

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

## Sunny Hodge: *The Cynic's Guide to Wine*

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Webster's offers two definitions of the word "cynic." The first, "a fault finding critic," is the one most people default to, and admittedly this made me wary when I first encountered the title of this book. The second definition of cynic is the one that applies here: "an adherent of an ancient Greek school of philosophers who held the view that virtue is the only good and that its essence lies in self-control and independence." Sunny Hodge makes it clear from the outset of his *Cynic's Guide to Wine* that the latter definition is the guiding light for his work, as written in his introduction: "In this book I rip away the marketing and tasting notes and present you with the scientific links from soil to glass that will enable you to understand how it all works." Hodge sets out to strip away overused prose from wine educators and sommeliers, and to examine what actually makes wine what it is.

A frequently repeated term in the wine world, especially by sommeliers, is "minerality." "This wine has so much minerality because of the soil," is a common refrain. Hodge subjects this claim to rigorous geological exploration. He leads the reader through ion lattices, crystalline structures, and the actual building blocks of minerals. Soil, as Hodge clarifies, contains minerals, but minerals are not transferring themselves directly into wine. His explanation of ionic adsorption (not absorption, because the latter refers to ions becoming part of a crystalline matrix) is particularly helpful. The key takeaway: minerals in the soil are essential to vine health, but they are not present in the finished wine. What we perceive as minerality may be an expression of terroir, but it is not a literal transfer of stone to glass.

Hodge expands the geological lesson into an overview of the three major rock categories: sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic. This framework is refreshing, as much wine literature jumps immediately into specific vineyard soil names without grounding the reader in fundamentals. Hodge also organizes geological materials by particle size, from boulders down to fine clay. Limestone, long held up as the holy soil of wine lovers (with Montrachet invoked as the archetype), is addressed with nuance. Limestone does offer excellent drainage and allows for deep rooting, but its primary chemical

component, calcium carbonate, brings high pH to the soil. Despite the often-repeated association between limestone soils and wines of high acidity, Hodge emphasizes that soil texture and drainage characteristics matter more than broad mineralogical realities.

The chapter on nutrient chemistry is well-structured. Hodge outlines the roles of essential elements, including nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and several more, explaining how each affects vine function and how deficiency or excess manifests in the vineyard. The treatment is concise, but not superficial, and provides the reader with a clearer understanding of vine physiology.

The book is not just about rocks and soil. Hodge presents the history of synthetic fertilizers through the work of Fritz Haber, discusses fungicides such as Bordeaux Mixture and copper, and evaluates organic and biodynamic farming without ideological assumptions. His discussion of copper is exactly what the subject needs: acknowledgment of its long-term use and efficacy, coupled with the reality that it can cause serious and lasting harm to soil microbial ecosystems. Biodynamic preparations, from horn manure to horsetail, are laid out plainly, without either evangelism or derision. The presentation is balanced, informed, and fair.

Can a wine book with the word *cynic* in its title not have a chapter dedicated to natural wine? It's basically required these days, and Hodge does not disappoint. Yes, there is no legal definition of natural wine (although the German's might disagree), and certainly natural wine means different things to different people. If low intervention is the accepted vernacular, then Hodge supports it. His recognition that hybrids may become increasingly important, especially in climates requiring constant disease management, is notable.

I have barely scratched the surface of what Sunny Hodge has compiled in *The Cynic's Guide to Wine*. Parts of the book are deeply scientific, sometimes down to the molecule, making casual reading difficult. But the clarity of explanation prevents the book from being inaccessible. It challenges mainstream wine dogma, with the virtue of seeking the truth, not just being contrarian, in a way that perfectly dovetails with the Ancient Greek philosophic Cynics of antiquity. *In vino veritas*, yes, but Hodge reminds us that truth requires effort, and this book is a refreshing and grounded contribution to wine literature.