

# Cork Dork

*A Wine-Fueled Adventure Among  
the Obsessive Sommeliers, Big Bottle Hunters,  
and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me  
to Live for Taste*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

time he and I spoke, it had been at Terror. Now I was serving wine to people who sat at virtually those same seats.

As I answered questions about the list and guided people around the Book, I realized that my whole way of seeing wine—and food—had evolved. I cared what I drank, but I also cared what *you* drank.

I saw the potential for a glass of liquid to be the gateway for an experience that took you somewhere and revealed something without you ever needing to leave your seat. Merely liking a wine was a necessary but insufficient condition for being satisfied with it. A knockout wine took some doing to figure out. You couldn't make sense of it all at once. It would plant a question in your mind, or transport you to another place. *This is from where? Is that . . . pine needles? I'm tasting? How did this get made? Why am I suddenly filled with nostalgia for my college girlfriend and our hikes through the Pine Barrens?* A glass reached its full potential when it left you with a story. It could be a story about the wine itself and the hippie in Germany who made it using his great-great-grandfather's methods. Or it could be a story about the night you drank that wine, the sweet smell of the Riesling instantly lifting your spirits so you stayed out later than you'd planned, and laughed so hard that the bar's owner—that guy with the weird beard—came over to see what was up. Or it could be a story about yourself, since you were shocked to discover the intellectual dimensions unlocked by senses you thought you used only for basic survival. Food could elicit such feelings too. But that experience of being nudged into a place where you're wondering about the world, and your place in it, could come more easily, more affordably, more reliably from wine.

We Terrorists were crushed when people order-fired whatever familiar thing they recognized in the Book. "That's such a shame. There are so many better wines on the list," whispered one of my colleagues on the floor when he saw me grabbing a Chardonnay for a deuce in the front. Not so long ago, I would have assumed this was snobbishness speaking. But really, we were disappointed that we

couldn't rock you back on your heels a little. Maybe open up a new perspective, or at least make you question what you thought you knew about flavor. Paul required the civilians in his wine classes to pledge they'd never drink the same wine twice. I'd drop that fact at my tables to see if I could coax people into uncharted territory.

Don't get me wrong—of course I'd bring you the Chardonnay or Doc's cider and I'd be happy if you were happy. However, in the back of my mind I'd be thinking that in the grand scheme of what I *could* give you, the Doc's is boring. Watery! The Cornouaille is a mind-altering mess of blue cheese, cider vinegar, and Sheldan pony that stinks and is *phenomenal* and utterly perplexing. The Château Belà Riesling is like Schubert had a baby with Grace Kelly and every bit as mind-boggling as that description implies. Wait till you get a hold of the Tempranillo that's like sucking on an old saddle, in a totally wonderful way. Instead of another jaunt through California wine country, you could be inhaling the smells of Lebanon, Austria, Greece, Israel, Slovenia. It's only a splash of wine we're talking about here and you don't have to keep it, or even pay for it. We merely want you to try it.

And yet so many people wouldn't even do that. There were times when guests just weren't in the mood. They'd had a bad day at work, and all they needed, as Paul would say, was a glass of fucking grape juice. In those instances, I was content to back off and bring them the alcohol.

Yet there were many, *many* more people who wouldn't let us take them to the next level because they were scared—of wine, of looking dumb, of being wrong, of not knowing the difference, of asking stupid questions, of getting long-winded answers with jargon like "aldehydic," and of putting an unknown thing in their mouths. I would watch fully grown adults recoil from glasses of wine and scrunch up their faces like toddlers being asked to eat broccoli. It's true that taste and smell are the most invasive and intimate senses. We're letting things into ourselves. Still, these people acted like I was trying to poison them, as if it were physically painful or dangerous to sip these