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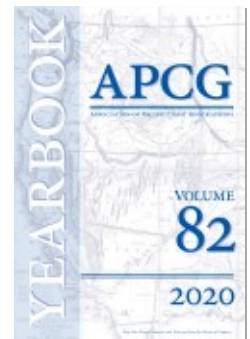
## Crush: The Triumph of California Wine

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## Book Review

# Crush: The Triumph of California Wine

John Briscoe  
University of Nevada Press, 2018

Reviewed by  
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WINE ATTRACTS PRINT like no other beverage. Wine atlases, histories, scientific publications, dedicated scholarly journals, blogs, and popular magazines abound. Among the many contributions centered on the California wine industry, historical efforts in book form have reached a sizable number. Such volumes began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century as the state's wine industry reached viability. With the impact of the Wine Revolution from the 1960s forward, California's wine gained international recognition for its quality. Vineyards appeared on sites that had never seen a grape, as acreage expanded and the number of wineries grew at ever greater rates. Not surprisingly, wine literature followed suit.

John Briscoe (“a poet, author, and lawyer” and vice president of the San Francisco Historical Society at the time of publication) felt something was missing in other works. In his view, previous studies did not “sufficiently reference or illuminate the larger history” in which wine events transpired. He also felt previous authors had treated Prohibition as the only major setback for California's wine industry, omitting additional calamities that also had dire consequences; other major negative forces merited attention as well. Additionally, he opined that among the earlier presentations, “none teases out the most important strands of California's wine history...” Too often, wine trends were described/analyzed without tying them to other contemporaneous developments that impacted the wine industry. He proclaimed that one of his major goals in *Crush* was to identify the highs and lows and to more closely examine how wine folks dealt with negative impacts.

While extensively relying on a dozen or so previously published efforts, he also taps into a broader expanse of publications. In some instances he conducted personal interviews and he also consulted various oral histories

that grew from the 1970s onward. Throughout the volume, Briscoe provides abundant citations.

The book is built around a three-part sequence based on the following basic ideas: the early history; the four great setbacks (phylloxera, 1906 earthquake, WWI, and Prohibition); and Recovery and Ascent following Repeal.

Briscoe writes well, and this is a publication meant for the general public interested in California wine history, not for a select scholarly segment of society. He is not testing theories nor extensively criticizing earlier works. He means to demonstrate that wine industry episodes are related to other happenings in the greater society, while tracing the evolution of the California wine industry. Among the physical attractions of *Crush* are the numerous historic drawings, photos, and wine labels that decorate the pages of text. He also places extensive quotes from many sources in highlighted sidebars. These additions make for a visually appealing and informative presentation.

In my view, what Briscoe does, he does very well. He provides great detail on many subjects that have been treated more briefly (or not at all) by others. The 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco (where most of California's wine was stored at the time!), the origins of the Gallo story, and the 1976 Paris tasting all receive extensive coverage. He manifests in these moments his considerable abilities as an exhaustive researcher.

But Briscoe's approach is a selective one, a weakness he admits in the Acknowledgments. He notes that Thomas Pinney, author of a voluminous and excellent history of wine across the United States, suggested he pay more attention to some of the more important Southern California developments, and that also he should make the book "less Northern California-centric." Briscoe responds to this suggestion by saying, "I confess to a slashing selectivity, one that traces the historical trajectory of California wine as I happen to see it."

From its origins through the early 1860s, California winemaking centered in what today would be called metropolitan Los Angeles, extending eastward (eventually) to San Bernardino. The author provides fine detail in searching out the earliest operators here, but he gives short shrift (or skips over) some of the main players as proceedings move through the 1850s. He mentions, but provides little elaboration on, the Anaheim Colony, which for a while was the largest wine purveyor in the state. Likewise, he passes on the San Gabriel Valley, a major player for a time.

His selectivity, alas, becomes particularly bothersome in the final chapters on developments since the late 1960s. He tends to focus on particular individuals throughout this work, a kind of multiple historiographical approach. Not surprisingly, the Gallos, Robert Mondavi, and Warren Winarski appear, as do several others. But at times the story goes a bit astray. While granting accolades to Louis Martini and Martin Ray and their wineries, he notes that one proof of their worthiness is the fact that their wineries are still in existence. But his claim is highly misleading. The Martini winery has been the property of Gallo since 2002. Martin Ray production today is located a few miles west of Santa Rosa in a former (and older) mainly bulk wine facility, whose ownership has no connection with the defunct Martin Ray operation in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

For the post-1960s, though providing much detail on the Napa Valley, Briscoe has little to say about happenings elsewhere in the state. One would never know that a vibrant wine industry has developed near Paso Robles, that wine production is now found in mini-operations over new areas in Southern California, or that a wine florescence blossomed in Sonoma County or Monterey County (both major players in California's fine wine production). Quality advances in Lodi, the Central Valley's role in the state's wine industry (most of California's wine is made there), and the influx of French and Spanish sparkling wine companies are examples of other overlooked topics.

The post-1980 crusade to delimit wine regions is ignored. Short-term trends focusing on particular varieties (other than the White Zinfandel craze) such as Merlot and Pinot Noir go unmentioned. That Napa Valley stands at the top of California's wine pyramid in terms of fame and quality few would argue, but Napa produces only about five percent of the state's wine. Is nothing happening where the other ninety-five percent is produced?

In fairness, Briscoe does elaborate a bit on Kendall-Jackson as well as Franzia and the Two-Buck Chuck craze, but he simply does not present a rounded picture of the California wine scene today. In the North Coast region alone, something close to a thousand wineries (maybe more!) now dot hillside and valley; in the late 1960s not a hundred were functioning.

As with most expansive works, one finds errors of both omission and commission, some of them fairly trivial. In the Introduction, Briscoe ascribes the founding of Massilia (on the site of present-day Marseille) in 600 BC to the Phoenicians, when in fact it was the Phocaeen Greeks who planted the city. Some of these missteps are not really germane to his mission, but they give one pause in assessing what follows. Another example: on page 269,

in a discussion of vines rooted in the Napa Valley, Briscoe states that “following the climate-similar Bordeaux...” varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon were widely planted. Length of growing season, presence of summer rains, nightly fog intrusions, and more make Napa and Bordeaux pretty distinct climatically.

For the geographer, especially, one of the greatest faults of this volume is a complete lack of maps. Wine is almost always about place in one way or another, and Briscoe discusses place extensively at times. But unless you’re from California or are a dedicated fan of the California wine scene, all the place names in the text may leave you quite baffled. At a minimum, the subject matter mandates at least one map of principal locations mentioned. This shortcoming seems especially curious when one notes the extensive use of historic labels, photos, and other visuals. Somebody did a lot of searching in many locales to find all of this material, and it adds greatly to the historical sense that Briscoe seeks to portray. But just one map, please!

Criticisms aside, Briscoe has made a grand effort to inform us about a significant strand of California’s history and economy. His methodological sequence, attention to detail, and stylistic approach make for time well-spent for those interested in the general lines of the evolution of California’s wine industry and for an intricate examination of particular facets of that evolution.