

A Q&A with Kevin Begos, author of

TASTING THE PAST

The Science of Flavor & the Search for the Origins of Wine

Q: Is it true that this book came about because of a chance encounter with an obscure Middle Eastern wine?

A: Yes, my wine madeleine moment was in an Amman, Jordan, hotel room of all places. I had spent the day reporting about medicine in the Arabic world. I was exhausted—and really wanted a drink! In the minibar was this little bottle from Cremisan Winery and Monastery, which is located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It was 2008. Who knew monks were still making wine? Anyway, it was delicious.

Q: So you looked for the wine when you returned to the U.S.?

A: I got home, did some research, and discovered that at the time no one had heard of it. I couldn't find it anywhere. Plus, Cremisan was using grapes with strange names like Jandali, Hamdani, and Baladi. At the time neither the winery nor the grapes were mentioned in the *Oxford Companion to Wine*, which was, and is, my go-to source, a kind of industry bible.

Q: But you finally tracked it down?

A: Well, eventually. We're talking years. All the mystery around it made me wonder if people had used those strange grapes to make wine 2,000 or 3,000 years ago. I started to realize how little I really understood about the origins of wine, and set out to learn.

Q: Some people who want to learn about wine train to become sommeliers or Masters of Wine. You visited wine scientists and vineyards.

A: I was a busy science journalist at the time, obsessed with a little-known wine. I'd never really considered wine research. I knew wine was wonderful, complex, and magical—but I wanted to at least try and find out why. It turned out that there was an explosion of cutting-edge science on taste and the origins of wine. I spoke to brilliant researchers such as Patrick McGovern, an archaeobiologist at the University of Pennsylvania who deciphers the flavors that were in ancient foods and wines thousands of years ago, and Jose Vouillamoz, a Swiss geneticist and wine lover who hopes to understand the DNA and family tree of every wine grape in the world. I learned that just like we can map the human genome, scientists are now doing the same for wine.

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Q: You also once analyzed DNA in a laboratory.

A: Yes, with help from real scientists a group of journalists spent 10 days doing genetic research. It was life-changing to realize that we share DNA with surf clams (and grapes, by the way). And for *Tasting the Past*, another thrill was getting to hold a 65-million-year-old grape seed fossil.

Q: As you were writing the book, you spent a lot of time traveling along ancient wine routes. What surprised you most?

A: Like most people, I grew up thinking that France or Italy had probably invented winemaking—because wine from those countries so dominate our marketplace. Turns out those countries' wines came thousands of years after the Middle East and the Caucasus Mountains region (Armenia and the Republic of Georgia) had already domesticated grapes. There are hundreds of wines, and wine grapes, that most of us rarely try in America. And many of them are fabulous.

Q: That's really a revelation. Why don't we know about these wines?

A: I always remember what Andy Walker, a scientist at the University of California at Davis who researches the hidden genes in native American grapes, told me. That's a marketing scam, he said, because we're still caught in that trap of believing that there are only a few good grape varieties in the whole world. Before I tasted the Cremisan wines—and all the incredible wines I tried in Cyprus and Greece, in Israel, Georgia, Switzerland, and Armenia—I was drinking the usual Chardonnays and Merlots. I, too, thought that's all there was. Wow, was I wrong.

Q: And you even made it to the Cremisan Winery to try the wine that started this whole adventure? Can you tell us where we can find it and also a few other wines we can try?

A: Yes, I finally visited Cremisan. *Tasting the Past* lists distributors and wine stores who carry some of these unusual vintages. I still have a fond spot for Cremisan's Hamdani/Jandali blend. It's a fragrant, very drinkable white wine. Another great experience is trying traditional Georgian wines, which are aged in clay containers called qvevri. Try Pheasant's Tears Rkatsiteli, another white, or Georgian Saperavis, made from red grapes.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from your book?

A: Just like fruits, vegetables, and cheese, there is a whole world of heirloom wine made from native grapes. And the real science behind how winemaking developed, and why grapes produce so many beguiling flavors and aromas, is even more fascinating than myths about wine.

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