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—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 Lamborghini- and 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
percentage of Chicken’s readership will likely be comprised of fast-food devotees in need of grease-resistant reading matter. Siaron Hughes, a Welsh graphic designer currently living in England, has divided her extensive aesthetic effort into four sections, “shop fronts, names and branding,” “menu graphics and display,” “sign makers and designers,” and “graphic language,” overlaying hundreds of photographs with interviews of restaurant workers and advertising suppliers.

Like birds slaughtered under halal conditions, the pages of Chicken are fully bled, printed edge-to-edge on heavy magazine stock commonly used for color takeout menus. A critical mass of British imagery bombards the reader with blazes of red, white, and blue that “possess a homage to America” (p.4) and industry standard-bearers like Colonel Harlan Sanders’s KFC. London may be known as The Big Smoke, but who knew so many chickens gave their lives to darken its skies? Chicken also made me realize there’s an awful lot of brown, yellow, and taupes in fast food and the accompanying deluge of graphics that never seems to succeed in glorifying the leap of broiler flames, the addictive crunch of golden fried chicken and chips.

Hughes’s longest interview is with Morris Cassanova, an upbeat man whose three decades of designing and fabricating London’s plethora placards has earned him the sobriquet “Mr. Chicken.” The remaining fourteen interviews are brief and, all told, sad. The interviewees invariably bemoan the trials of working in low-end food service and regularly go off topic to flirt with Ms. Hughes. Only one interview, the first, is with a woman, Ewelina Swierczek, who believes “they don’t have fried chicken in China!” (p.34).

Hughes’s inspiration for Chicken was a fast-food flyer that read “Dunk Your Dipper!” (p.4). She finds enough titillation in such suggestive restaurant come-ons to devote the back cover and eight pages to a repetitive list of similar findings, like “Tender Loin” and “Taste Me.” As claimed, Chicken presents an exhaustive exploration of a vernacular design culture, and its grease-and-ink-resistant cover will make this half-kilo a functional reference tool in the oft-grimy shops of menu printers and sign makers.

—Harley Spiller, aka Inspector Collector, New York, NY

Sex, Death & Oysters: A Half-Shell Lover’s World Tour
Robb Walsh
Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009
268 pp. $25.00 (cloth)

Although writers such as Lewis Carroll, Eleanor Clark, and, especially, M.F.K. Fisher, shared their romance with the oyster long before the recent aficionados of the irresistible bivalve, the so-called “Great American Oyster Renaissance” of the last twenty years has occasioned a mixed bag of oyster lit.

To his credit, Texan food writer and restaurant critic Robb Walsh avoids narrating in detail the occasion of “eating my first oyster” and concentrates his passion for oysters in writing about various geographical breeding locations, oyster bars and restaurants, and oyster celebrations, festivals, and feasts. His book begins with a thoroughgoing exploration of Galveston Bay, its real and fictitious pollution problems, and the astonishing 6.8 million oysters harvested from its waters in 2003. By interviewing oystermen, wholesalers, retailers, environmentalists, and oyster-bar habitués, Walsh tracks down Gulf oysters in San Leon, Texas; Apalachicola, Florida; and New Orleans, Louisiana, before going on to sample half-shells and collect oyster lore in Ireland, France, England, and the American oyster-growing areas—in Washington State, California, Oregon, New England, and the Eastern Shore.

Pinning his search for what he celebrates as a perfect-tasting oyster on geography, environmental factors, harvesting skills, and reputation, Walsh samples Irish natives in Galway, Colchesters in London, Marennes in Paris, Olympias in Seattle, Blue Points in South Norwalk (Connecticut), and Malpeques on Prince Edward Island. Ultimately, he tastes his way through hundreds of oysters to a genuine enjoyment of his native Texas C. virginicas, but not before meeting the leading experts in each oyster location, learning how to shuck oysters, and uncovering questionable practices such as phony labeling, marketing hype, and prejudice. One of the most dramatic scenes in the book is Walsh’s account of visiting Raymond Carver’s grave with oyster advocate Jon Rowley. On a chilly overcast morning in Port Angeles they shucked a few oysters, passed a bottle of Jack Daniels, and saluted the writer who had been Rowley’s neighbor.

“Complete with famous recipes and a list of notable oyster bars,” Robb Walsh’s foray into oyster literature is revealing, well researched, and eminently readable. He concentrates his attention on popular oyster myths like the unfortunate and false suspicion that Gulf oysters must be cooked and are dangerous when eaten raw. He reaffirms the seasonality of oyster consumption and advises against consuming them during the R-months. In the end Walsh concludes that provincialism is intrinsic to the oyster business.

—Joan Reardon, author, Oysters: A Culinary Celebration