

Armed with master's degrees in philosophy or Stanford engineering degrees, these self-proclaimed "white-collar refugees" espouse lofty theories about service and ambitious ideas about wine's potential to move the soul. And they've brought both youth and XX chromosomes to an industry that's long resembled a good-ol'-boys fraternity.

Initially, my interest was largely journalistic. All my life, I've been obsessed with other people's obsessions. I've never stood in line for hours to scream my head off at a teenage heartthrob or decided to "date" a character in a video game, but I've spent years writing about—and trying to figure out—the sort of people who do. So naturally, the somms' passion instantly sucked me in. I became fixated on understanding what drove them. Why were they consumed by wine? And how had this "sickness" upended their lives?

Yet as I dug deeper into their world, something unexpected happened: I started to feel uncomfortable. Not with the sommeliers—who, aside from a tendency to overserve me, were perfectly charming—but with my own attitude and assumptions. The truth is, the strongest emotion I'd ever felt for wine was something like shame-infused guilt. More than any other edible thing on this planet, wine is celebrated as part and parcel of a civilized life. Robert Louis Stevenson called wine "bottled poetry," and Benjamin Franklin declared it "constant proof that God loves us"—things no one's ever said about, say, lamb chops or lasagna, delicious as they might be. The somms spoke of bottles that sent their spirits soaring like a Rachmaninoff symphony. "They make you feel small," one gushed. I didn't have a clue what they were talking about, and frankly, it sounded farfetched. Were they full of shit, or was I somehow deficient in my ability to appreciate one of life's ultimate pleasures? I wanted to know what these oenophiles meant, and why otherwise rational people devote mind-boggling amounts of money and time to chasing down a few ephemeral seconds of flavor. To put it more bluntly, I wanted to know: What's the big deal about wine?

When I drank a glass of wine, it was as if my taste buds were

firing off a message written in code. My brain could only decipher a few words. "Blahblablablah wine! You're drinking wine!"

But to connoisseurs, that garbled message can be a story about the iconoclast in Tuscany who said *Vignaiuolo* to Italy's wine rules and planted French Cabernet Sauvignon vines, or the madman vintner who dodged shell fire and tanks to make vintage after vintage all through Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war. That same mouthful can tell a tale about a nation's evolving laws, or the lazy cellar dweller who botched his task of cleaning the winery's barrels. These drinkers' senses offer them access to a fuller world, where histories, aspirations, and ecosystems emerge from tastes and smells.

My obliviousness to such nuances started to drive me crazy. Now as I listened to my friends swear off Starbucks for \$4 cold-brew coffee or rave about single-origin chocolate bars, I began to notice a paradox in our foodie culture. We obsess over finding or making food and drink that tastes better—planning travel itineraries, splurging on tasting menus, buying exotic ingredients, hustling after the freshest produce. Yet we do nothing to teach ourselves to be better tasters. "We are as a nation taste-blind," wrote M. F. K. Fisher, a criticism that, from everything I'd observed, remains as true today as it was in 1937.

A more personal and profound concern quickly overshadowed my journalistic curiosity. I'd lately had flashes of frustration with my tech-centric existence, the textures of stories and life all flattened by the glossy sameness of screens. The more I learned, the more confined and incomplete my own tiny corner of experience appeared. Merely writing about the sommeliers suddenly seemed inadequate. What I wanted, instead, was to become like them.

I began to ask myself: What would it take for me to uncover the same things in wine that they did? Did these pros get where they are through practice alone? Or were they genetically blessed mutants born with an innate sensitivity to smell?

I'd always assumed that super sensors were born, not made, the way Novak Djokovic was endowed with the wingspan to crush all



comers. Turns out, that's no excuse. As I began supplementing my YouTube binges with a healthy diet of scientific studies, I found that training our noses and tongues depends first and foremost on training our brains.

Only, most of us haven't bothered to do so. Biased by thinkers as far back as Plato who dismissed taste and smell as the "minor" faculties, most of us don't know the basic truths about these two senses (which we actually have a tendency to confuse with each other). We mix up where we register different tastes (hint: not only in your mouth). We're not even sure how many tastes there are (almost certainly more than the five you've heard of). And we're convinced that humans evolved to be the animal kingdom's worst sniffers (even though recent research suggests that's a myth). In essence, we all but ignore two of the five senses that we've been given to take in and interpret the world.

I was impatient to make a change and discover what I was neglecting, both in wine and in life. The somms I met described how their training had helped them do everything from finding fresh pleasure in their everyday routines, to staying true to sensory perception, fending off interference from extraneous noise about price or brand. It seemed possible for any of us to relish richer experiences by tuning into the sensory information we overlook. And I was thirsty to give it a go.

This book traces the year I spent among flavor freaks, sensory scientists, big-bottle hunters, smell masterminds, tipsy hedonists, rule-breaking winemakers, and the world's most ambitious sommeliers. It is not a wine buyer's guide, or a credulous celebration of all wine-drinking traditions. In fact, it explores the ways in which the industry is—in the words of one Princeton University wine economist—"intrinsically bullshit-prone." But clear aside the bullshit, and what remains are insights that have relevance far outside the realm of food and drink.

Less a journey from grape to glass (though there will be glimpses at how wine is made), this is an adventure from glass to gullet—into the wild world of wine obsession and appreciation in all its forms and with all its flaws. It's an investigation of how we relate to a 7,000-year-old liquid that has charmed Egyptian monarchs, destitute farmers, Russian tsars, Wall Street moguls, suburban parents, and Chinese college kids. Prepare to go behind the scenes in Michelin-star dining rooms, into orgiastic bacchanals for the 0.1 percent, back in time to the first restaurants, and into fMRI machines and research labs. Along the way, you'll meet the madman who hazed me, the cork dork who coached me, the Burgundy collector who tried to seduce me, and the scientist who studied me.

The relationship between taste and appreciating life runs through our language. We say variety is the "spice" of life. In Spanish, the verb *gustar*—to like or to please—comes from the Latin *gustare*, meaning "to taste," the same root for our English word "gustatory"—concerned with tasting. So, in Spanish, when you say that you like something—clothes, democracy, artwork, can openers—you are, in an ancient sense, saying that it tastes good to you. In English, when we apply ourselves with passion and enthusiasm, we say we've done something with "gusto," which stems from the same Latin root. A person who likes the right things is said to have good taste—no matter if those things, like music, cannot be tasted at all.

Taste is not just our default metaphor for savoring life. It is so firmly embedded in the structure of our thought that it has ceased to be a metaphor at all. For the sommeliers, sensory scholars, wine-makers, connoisseurs, and collectors I met, to taste better is to live better, and to know ourselves more deeply. And I saw that tasting better had to begin with the most complex edible of all: wine.