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The Heartbreak Grape: A California Winemaker's Search For The Perfect Pinot Noir



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Customer Reviews

Josh Jensen, the wine-besotted hero of this adventure/love story and founder of the small Calera Wine Company, set out to produce a California wine to rival the best French burgundies--an impossible quest, he was told by vintners. De Villiers (*White Tribe Dreaming*) traces Jensen's apprenticeship in the vineyards of France, his frustrating search in California for the right limestone soil and climate, his acquisition of a barely accessible mountainside in the central part of the state and his dedication to his goal, which ruined his marriage. Along the way, the character of the pinot noir grape and the difficulties of its transformation into the "perfect" wine become as compelling to the reader as to Jensen and the author. Equally absorbing are the details of financing the winery, bottling, labelling, pricing and marketing the wine. This gracefully written tale will delight anyone who takes pleasure in a good burgundy. Illustrations. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

De Villiers embarked on a quest to learn more about an unknown vintner responsible for the superb wine he happened upon in upstate New York. His narrative introduces Josh Jensen, a wonderfully original personality and extraordinary wine maker, who produces California Pinot noir wines comparable to the fine French burgundies. De Villiers traces the history of the Calera vineyards from Jensen's grape-picking days in France to the purchase of limestone-rich California land for his vineyards--which was done in spite of prevailing opinion in the wine trade that the Pinot noir grapes could not be grown successfully in the U.S. This engrossing account has a real air of mystery about

it and should have appeal for a broader audience than simply connoisseurs impressed with Jensen's prizewinning wines. Alice Joyce

as described, very nice

What "A River Runs Through It" is to flyfishermen everywhere, "The Heartbreak Grape" is to viticulturists, winemakers and wine lovers. Simply put, it captures the entire winemaking experience clearly and poetically. The book begins in the golden hills of California, specifically in the cellar of the Calera Wine Company. Shortly thereafter it flashes back to a cozy December evening when South African Marq de Villiers attended a dinner party at Mount Vernon, New York. A cork was pulled by an unnamed host and wine was served without comment. "I remember that something struck me about its clarity, a brilliant red, like rubies under fire, and though my memory is probably colored by the warmth of the setting, I know I felt there was something...unusual...about it." The wine is Calera Jensen Mount Harlan Pinot Noir, 1987. The author continues by "...dipping my nose into the glass and inhaling slowly, then taking a small sip. It was rich and complex, with a maddening hint of chocolate and violets. I groped for descriptives, as wine people do, without much luck." What then follows is quite extraordinary. The author embarks on a journey west to California to discover how this exceptional bottle of wine came to be. But it is not just the story of a particular wine, it is the story of a particular grape, of a particular winemaker, of a particular way of making wine, of interventionist politics, of bureaucracies and critics and complex economics.... It is a broad canvas painted from a rich palette, and in the end the reader is delivered as the final arbiter of the art. This is a fun book to read. It is both revealing and irreverent. From the primogeniture system in Bordeaux to the endless subdivision of land in Burgundy, de Villiers slices through the layers of tradition and bureaucracy to find the wisdom and practices that have resulted in some of the finest wines the world has ever known. To this stage set Josh Jensen, a young American student who had only recently decided he really enjoyed wine. He travels to where the best wines are made, and begins his education by picking grapes. He hangs around the wineries and translates for non-French-speaking visitors. In the end, he learns the Burgundian style of winemaking and takes it back to the United States, where he finds himself at odds with the then prevailing high-tech methods taught at UC-Davis. What ensues is a 15-year struggle to find the right soil in the right setting to grow the right crop so he could make the right wine from the most fickle of wine grapes, the Pinot Noir--the heartbreak grape. The proof of his success is evidenced not only in the French delegations sent over to find out how he did it, but also--no, especially--in the wine itself. If you grow

a few grapes, make some homemade wine, or simply love to drink the stuff, you'll enjoy this book.

'The Heartbreak Grape' offers an intelligent and amusing look into the trials and tribulations surrounding one man's efforts to produce a domestic wine equivalent to the best Red Burgundies. Mr. de Villiers writes with wit and style, and his engaging commentary provides a sense of drama to the story. Unfortunately, Mr. de Villiers suffers the fate of many who try to decipher the egos, expectations, and experiences of those involved with the complex world of wine. Factual errors abound, ranging from the trivial (mistaking "sulfur dioxide" for "sodium dioxide") to the more disconcerting (as in Mr. de Villiers obvious mis-understandings about the role that science has played in assisting those involved in the production of fine wines). Too, his tendency to indulge in adulatory statements and his willingness to believe all that his protagonists tell him cause the book to, at times, read more like a PR publication than a reasoned view of wine production. In the final analysis, though, the sheer joy, excitement, and obsessiveness of the epic journey of Mr. Josh Jensen and his Pinot noir vines makes for tasty reading.

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