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The Makers of American Wine: A Record of Two Hundred Years

Thomas Pinney

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Thomas Pinney : The Makers of American Wine: A Record of Two Hundred Years before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Makers of American Wine: A Record of Two Hundred Years:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. One Hundred Fifty Years of Failure: An Absorbing ChronicleBy DPHBrooklynThis review originally appeared on 205Food.comJohn James Dufour arrived in America from Switzerland in 1796, convinced he could turn his adopted country into a wine-growing, wine-loving nation. He believed this, even though Thomas Jefferson had tried and failed to grow the grape. He believed, despite the black rot

and other vine diseases that had devastated all European vinifera planted in America. Dufour's initial effort, "First Vineyard" in Kentucky, was aptly named. It was decimated by disease its first year. Yet, some vines survived the wreckage, even thrived. These hardy vines (unknown to Dufour) were a chance crossing of vinifera and an American grape, creating the Alexander, the first significant French-American hybrid. With the help of new settlers from Switzerland and a loan from the U.S. Congress, the first commercial winery was established in America, near Vevey, Indiana. The wine made from the Alexander grape was probably rather poor. President Jefferson was polite and noncommittal after opening a bottle. Another taster said that "nothing but a strong effort at courtesy, however, can induce anyone seriously to call it wine..." Although the wine business in Vevey flourished for a time, disease battered its vines, and by the 1830s it was finished. Other visionaries took up the cause of Dufour in the following decades. Nicholas Longworth, a successful businessman and amateur horticulturist, found that the Catawba grape flourished near Cincinnati, and by 1859 Ohio "led the nation in the production of wine." But disease was again a problem, and Catawba an easy mark, making production irregular. In the 1850s there were only three successful vintages. After 1860 the wine business began to grow rapidly in California, mainly in the Los Angeles area, commercialization following the padres and their wine making. The Mission Grape, an obscure European vinifera, grew well and made such successful wine that the town of Anaheim was founded by a contingent of German immigrants just to grow it. Very productive for a time, these viticulteurs produced 1.25 million gallons by 1884. But guess what? Pierce's Disease (native to the American South) infected their fields in the 1880s, and by 1891 nearly all the Mission grape vines had perished. Is it time for a brief recap? Grapes were planted in many different locations in the 1800s. Indifferent to undrinkable wine was made. Most of the vineyards were successful at first, but all were eventually felled by disease. By the time the prohibition movement began to gather force in the late 1800s, no teetotalers fumed about "demon wine" or the depravity of wine bars. No, the visionaries in Thomas Pinney's book, the men who saw grapevines growing in every locale, from coast to coast, had failed. America was not a wine-drinking nation. Not even close. By the late 1800s there was only one real glimmer of hope. Grape growing was shifting to Northern California, where European vinifera thrived. Producers like Italian Swiss Colony began to pay a great deal of attention to quality. They grew the best vinifera grapes and bottled their own wine, instead of shunting it off on the rails, in barrel or tank car, its destiny to be mishandled and adulterated by a bottler elsewhere in America. But northern California offered only an illusory hope. Disaster was certain to find the wine industry once again, and it did. The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 landed the first punch, destroying enormous stockpiles of wine. The prohibition movement landed a series of blows in the early 1900s, as it chased wine entrepreneurs like Paul Garrett, the baron of Scuppernon, out of one state after another. The enactment of prohibition in 1920 was the knockout punch. Or was it? No, there were more indignities to come. The loss of wine-making skills during prohibition led to large scale production of plonk in the 1930s. The disruptions of World War II and the collapse of the wine industry afterwards left "the mood of the industry resembling the bad old days of the depression." In the post-war years Maynard Amerine, of the University of California at Davis, urged growers to adopt better varieties and plant them in suitable locations. His advice was mainly ignored, and he "was so discouraged by the apparent failure of his work to make any difference that he thought of leaving Davis for work elsewhere." Frank Schoonmaker, the preeminent wine writer of his time, urged California wine makers to label their bottles with grape names and specific locations, for instance Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, not "Hearty Burgundy" or "Pink Chablis." But his suggestions were not welcome, and the author notes that "it is difficult to imagine the violence with which [his ideas] were opposed at the time." If Thomas Pinney's book *The Makers of American Wine: A Record of Two Hundred Years* had covered only one hundred fifty years, an appropriate title would have been "The Makers of American Wine: A Long History of Their Many Failures." But miraculously, in the 1960's public taste began to change. Winemakers smartened up. Amerine's advice was finally heard and Frank Schoonmaker's *Encyclopedia of Wine* (1964) sold well and was read. Robert Mondavi and his followers led the transformation of the California wine industry. *The Makers of American Wine* consists of thirteen chapters, each describing the contribution of one person to the industry. Some of the individuals made positive and lasting contributions (John James Dufour, Frank Schoonmaker, Maynard Amerine, Robert Mondavi), others were very successful businessmen but now forgotten (Charles Kohler, Paul Garrett), and still others certainly left their mark, even if it was not necessarily positive (Ernest and Julio Gallo). Choosing thirteen individuals to represent two hundred years of history isn't easy, especially since the events of the last fifty years are much more important than the preceding one hundred and fifty. Author Pinney's decision to end the book with a profile of Cathy Corison seems particularly odd. Yes, she is a talented winemaker, but her impact on the industry has been negligible, and she has not led a charge of women into the field. Her inclusion is especially strange given that Robert M. Parker is not one of the chosen thirteen. One could easily argue that Mr. Parker has had as much influence on the U.S. wine industry as anyone profiled in this book. The best chapters in *The Makers of American Wine* cover largely forgotten history -- Dufour, the California Wine Association, the story of Italian Swiss Colony. Sections on Robert Mondavi and Ernest and Julio Gallo may seem too familiar, lacking drama, especially for those who have read *The House of Mondavi* or *Blood and Wine*, the story of the Gallos. But the arc of this book is impressive, and by its end you feel wonderment that the wine industry in America ever found its stride.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Entertaining narrative

history of colorful personalities in American wine history. By Kenneth Umbach This is an entertaining, wide-ranging overview based on key figures in the industry over the last two centuries, mostly drawn from Pinney's massive two-volume (and four-century) history of wine in America. Colorful characters abound. Great book for folks with an interest in American wines and where they came from. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Amazing book. Beginning is a little boring By Customer Amazing book. Beginning is a little boring.

Americans learned how to make wine successfully about two hundred years ago, after failing for more than two hundred years. Thomas Pinney takes an engaging approach to the history of American wine by telling its story through the lives of 13 people who played significant roles in building an industry that now extends to every state. While some names—such as Mondavi and Gallo—will be familiar, others are less well known. These include the wealthy Nicholas Longworth, who produced the first popular American wine; the German immigrant George Husmann, who championed the native Norton grape in Missouri and supplied rootstock to save French vineyards from phylloxera; Frank Schoonmaker, who championed the varietal concept over wines with misleading names; and Maynard Amerine, who helped make UC Davis a world-class winemaking school.

Pinney is a master researcher deeply immersed in the minutiae of the primary-source record, and his prose is lively but, more important, clear-eyed. He has written a book that tracks the tastes of the nation through the people who chased and changed them.