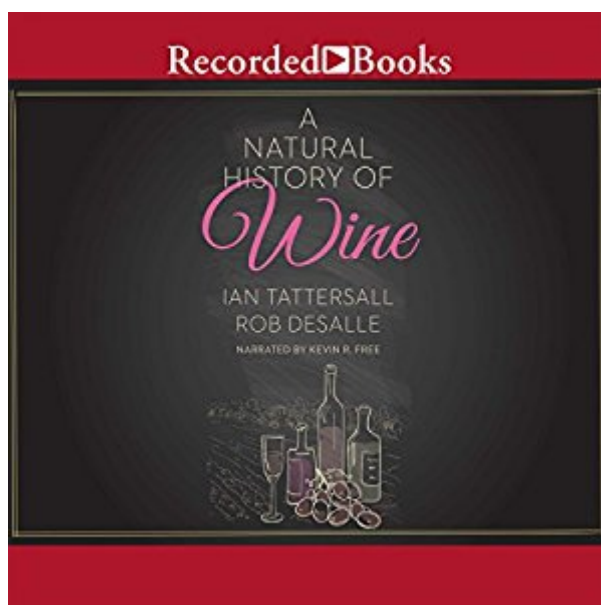


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A Natural History Of Wine



Synopsis

An excellent bottle of wine can be the spark that inspires a brainstorming session. Such was the case for Ian Tattersall and Rob DeSalle, scientists who frequently collaborate on book and museum exhibition projects. When the conversation turned to wine one evening, it almost inevitably led the two - one a palaeoanthropologist, the other a molecular biologist - to begin exploring the many intersections between science and wine. This audiobook presents their fascinating, freewheeling answers to the question: What can science tell us about wine? And vice versa. Conversational and accessible to everyone, this book embraces almost every imaginable area of the sciences, from microbiology and ecology (for an understanding of what creates this complex beverage) to physiology and neurobiology (for insight into the effects of wine on the mind and body). The authors draw on physics, chemistry, biochemistry, evolution, and climatology, and they expand the discussion to include insights from anthropology, primatology, entomology, Neolithic archaeology, and even classical history. The resulting volume is indispensable for anyone who wishes to appreciate wine to its fullest.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book really is very good and largely enjoyable to read, but there are a couple of caveats for readers, especially if they're coming to this book as wine-enthusiasts rather than scientists (or both). First, this book is written by two scientists that happen to be wine lovers and not by two wine lovers who happen to be scientists. Yes, there is a difference. There are several chapters that lend themselves to in-depth treatments of the science behind the subject, and it's obvious that the two

authors are in their element here. Unfortunately, while their discussions of the chemical structures of sugar and alcohol, the chemistry behind photosynthesis and fermentation and the role of the ventral putamen in pleasure-processing (to name but a few) are interesting at one level, they quickly get lost in minutiae at another. This gets especially bad for anything involving molecules and chemistry, and the final experience for me of reading any of those chapters was a steady shift from really wanting to figure the science out to feeling ignorant and guilty for not paying enough attention during 10th grade Chemistry. I suppose it's possible that I deserve to feel ignorant and guilty, and there is a little part of me that wants to go dust off my Intro to Chem and Bio textbooks (of course I saved them, didn't you?) and review this stuff until I understand what they were talking about, but the reality is I won't actually be doing that, so I'm just left with the guilt and ignorance. Second, they give short shrift to a surprising amount of the history of wine. Yes, the first chapter does try to situate wine in a historical context, but after they get past the Romans they seem to run out of steam, and the next thing you know it's the 19th century.

This is an excellent book, with one qualification: some chapters are heavy on the science, particularly chapter 3, which gets rather arcane in discussing the chemistry. The authors are an anthropologist and a molecular biologist. The writing is consistently good, sometimes rather charming, and largely accessible even with the fairly difficult science sections. It's short enough to read in an afternoon, and if you read it through you'll know a lot more about wine. The first two chapters set up the history of wine--it seems to have started in the South Caucasus about 6,000 years ago, and the authors think in the area of Armenia. There's some interesting history: in pre-dynastic Egypt the king Scorpion 1 was entombed with 700 jars of wine, equivalent to about 4,000 liters, so one hopes he has had a happy afterlife. A 5th century BCE Greek shipwreck has yielded 10,000 amphorae which is equivalent to 300,000 modern bottles of wine, so it's been a sizable scale trade for a very long time. Chapter 3 is largely the chemistry of wine. Chapter 4 is largely about molecular tracking of various grape cultivars, and is to me the duller chapter. Chapter 5 is on yeast, and while some of it is technical, I had no idea of the complexities. No yeast, no fermentation. Yeast occurs naturally, and newly colonizes vineyards each spring, and spends the off season so to speak, in the intestines of a wasp; its life cycle is amazing. Chapter 6 overlaps with chapter 5, and discusses interactions, that is the ecology. This should interest anyone interested in ecology, it's far more complex than just grapes growing and then harvested and trampled by barefoot peasants. Chapter 7 looks at the story of phylloxera, and shows it to be a danger still, even to California vineyards.

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