

6 books that make wine taste better or at least help you understand it

Michael Austin, Wine Columnist - October 5, 2016

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Crack open a bottle, crack open a book and drink deeply of the wine knowledge that might help you understand more completely what you're drinking — and maybe appreciate it more too. (Michael Tercha / Chicago Tribune)

You could learn a lot about the game of hockey by watching a season from start to finish. But until you lace up a pair of skates, step onto an ice rink or frozen pond, and hold a stick in your hands, you will never really know how to play the game. You will know how others play the game, but that's as close as you will get.

Not everybody wants to play hockey. Some, like me, are fine with taking a seat, provisions readily available, and just watching. We appreciate the grace and power of the players and puck. Hockey is certainly one of the most viewer-friendly sports, even if you're not clear on every nuanced rule. But wine is not a spectator sport.

Sure, wine has its academic side, but at its essence, it is participatory and completely nonacademic. We have made it somewhat academic, and when I say "we," I mean "they" — the academics. And more power to them, because wine gets better overall the more the academics academicize.

You and I, though, we just want to have a better understanding of what we're drinking, so we can better enjoy the thing we better understand. Plus we're curious by nature, and part of that is what drew us to wine in the first place. So when this urge arises, this urge to front-load information, we turn to books.

"Exploring Wine Regions: Argentina" by Michael C. Higgins. This slick softcover has the look of a well-organized travel guide, with short, focused text entries and scores of glossy photographs. It offers a great overview not only of world-famous Mendoza, but also lesser-known growing areas all the way down to Rio Negro, the world's southernmost wine region. As a bonus, the book offers culinary and cultural insights, plus travel tips. It is the first in a series, with future books planned for Italy, Spain, France, Chile and Australia, among other countries. (Exploring Wine Regions, \$34.95)

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