McAllester admits that his efforts have not yielded understanding but that in accepting her death he must now make his own feasts, and life, with the wife with whom he is trying to start a family, and not just vainly strive for a happy, snow-globe past. “Meals are a source of life, not an echo of death” (p.165), he notes.

Elizabeth David said of her good friend Norman Douglas’s writing that whoever has helped us to a larger understanding is entitled to our gratitude for all time. Certainly McAllester’s mother deserves this tribute that he has paid to her in Bittersweet.

—Doreen Schmid, Napa, CA

Pacific Pinot Noir: A Comprehensive Winery Guide for Consumers and Connoisseurs
John Winthrop Haeger
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008
xli + 454 pp. $21.95 (paper)

John Winthrop Haeger’s Pacific Pinot Noir will prove useful, informative, and entertaining to anyone who enjoys pinot noir wines—from the occasional consumer to grape growers and winemakers. This book is an updated and in some ways expanded version of Haeger’s earlier North American Pinot Noir (University of California Press, 2004).

The stunning growth in pinot noir production since the movie Sideways brought the variety widespread acclaim has led to major upheavals, most notably in the rise of numerous new, much lauded producers. In response, Haeger has tripled the number of producers profiled in this edition. He has also changed his criteria for inclusion. As he explains in “About This Book,” he selected the producers for North American Pinot Noir on largely subjective grounds, opting for producers who were pioneers or had a proven history with the variety. For Pacific Pinot Noir Haeger compiled lists from restaurants and retailers “with very serious and intelligent wine programs” (p.xiv) and other sources, ultimately selecting those producers who featured on at least three of the thirty-odd collected lists. Haeger admits that this methodology is imperfect but believes that “it is biased in favor of qualitative superiority adjusted for price performance, which seems a reasonable outcome” (p.xv).

Intriguingly, his own preferences did not factor into the inclusion decisions, though he indicates his favorite producers with an icon.

With three times as many producers to cover, Haeger has less room to discuss the history of pinot noir, the clones and selections used today, the regions where the grape variety thrives, barrel selections, and the like. He argues fairly that such information is little changed since 2004 and refers interested readers to his earlier book. Nevertheless, Haeger’s skill as a writer allows him to include a tremendous amount of information on these subjects in the first brief sections, “About This Book” and the introduction, which contain sufficient technical information to satisfy most readers.

The introduction is also a wonderfully thoughtful essay on the history and current state of pinot noir production and its future, framed largely on the question of whether the Sideways-induced pinot boom is sustainable, and what it will mean for producers and consumers if it is.

Haeger is quite good on winemaking. Much of the introduction focuses on pinot noir styles and the winemaking decisions behind them, such as the maximum fermentation temperature allowed, whether to add cultured yeast, and when to press the wine off the skins (p.xxxvi). Here he also elaborates on the “consensus protocol” for pinot noir winemaking. By clearly explaining how pinot noir is typically produced, Haeger frees himself to discuss only how producers diverge from the consensus protocol in each profile. His clear descriptions are sufficiently detailed to satisfy winemakers; lay readers, too, will easily understand them, especially with the help of the comprehensive glossary.

The core of the book consists of thorough and descriptive profiles of pinot noir producers. Each entry provides an overview of the producer and describes grape sources and stylistic decisions. The “Wines and Winemaking Notes” section is technical but clear. Winemakers and serious wine geeks will delight in the candidness with which most of the producers discuss their winemaking. Rather than relying on clichés such as “wine is made in the vineyard,” the producers provide detailed information on, for example, the strains of yeast they use, how they select barrels for blends, and the criteria on which they base their picking decisions. Only a few producers decline comment, as when Merry Edwards states that “some of my winemaking techniques are proprietary and not up for discussion” (p.262). Yet even Edwards is happy to address acid adjustment for overripe grapes. For the winemaking professional, this information is invaluable. The book has inspired energetic conversations among winemakers wishing to learn more about each other’s techniques.

Quibbles with the book are minor and have to do with the inevitably ephemeral nature of its subject. Most of the wines discussed are already gone from the market. The discussion of vintages, ranging from 1999 to 2006, is largely irrelevant to a new buyer. The roster of pinot noir producers
will naturally continue to evolve. However, the strengths of this book are timeless and greatly outweigh these complaints. Pacific Pinot Noir is recommended to anyone who has discovered the joys of pinot noir wines.

—Matthew Reid, Calistoga, CA

Bordeaux/Burgundy: A Vintage Rivalry
Jean-Robert Pitte. Translated by M.B. DeBevoise
xiv + 246 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (cloth)

Most of us have had a charming someone in our lives who had the ability to take a bit of mental fluff and spin it out into an amusing and seemingly endless thread. That the thread was absolutely unwearable into more serious cloth was of no consequence: the pleasure of his (and it’s always his, isn’t it?) company lay in the elegance of the spinning. If you didn’t have an Uncle Joe who brought out his fiddle to accompany after-dinner drinks, you had an old school friend who dined occasionally with the Kennedys, or at the very least you had the televised version of William F. Buckley. This sort of elegance-without-substance is especially appealing in the world of wine writing. Those of us at the fringes of the wine world—the writers, the waiters, the wannabes—revel in pretended intimacies with those at its center: the winemakers, the viticulturalists, the owners of grand estates. If the writing that pretends to take them down a peg also aggrandizes them, so much the better. All of us today love our slightly soiled saints.

So here we have a book that treats two of the idols of the wine world, Bordeaux and Burgundy, with an easy familiarity, pointing slyly to the weaknesses of their partisans while genuflecting dutifully to the wines themselves.

There are two layers to argument in this book. The first is intellectually respectable: there is more of history and culture in each bottle of wine than there is geography. This is, of course, a heresy in the French wine world. If our soil is not unique, then where lie our claims of greatness? Or the value of our real estate? However you react to this assertion (and the author himself backs off from it a bit), you have to admit that it’s worth discussion.

The second layer involves the pathetic fallacy, the odd notion that inanimate things or even generalizations about things have feelings. You see, it seems that the wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy don’t get along. They are at opposite poles of a world of French culture and, indeed, opposite ends of the French soul.

You can imagine the dichotomies: the Bordelaise are temperate, the Burgundians lushes. The wines of Bordeaux are cerebral, the Burgundies sensual. Bordeaux is masculine except when it’s feminine, and Burgundy is feminine except when it’s masculine. Bordeaux favors the aged palate, Burgundy the young. One promotes urination, the other copulation. Bordeaux is Protestant (the very Jewish Rothschilds aside) and Burgundy Catholic. And so on. The reader imagines the author straining for effect, being more sly than serious even when he hedges and qualifies. The effect is inherently droll, and you are to smile, but not to laugh.

In between all the stories about dinners and revels the author has enjoyed and the overreaching in the personification of the two wine regions he reminds us of some very sound anti-terroir arguments. He also reminds us that wine culture as we know it is relatively recent. For instance, in the eleven-thousand-year history of wine, serving the stuff undiluted became established only at the beginning of the twentieth century. There is a provocative bibliography for those who would pursue one of these details.

The average wine consumer may be dazzled by all this, but she would be right to be a bit puzzled as well. Is there not more to wine than these two? Is there not Alsace and Chianti? What about the Langhe and Rioja, not to mention Napa and Coonawara? Are we to forget that the best of these two French contenders produce wines that are so expensive that most of us will likely taste them only once or twice in our lifetime? We could just as reasonably listen in on the quarrel between the Lamborghiniasts and the Ferraristas and then retire to our Camrys and drive off.

But to demand too much of this book is to miss out on the fun. There’s a raconteur here, a wine-lover with stories to tell. Best to let the tipsy uncle play his violin and best for us to raise a glass of, let’s say, Zinfandel and sing along.

—Lynn Hoffman, author, The New Short Course in Wine

Bookends

Chicken: Low Art, High Calorie
Siaron Hughes
New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2009
128 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (vinyl)

Just as the whiff of fast-food fried chicken might be its most powerful attribute, the first thing that strikes readers of Chicken: Low Art, High Calorie is the powerful aroma of its catsup-red cover. Perhaps heavy-gauge vinyl was chosen because a good