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Sonoma County Wine Library: An amazing asset to our industry and community

Last week, I was working on a research project for one of my public relations clients. I needed to locate a book called "Notes on a Cellar-Book" by George Saintsbury. It was written in 1920, and a re-issue simply wouldn't do. I needed the real McCoy from 1920.

Well, I found it. It was in Healdsburg, at the Sonoma County Wine Library.

The Sonoma County Wine Library is an amazing place. It's located in the back portion of the "regular" Healdsburg library, and it boasts more than 5,000 wine-related books. Additionally, they carry about 80 wine periodicals and magazines, historical information about Sonoma vineyards and wineries and an array of other cool stuff.

"The Wine Library started as an idea in the early '70s," said Wine Librarian Bo Simons. Wineries that were a part of the Russian River Wine Road conjured up the idea, and wine writer Millie Howie suggested the library as the right place to house the collection of wine info.

"The industry agreed, but the library said, 'OK, show us the money,'" Simons said. "They came up with the idea of subscriptions, where wineries paid based on their case production and growers paid by the amount of acreage (they farm). So, the industry supported it, and now the library exists."

One of the most amazing parts of the library is the historical section. Here, I saw some wine books that dated back as far as the early 1500s. One title I saw was Libri De Re Rustica, printed in 1514. It's a multi-language book, which is actually three books combined into one. Books don't look like this anymore - simply gorgeous.

Another fun title in the historical section was called Wines in Health and Disease by Francis Anstie, 1877. Here are a couple of paragraphs I found amusing:

"As a dietetic aid in the debility of old age, the more potent wines are more useful than in infancy and childhood."

Wine for infants? I had to read on.....

"The improvement of appetite and nutrition is sometimes marvelous in young children who have been put on an allowance of wine. It is therefore a point of much consequence that in prescribing wine as a supplementary food for parents who aren't wealthy should recommend sherry rather than port."


Damn. I'm not wealthy, but I do enjoy good port.

The historical books may be viewed at the library, but have to stay there.

Some of the more interesting assets at the Wine Library are the oral histories. Here, Sonoma County old-timers have told their stories on cassette, which have since been transcribed into books. Much of the work involved in capturing and transcribing the oral histories comes from the Wine Library Associates of Sonoma County. This organization helps to support the library in a variety of ways, including raising money to purchase books and other material for the Wine Library.

The southern third of the Wine Library contains the books that may be checked out. Titles range from every aspect of the industry, from farming practices, technical journals, stories about wine, and even a

Bradley Gray owns Gray Matters Communications, a Sonoma-based public relations firm. Since joining the Sun a year ago, his work has been published in The Wine Spectator, Vogue, Grapelive.com, The Wine Report and FineLife. Contact him at sonomasunwine@hotmail.com with comments, story ideas or to submit samples for review.

e-mail Bradley: 

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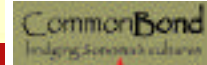
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few questionable-looking wine-related romance novels.

There are DVDs, videos, articles, press releases, you name it. "One of the wonderful things about the wine library is the Web site," said Roxane Wilson, one of the librarians. Wilson directed me to a site called Wine Files (www.winefiles.org). Here, thousands of articles have been summarized and put online. Simons explained that all of the articles may be viewed in their entirety at the library, but that some of the articles online are summarized because of copyright law.

Realizing that I'm quickly becoming a very important wine writer, I tried to look up my own name on winefiles.org. As I suspected (and you too, no doubt), nothing came up. I did, however, look up a ton of other cool stuff. This site should be a really valuable tool to just about anybody in the industry. Especially a wine writer! Take a moment to visit. "The Sonoma County Wine Library is a really great asset to our community and our industry," commented Bo Simons. "It helps us to be competitive, and it helps the northern California wine industry to be amongst the best in the world."

I did manage to locate "Notes on a Cellar-Book" by George Saintsbury. I was able to look through the 1920 original version, which was signed by the author, and I checked out the 1963 re-issue. It is a must-read if you are in the wine industry. Here's a trivia tidbit: Carneros pinot noir specialist Saintsbury Winery, which is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this year, took its name from George Saintsbury's book.

Bradley Gray has been in the wine industry for 10 years. He owns Gray Matters Communications, a wine-related public relations firm. Contact him at sonomasunwine@hotmail.com with story ideas, comments or to submit samples for review.

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