rubbing alcohol” (p.220). He
continues, “During a single four-day period in 1928, thirty-
four people died in New York City alone from unwittingly
drinking wood alcohol” (p.224). Of course, as he points
out, the drinkers were unwitting; the bootleggers who
produced the stuff were not.

One of the primary strengths of The Spirits in America—
beyond Burns’s raconteurish affability—is the deftness with
which it illuminates the complexities and tragedies that
underlie the more familiar aspects of the history of America
and alcohol. It’s a charming and entertaining book, to be
sure; at times it’s also, as it should be, somewhat sobering.

—Ray Isle, Food & Wine

A History of the World in 6 Glasses
Tom Standage
New York: Walker & Company, 2005
viii + 311 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

With his cheerfully cheeky title, Tom Standage sets a tone,
what might even be called an Economist (for which he is
a technology writer) tone: seriously lighthearted, lightheart-
edly serious. An epigraph from Karl Popper introduces the
approach: “There is no history of mankind, there are only
many histories of all kinds of aspects of human life” (p.1).
At its best, this way of looking at the world results in some
original historical insights; at less than its best, a pleasant
miscellany of drinks trivia.

The six drinks—all of them modifications of water—
have affected human history in various ways, large and
small. Beer, the ancient mother of them all, arose in the
Fertile Crescent and like many drinks assumed multiple
ceremonial, commercial, and civilizing roles. In the earliest
written documents—Sumerian wage and tax records—the
symbol for beer is one of the most common, and the
oldest written recipe is for beer. Beer also served as currency.
In a charming Mesopotamian pictogram from around 4000
BCE, two figures are depicted sipping beer through straws
from a very large jar (p.11).

Coffee was one of several historically influential beverages
that came to the West from the Arabic East—along with
the coffee house. Once established in Europe, particularly
in London, the coffee house functioned as an indispensable
political and economic institution. The Wine of Islam