

“Shadows in the Vineyard: The True Story of the Plot to Poison the World’s Greatest Wine,” By Maximilian Potter.

A Review by Neal Hulkower.

I paused after the first four pages. It just seemed a bit too artsy for a real-life crime story. For example, the following sentence did not set the hard-boiled tone I was expecting: “At moments like this, surrounded by the sublime splendor of the vineyards before harvest, the Grand Monsieur sometimes thought of the French masters – Pissarro, Renoir, Monet” (p. 2). However, as I pressed on, I realized that this was a different kind of read and one to which I would eventually take.

Journalist Maximilian Potter updated and greatly expanded his May 2011 Vanity Fair article, “The Assassin in the Vineyard,” (<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/vineyard-poisoning-201105>) into this book, which first appeared 3 years later. Unconstrained by word count, Potter was able to complete the story of a pathetic extortion attempt in January 2010 aimed at the owners of two extraordinary vineyards in Burgundy. He does so by interleaving the details of the crime with about a thousand years of history of the more famous vineyard, Romanée-Conti. What happened at the second, Musigny, owned by Domaine Comte Georges de Vogüé, merits only a couple of pages.

The protagonist is Aubert de Villaine, the Grand Monsieur, co-gérant of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC), with a member of the Leroy family serving as the other manager. His story, parsed out across the 17 chapters, dominates the narrative. Though not always in linear fashion, de Villaine’s life is recounted from his birth through a tasting on March 7, 2013 of the 2010 vintage, the year of the crime. Despite being born into the family that had acquired Romanée-Conti in 1869, de Villaine initially was not sure he wanted to go into the business. His time in California’s wine country beginning in 1964 led him to his decision: “Everywhere he turned, everyone he spoke to... looked with envy to France’s rich winemaking history for guidance. Everyone ... told him how fortunate he was to be a part of such traditions at the greatest Domaine in all of France” (p. 166). On a call to his father, he asked for a job at DRC when he returned home.

A second key player is Louis-François de Bourbon, the Prince de Conti, much favored blood cousin of King Louis XV and namesake of the vineyard. Conti’s story encompasses intrigue and his likely involvement in the aborted Protestant uprising in France in 1757. The account of his acquisition of La Romanée under the nose of the king’s former mistress, Madame de Pompadour, and what he chose to do with the wines made from it is a delicious tale of spite.

The crime, the destruction of a handful of vines and a threat to poison hundreds more in the two vineyards if a significant sum of money was not paid, represented an attack on a sacred French institution. However, the resolution of the affair was so mundane that in and of itself, it would not have merited expanding the original article into a book. As a result, Potter wanders across time and space to fill the pages. In chapter 10, for instance, we are taken to California in the late 1840s for a history of the Almaden winery, which segues into profiles of Burgundy importers Frank Schoonmaker and Frederick Wildman and then goes on to detail de Villaine’s visit to the winery and his meetings with

Professor Albert J. Winkler and Robert Mondavi. Individual taste will dictate how much these digressions will amuse or irritate the reader. Most of the time, I found them engaging if not always necessary.

One excursion that should be of interest to wine economists is the discussion of arrangements for pricing and distributing DRC wines in various countries and what happened when a gray market emerged. Chapter 15, *Quelle Pagaille*, recounts this event that led to a serious rift between the two managers of the *Domaine* and the dismissal of Lalou Bize-Leroy.

While I was reading the book, I was touring Champagne with an importer who also brings in Burgundies. He had been in the Côte d'Or at the time the events described in the book were unfolding. When I asked his opinion of the book, he was initially quite negative, especially about the writing and some errors. Later, he softened his criticism, admitting that many of the inaccuracies would probably only be noticed by hard-core and particularly knowledgeable Burgundy geeks. Nevertheless, his plaint, "Dude, do your research," would seem to be the least we should expect from a journalist.

Another oddity that calls into question Potter's attention to detail is the following: "Born on August 13, 1717, into a family with Burgundian roots ... Louis-François studied philosophy and the arts, having a particular fondness for Mozart" (p. 38). The good prince was clearly ahead of his time as the composer was born in 1756.

If I was given to pause at the beginning, the conclusion of the final chapter was partially redeeming. Potter admitted to having his first taste of Burgundy while covering the story of the crime for *Vanity Fair* in 2010. Until then, he wrote, "when I found myself reading a bit of a wine review, it struck me as pretentious to the point of being worthless" (p. 269). He went on to cite a review of "1987 Romanée-Conti by Allen Meadows, the self-appointed Burghound" concluding that "for connoisseurs, this sort of review might be useful. It didn't seem especially helpful for me" (p. 269). Paradoxically, in the acknowledgments, the author thanked Meadows who "answered many of my elementary questions" (p. 278). He also wrote, "I am deeply indebted to the work of many authors but these books were invaluable source material ... *The Pearl of the Cote* by the ultimate Burghound, Allen Meadows" (p. 279). Perhaps one can attribute this change of heart to the epiphany Potter experienced when he tasted the 2008 *La Tâche*: "It is like divine, liquefied Pop Rocks that make me feel lightheaded – the kind of happiness that I felt after I first kissed my wife" (p. 272).

Like the author, the intended reader is not required to be an oenophile. As an unabashed one myself who has visited Burgundy and Champagne, where the crime and its resolution took place, I did not expect to add to my knowledge of wine, though I did learn a bit about DRC. However, I found Conti's story more intriguing than de Villaine's. The crime and its aftermath, which Potter describes as "unbelievable because it was all so remarkably unremarkable" (p. 240), left me more sad than satisfied. Nevertheless, despite its somewhat uneven writing style and the specter of inaccuracy, the book, which according to Potter's LinkedIn page is now in development for a movie, made for an agreeable diversion.

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