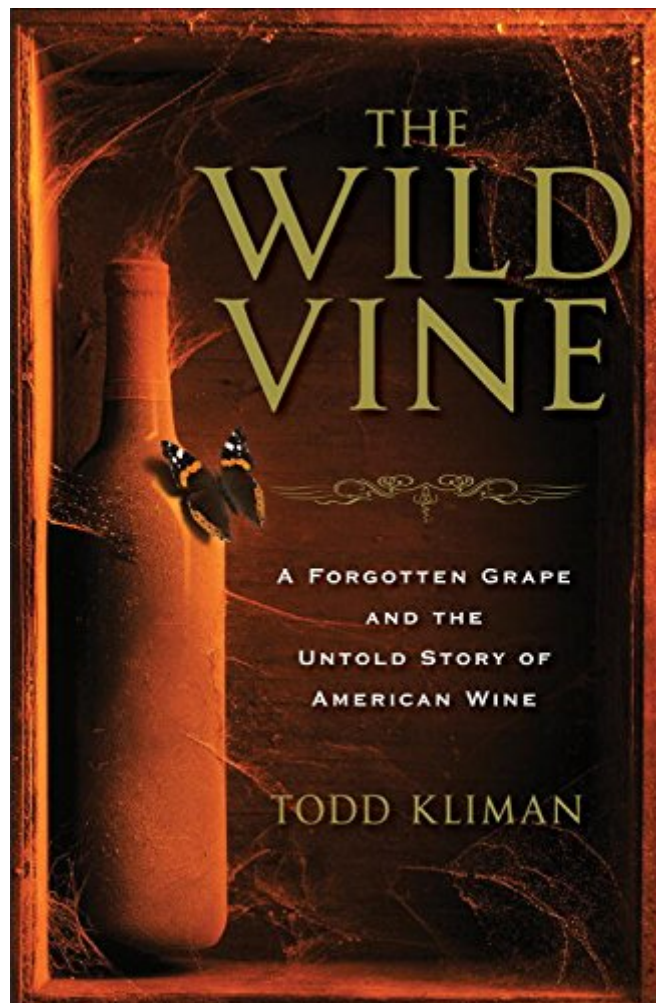




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The Wild Vine: A Forgotten Grape And The Untold Story Of American Wine



Synopsis

A rich romp through untold American history featuring fabulous characters, *The Wild Vine* is the tale of a little-known American grape that rocked the fine-wine world of the nineteenth century and is poised to do so again today. Author Todd Kliman sets out on an epic quest to unravel the mystery behind Norton, a grape used to make a Missouri wine that claimed a prestigious gold medal at an international exhibition in Vienna in 1873. At a time when the vineyards of France were being ravaged by phylloxera, this grape seemed to promise a bright future for a truly American brand of wine-making, earthy and wild. And then Norton all but vanished. What happened?

The narrative begins more than a hundred years before California wines were thought to have put America on the map as a wine-making nation and weaves together the lives of a fascinating cast of renegades. We encounter the suicidal Dr. Daniel Norton, tinkering in his experimental garden in 1820s Richmond, Virginia. Half on purpose and half by chance, he creates a hybrid grape that can withstand the harsh New World climate and produce good, drinkable wine, thus succeeding where so many others had failed so fantastically before, from the Jamestown colonists to Thomas Jefferson himself. Thanks to an influential Long Island, New York, seed catalog, the grape moves west, where it is picked up in Missouri by German immigrants who craft the historic 1873 bottling. Prohibition sees these vineyards burned to the ground by government order, but bootleggers keep the grape alive in hidden backwoods plots. Generations later, retired Air Force pilot Dennis Horton, who grew up playing in the abandoned wine caves of the very winery that produced the 1873 Norton, brings cuttings of the grape back home to Virginia. Here, dot-com-millionaire-turned-vintner Jenni McCloud, on an improbable journey of her own, becomes Norton's ultimate champion, deciding, against all odds, to stake her entire reputation on the outsider grape.

Brilliant and provocative, *The Wild Vine* shares with readers a great American secret, resuscitating the Norton grape and its elusive, inky drink and forever changing the way we look at wine, America, and long-cherished notions of identity and reinvention.

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Customer Reviews

I'm sure this is one of those things that depends on the individual and his or her current situation...but I personally thought this book was fantastic. Having just visited Hermann...and knowing a little about Norton...the book was an outstanding summary of its history. I happen to like Native wines...such as Concord and Catawba...and to have the whole history put into context...it really is interesting, historically speaking. The author knew he was on to something regarding the wine industry and their insular approach to wine marketing, particularly regarding the spell they seem to have put on the popular consumer psyche. I'm not sure I'd compare Norton to a first growth Bordeaux...but I will say that the Stone Hill wines are pretty freaking good. Unfortunately, I've had some terrible Norton's as well. Perhaps that speaks to the grapes evolution...afterall, Bordeaux is hundreds of years ahead of us (literally); In another universe, with all the U.S. growers and winemakers struggling to master the wild vine...perhaps something incredible could await us. Nonetheless...the perspective is appropriate as far as I'm concerned. And the story is a great one indeed.

I read The Wild Vine as a wine fan (connoisseur is too grand a term here) who reads voraciously about wines and their history (especially American wines) and drinks a wide range of wines. Having already read much about the Norton grape, I'd tried a bottle from the St. James Winery, in St. James, Missouri, and was primed to learn more. Kliman's book was spot on, at least for my tastes, both for what it says about the grape and for what it says about people and places related to it. Even

readers who are not especially into wine might enjoy the stories of people and of local and regional history, and the backbone narrative that forms the present-day arc of the story, intertwined with wide-ranging history and locations. The book has an arc of almost novelistic proportions, with some real surprises along the way. (No spoilers here. You'll have to read it.) As a bonus, Kliman provides the best discussion I have seen of the relationship between Norton and Cynthiana. (My bottle of St. James Cynthiana awaits.) That's wine-geek stuff, I grant you. I'll be ordering a few bottles from some of the wineries featured in the book -- Horton and Chrysalis for sure -- to make my own judgments and comparisons. If at all possible, my wife and I will be visiting both of those as well, armed with considerable context thanks to *The Wild Vine*. FYI, for folks who read the book on Kindle, as I did: at the end, keep paging PAST the "rate this book" page to find the bibliography and acknowledgments. They are included. As for that St. James Norton, FWIW, it was certainly distinctive in comparison to the wines I am used to from California, France, Italy, Spain, and South Africa (and a few other places -- even Michigan). While it was speaking the same language as those others, it was in a distinctively different dialect. I can understand why it would not be to everyone's taste. (But then, neither are over-oaked California Chardonnays and highly alcoholic, intense California Zinfandels and Cabernets.)

I live in Alabama, and recently tried a Norton wine from a local vineyard and winery. It was complicated and hard to pin down, so of course I began researching: a real, non-Concord, non-Muscadine that could grow in our climate, and produce a profound and interesting red wine? Tell me more! There's much to read online about the Norton grape and its history, but none told so well as Todd Kliman does in *The Wild Vine*. Kliman's story, both of researching the grape itself, its creator, and its most vocal modern advocate, is at times moving, sad, funny and dramatic. There is tragedy in Norton's story, as in any human endeavor, but there is also a sense of how heavy the weight of history must be when it all but erases an achievement like the Norton grape from not only modern awareness, but almost from history itself. *The Wild Vine* spends much time on the personalities that affected the grape's journey, including that of Kliman himself, but in the process the grape's story shows through as the unifying thread. The book is a good example of a Chatwinesque travelogue, though the travel is (mostly) through a plant's history rather than a region's geography. My one criticism of the book is that it can become a bit **too** self-involved at points, exposing Kliman as a bit more of a Romantic than is seemly, but these bits are short, and don't detract meaningfully in my opinion. All in all I found *The Wild Vine* to be an engrossing read, and recommend it to anyone who enjoys wine and/or the more quirky side of history.

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