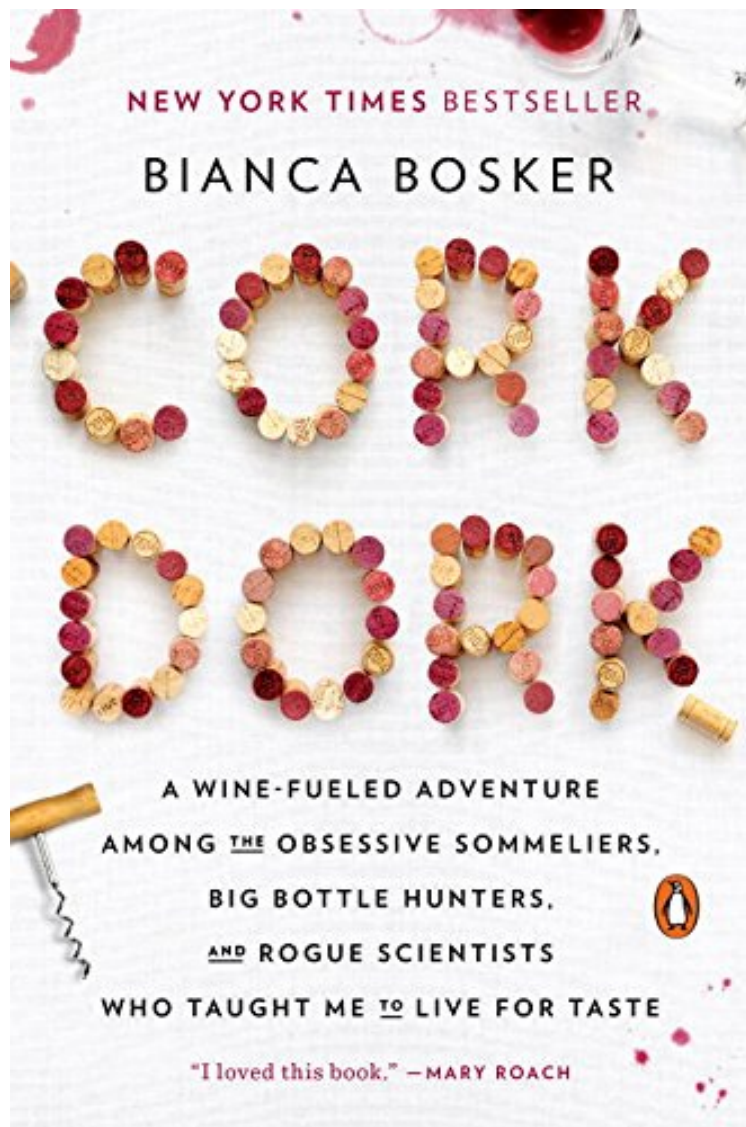


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Cork Dork: A Wine-Fueled Adventure Among the Obsessive Sommeliers, Big Bottle Hunters, and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me to Live for Taste

Bianca Bosker

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Bianca Bosker : Cork Dork: A Wine-Fueled Adventure Among the Obsessive Sommeliers, Big Bottle Hunters, and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me to Live for Taste before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cork Dork: A Wine-Fueled Adventure Among the Obsessive Sommeliers,

Big Bottle Hunters, and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me to Live for Taste:

37 of 38 people found the following review helpful. The nature of an obsession
By Michael J. Edelman
I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, a wine person. If you were to ask me what the last wine I had was I'd answer something like "The \$7 red I had with dinner last month." I probably have a dozen or more bottles of wine in my department store wine rack, but they tend to be bottles of three-buck Chuck for cooking, wine I bought because the label looked interesting, or (horror of horror!) sweet German wines. And yet I've always been curious about wine, and the people are willing to spend upwards of \$100 a bottle on some particularly special wine. I've tasted some of these wines, and while I could tell that yes, they were significantly better than what I'm used to, I couldn't see getting \$100 worth of pleasure out of a bottle of wine like I could getting \$100 worth with of (say) a really exquisite dinner.
Author Bianca Bosker shared this curiosity about wine and taste. What is it in wine that compels some to pay \$100, \$1,000, or more on a single bottle? What was she missing? Being a technical editor and reporter by trade, and not a little compulsive about the things that interest her, she quit her job and set about learning the trade of the Sommelier, the professionals whose job it is to select, taste, and recommend the finest wines in the world to those willing to pay. To this end she apprenticed herself to one, a man with a single-minded devotion to wine whose one goal in life is to achieve the title of Master Sommelier, a title held by perhaps 250 people worldwide. The best sommeliers, or "cork dorks" as they sometimes refer to themselves among themselves, can earn \$150,000 or more in New York restaurants. They're part expert, parts sales person, and part enabler. They can add millions of dollars in revenue to a high end restaurant over the course of a year, and they're rewarded handsomely for it. But to get to be a top Sommelier requires a degree of dedication and sacrifice that few have. Serious somms restrict their diet to avoid contaminating their palate. Mouthwash and hot peppers are an absolute no-no and on serious tasting days they might avoid brushing their teeth. They spend their off hours studying and tasting wine with vendors and other sommeliers, and making copious notes. Bosker's aim was to achieve the status of a Certified Sommelier, which she could then use to get an actual position as a sommelier in a high end restaurant. She did manage this, and along the way met a great many sommeliers, people in the wine trade, and even neuroscientists in her pursuit of understanding and learning the fine points of taste and smell. The result is an entertaining and informative read, interesting not only to those with a serious (or even passing) interest in wine, but those fascinated by the nature of obsession, and the sort of person who can be consumed by an all-encompassing obsession for something as seemingly trivial as a bottle of wine.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Four Stars
By Clifford R. Sevakis
Entertaining take on the sometimes tedious and obsessive world of wine experts.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Loved this book so much
By Customer
Loved this book so much! Great insight into what makes somms tick! Kudos to Bianca for going on this journey!

INSTANT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
"Thrilling . . . [told] with gonzo élan . . . When the sommelier and blogger Madeline Puckette writes that this book is the Kitchen Confidential of the wine world, she's not wrong, though Bill Buford's Heat is probably a shade closer."
—Jennifer Senior, The New York Times
"Think: Eat, Pray, Love meets Somm."
—theSkimm
"As informative as it is, well, intoxicating."
—Fortune
Professional journalist and amateur drinker Bianca Bosker didn't know much about wine until she discovered an alternate universe where taste reigns supreme, a world of elite sommeliers who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of flavor. Astounded by their fervor and seemingly superhuman sensory powers, she set out to uncover what drove their obsession, and whether she, too, could become a "cork dork." With boundless curiosity, humor, and a healthy dose of skepticism, Bosker takes the reader inside underground tasting groups, exclusive New York City restaurants, California mass-market wine factories, and even a neuroscientist's fMRI machine as she attempts to answer the most nagging question of all: "What's the big deal about wine? What she learns will change the way you drink wine—and, perhaps, the way you live—forever."
Named one of 10 New Nonfiction Food Books to Read this Spring and Summer by Bon Appetit
Named one of The 4 Books You Should Read This Spring by Fortune
Named one of 12 Nonfiction Books You Need to Read in March by Harper's Bazaar
Named one of the 20 Best Nonfiction Books Coming in March 2017 by Bustle
Named one of The Best Drink Books of Spring and Summer 2017 by Punch
Named one of the Best Books of Early 2017 by Brightly

"Bosker's journey into this sodden universe is thrilling, and she tells her story with gonzo élan. . . . She gives great gossip . . . [and] is, in the main, great company as a narrator—witty, generous, democratic . . . When the sommelier and blogger Madeline Puckette writes that this book is the Kitchen Confidential of the wine world, she's not wrong, though Bill Buford's Heat is probably a shade closer to this book's sensibility and heart."
—Jennifer Senior, The New York Times
"Reads like a wine lover's equivalent of Danter's 'The Divine Comedy': There is paradise, but only after glimpses of purgatory and hell. . . . A funny, thought-provoking and at times frightening look at the sublime tastes, enormous egos and curious rules of a

profession that is both insanely rigorous and occasionally ridiculous." —Associated Press "A madcap 18-month journey... [that's] as informative as it is, well, intoxicating." —Fortune "The 4 Books You Should Read This Spring" —A funny, fascinating adventure. —Real Simple "Cork Dork" is remarkably entertaining. Bosker is a talented writer, a thorough reporter and is unfailingly funny. —The San Francisco Chronicle "A savory romp... [that reveals] not just the intricacies and nuances of flavor that vary from grape to grape, but why wine has become such a social staple for the entire world — and how the way we drink it can potentially change our lives." —Harpers "Bazaar" "12 Books You Need to Read in March" —Both an entry-level guide to the ever-growing business of wine and a masterclass in the strange, immensely skilled fanatics who make it their work. —Then "Atlantic," "25 Books Atlantic Staffers Are Reading This Summer" —[An] often-hilarious memoir. —Good Housekeeping "An informative and riveting read that doesn't take itself too seriously — a much needed dose of reality the wine world could benefit from." —Bon Appetit "Incredibly well written, intelligent, witty, and highly entertaining." —Eater "As fresh and fun as a Wachau Riesling... packed with helpful information, wrapped in honest inquiry, and slathered with humor and wit." —Terroirist "One of the most entertaining drink-related memoirs in years." —Punch "A page turner . . . I heartily recommend [it]." —Martin Moran, "The Sunday Times (UK)" "Refreshingly accessible... It's delightful and informative to see a subject as potentially stodgy as wine appreciation refracted through the perspective of someone young, female, and very smart." —Portland Mercury "[A] must-read wine book." —San Jose Mercury News "You'll never feel lost in front of a wine list again." —Cynthia Graber and Nicola Twilley of "Gastropod" via The Atlantic "I loved this book. It's not just about wine. It's about learning how to listen to your senses, to more deeply experience and appreciate the world around you, and everyone could use another glass of that." —Mary Roach, author of "Gulp" "In this smart and sharply observed book, Bianca Bosker takes us on a marvelous journey through the mad, manic, seductive subculture of wine and wine lovers. It's also a deeply felt story of her own experience, told with great heart and wit." —Susan Orlean, author of "The Orchid Thief" "Cork Dork is a brilliant feat of screwball participatory journalism and Bianca Bosker is a gonzo nerd prodigy. This hilarious, thoughtful and erudite book may be the ultimate answer to the perennial question of whether or not wine connoisseurship is a scam." —Jay McInerney, author of "The Juice" "In this delightfully written and keenly observed book, Bianca Bosker helps us become connoisseurs; not only of wine but also of people whose passions would more aptly be described as obsessions." —Walter Isaacson, author of "The Innovators" "Speaking as someone who barely knows a good Bordeaux from a bottle of Boone's Farm, I was charmed and entertained by this book." —John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of "Pulphed" "The Kitchen Confidential of wine: Read this book, and you'll never be intimidated by wine — or wine snobs — again." —Madeline Puckette, co-author of "Wine Folly" "Fascinating! Thanks to Bosker's sensory descriptions, we get to taste and smell alongside her, without dealing with the thousands of hours of study and endless flashcards first." —Bustle "An informative yet funny examination of wine." —Brightly "The Best Books of Early 2017" —A quest — both hilarious and horrifying — to understand the nature of taste. —Imbibe "An entertaining read." —Phoenix New Times "Reading Bianca Bosker is like sitting down with a brilliant, curious friend for an after-work drink, and suddenly finding it's midnight and the table is littered with empty bottles. Between her hilarious exploits and thoughtful meditations on wine and life, you'll want to stay just one more." —Lauren Collins, author of "When In French" "A joyful journey of discovery into the 'soul' of wine, filled with wit and insight at every step." —Maria Konnikova, author of "The Confidence Game" "If you have wondered about the mysteries of wine, and the airs of people who claim to know something about it, 'Cork Dork' is essential reading. Read it, and you will never look at wine in quite the same way again. This is reportage of a high order." —Roger Cohen, author of "The Girl from Human Street" "Rollicking and lively... I gulped down this book with enormous pleasure." —Julia Flynn Siler, author of "The House of Mondavi" "I have read many 'wine books,' some casual, some pedantic, and many happily informative. But Bianca Bosker's book stands out as being spectacularly successful in teaching us about wine, in making us love wine, and in presenting a tone of unfailing good humor." —Richard E. Quandt, "The Journal of Wine Economics" "Always perceptive, curious, and entertaining, the author describes her experiences with precision and a wry sense of humor... Readers will certainly come away from the book knowing more about wine and likely eager to explore it further, but even those less inclined to imbibe will be intrigued." —Kirkus (starred review) "An interesting look at those with an unquenchable thirst for those unique bottles of vinicultural perfection." —Booklist "A page-turning and fascinating memoir." —Publishers Weekly "About the Author Bianca Bosker is an award-winning journalist

who has written about food, wine, architecture, and technology for [The New York Times](#), [The New York Times Style Magazine](#), [Food Wine](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The Guardian](#), and [The New Republic](#). The former executive tech editor of [The Huffington Post](#), she is the author of the critically acclaimed book [Original Copies: Architectural Mimicry in Contemporary China](#) (University of Hawaii Press, 2013). She lives in New York City.

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Introduction

The Blind Tasting

Perfume was the first to go, but I hadn't been expecting that. Scented detergent followed, then dryer sheets. I wasn't sorry to give up raw onions or hot sauce. Not adding extra salt was rough at first, tolerable for a bit, then miserable. When I went out to eat, everything tasted like it had been doused in brine. Losing Listerine wasn't so bad; replacing it with a rinse of citric-acid solution and watered-down whiskey was. I went through a dark phase when I cut out coffee. But by that point, I was used to being a little slow in the morning. Daytime sobriety was ancient history, along with all hot liquids, the enamel on my teeth, and my Advil supply. All this was part of the deprivation routine I cobbled together at the advice of more than two dozen sommeliers, who, over the course of a year and a half, became my mentors, tormentors, drill sergeants, bosses, and friends. You might be wondering why I'd spend eighteen months getting coached by a bunch of pinstripe-wearing bottle pushers. After all, aren't sommeliers just glorified waiters with a fancy name (somm-el-yay) who intimidate diners into splurging on wine? That was pretty much how I saw them, too, until I handed myself over to an elite clan of sommeliers for whom serving wine is less a job than a way of life, one of living for taste above all else. They enter high-stakes wine competitions (sometimes while nine months pregnant), handle millions of dollars in liquid gold, and make it their mission to convince the world that beauty in flavor belongs on the same aesthetic plane as beauty in art or music. They study weather reports to see if rain will dull their noses, and lick rocks to improve their taste buds. Toothpaste is a liability. They complain about that "new glass" smell, and sacrifice marriages in the name of palate practice. One sommelier, whose wife divorced him over his compulsive studying, told me, "Certainly, if I had to choose between passing my exam and that relationship that I had, I would still choose passing my exam." Their job depends on detecting, analyzing, describing, and accounting for variations of flavor in a liquid that's compound-for-compound the most complicated drink on the planet. There's hundreds and hundreds of volatiles. There's polysaccharides. There's proteins. Amino acids. Biogenic amines. Organic acids. Vitamins. Carotenoids, an enology professor explained to me. "After blood, wine is the most complex matrix there is." With that obsessive focus on minute differences in flavor comes—actually, I wasn't sure what, exactly. At least, not when I started. I came to these sommeliers wanting to know what life was like for them, out at the extremes of taste, and how they'd gotten there. It turned into a question of whether I could get there too—if any of us could—and what would change if I did. Some words of warning: For you, a glass of wine might be your happy place. The thing you reach for at the end of a long day, when you switch off a part of your brain. If you want to keep it that way, then stay far, far away from the individuals in this book. On the other hand, if you've ever wondered what all the fuss is about wine, whether there's really a discernible difference between a \$20 and \$200 bottle, or what would happen if you pushed your senses to their limits—well then, I have some people I'd like you to meet. --- Spend enough time in the wine world, and you'll find every connoisseur has a story about the bottle that launched their obsession with wine. Usually, their Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment arrives via, say, a 1961 Giacomo Conterno Barolo sipped in a little restaurant in Piedmont, Italy, overlooking the Langhe hills, the beech trees swaying as a gentle fog curls up from the valley floor. It's something of a formula: Europe + natural splendor + rare wine = moment of enlightenment. My wine epiphany came slightly differently: at a computer screen. And I wasn't even drinking—I was watching others do it. At the time, I was a technology reporter covering the Googles and Snapchats of the world for an online-only news site, and I was doing most things via screens. I'd spent half a decade on the tech beat, writing virtual articles about virtual things in virtual universes that couldn't be tasted, felt, touched, or smelled. To me, "immersion" meant websites with really big digital photos, and the words "it smells" could only ever refer to a problem—BO, a coworker's lunch, spoiled milk in the office fridge. I once made someone do a story titled "How to Take a Vacation on Google Street View," as if scrolling through blurry photos of Hawaii's Waikoloa Village could be a reasonable substitute for lounging around with a Mai Tai in the late afternoon sun. One Sunday evening, my then-boyfriend-now-husband dragged me to a restaurant on the lower rim of Central Park. It was the type of place that prides itself on applying to food what J. P. Morgan purportedly said about yachts: If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it. I would usually have steered clear of this place for fear of bankruptcy—financial and possibly spiritual—but we were going to meet his client Dave. And Dave liked wine. I liked wine the same way I liked Tibetan hand puppetry or theoretical particle physics, which is to say I had no idea what was going on but was content to smile and nod. It seemed like one of those things that took way more effort than it was worth to understand. Dave collected old wines from Bordeaux. I'd go so far as to say I generally preferred wines from a bottle, but I certainly wouldn't have turned up my nose at something boxed. We barely taken our seats when the sommelier came over. Naturally, he was an old friend of Dave's. After offering a few platitudes about a "good year" and "elegant nose," he disappeared to fetch us a bottle, then

returned to pour Dave a taste. "It's drinking really well right now," murmured the sommelier, employing the sort of nonsense phrase that's only credible to people who use "summer" as a verb. The wine, as far as I could tell, was not doing anything so much as "sitting" in the glass. As the two men oohed and aahed over exquisite aromas of shaved graphite and tar, I began to tune them out. But then the sommelier mentioned he was preparing for the World's Best Sommelier Competition. Excuse me? At first, the idea seemed ridiculous. How could serving wine possibly be a competitive sport? Open, pour, and yours're done. Right? The sommelier quickly ran through the contest's main events. Most difficult and nerve-wracking of all was the blind tasting, which required him to identify the complete pedigree of some half dozen wines: the year each was made, from what species of grapes, in what small corner of the planet (think vineyard, not country), plus how long it could be aged, what to eat with it, and why. Truth be told, it sounded like the least fun anyone's ever had with alcohol. But I love a competition, the less athletic and more gluttonous the better, so when I got home that night, I did some digging to see what this sommelier face-off was all about. I became obsessed. I lost entire afternoons glued to my laptop watching videos of competitors uncorking, decanting, sniffing, and spitting in their quest for the title of World's Best Sommelier. It was like the Westminster Dog Show, with booze: In one event after another, well-groomed specimens with coiffured hair and buffed nails duked it out at a pursuit where success came down to inscrutable minutiae, a grim-faced panel of judges, and the grace with which candidates walked in a circle. (Sommeliers should turn clockwise, only, around a table.) The hopefuls chose their words as if being charged by the syllable and scrutinized their guests (not customers—guests) for precious hints about their moods, budgets, and tastes. Seeing a desperate bid for control in the faint quiver of a hand pouring at an awkward angle, I sensed their craft was governed by stringent rules that I couldn't guess, let alone appreciate. But it was clear they were not to be broken: Veronique Rivest, the first woman ever to make it to the competition's final round, beat her fists when she forgot to offer her guests coffee or cigars. "Merde, merde, MERDE!" she moaned. "Shit, shit, SHIT!" There was no trace of irony. It was riveting. I found out later that one contestant had taken dancing lessons to perfect his elegant walk across the floor. Another hired a speech coach to help him modulate his voice into a velvety baritone, plus a memory expert to strengthen his recall of vineyard names. Others consulted sports psychologists to learn how to stay cool under pressure. If service was an art, the blind tasting looked downright magical. In one video, Veronique glided onstage, camera shutters clicking in the background, and approached a table lined with four glasses, each filled with a few ounces of wine. She reached for a white, and stuck her nose deep into the glass. I held my breath and leaned into my screen. She had just 180 seconds to zero in on the precise aromas and flavors that defined the wine, then correctly deduce what she was drinking. There are more than fifty different countries that produce wine; nearly 200 years of drinkable wines; more than 340 distinct wine appellations in France alone; and more than 5,000 types of grapes that can be blended in a virtually infinite number of ways. So, if you do the math—multiply, add, carry the three—you get approximately a bazillion different combinations. She was undaunted, and rattled off the profile of a 2011 Chenin Blanc from Maharashtra, India, with the ease of someone giving directions to her house. I was captivated by these people who had honed the kind of sensory acuity I'd thus far assumed belonged exclusively to bomb-sniffing German shepherds. I felt like these sommeliers and I existed at opposite extremes: While my life was one of sensory deprivation, theirs was one of sensory cultivation. They made me wonder what I might be missing. Sitting in front of my computer screen, watching videos of people sniffing wine on repeat, I resolved to find out what that was. --- I am a journalist by training and a type-A neurotic by birth, so I started my research the only way I knew how: I read everything I could get my hands on, carpet-bombed sommeliers' in-boxes, and showed up places uninvited, just to see who I'd meet. My first night out with a herd of New York City sommeliers did not end well. I kicked things off by crashing a blind tasting competition at a distributor's office, where I sipped a few glasses along with the judges, tasted a dozen or so wines in celebration of the winner, trailed everyone to a hotel bar for another round, then skipped dinner in favor of a bottle of Champagne that a thirsty sommelier insisted I split with him. Next, I stumbled home and immediately threw up. Early the next morning, while I was Googling "hangover cure" with one eye open, I received a text message from the guy who'd ordered the bubbly the night before. It was a photo of six wines lined up in front of him. He was tasting. Again. Lesson one: These people are relentless. This all-hours fervor was a far cry from what I'd found when I went digging through books and magazines for clues about how I could follow in footsteps of someone like Veronique. The literature makes a life in wine seem utterly sybaritic: A lot of fancy men (because it's traditionally been men) drinking fancy bottles in fancy places. A hard day's work was choking down a bottle of Bordeaux less than a decade old. "Casting a backward glance at my first trip to the Loire, I see a younger man who supported discomforts that sound torturous today," writes wine importer Kermit Lynch in his memoir, *Adventures on the Wine Route*. What were these torturous discomforts he endured? He "flew from San Francisco to New York, changed planes, landed in Paris, rented a car, and drove to the Loire." Quelle horreur! But as I spent more time with sommeliers—eventually drinking at late hours in their apartments and being schooled in the art of spitting—I grew fascinated by a subculture I didn't see reflected in anything I'd read about wine. For a field that's ostensibly all about pleasure, the current generation of sommeliers, or "somms," puts

themselves through an astonishing amount of pain. They work long hours on their feet late into the night, wake up early to cram facts from wine encyclopedias, rehearse decanting in the afternoons, devote days off to competitions, and dedicate the few remaining minutes to sleep—or, more likely, to mooning over a rare bottle of Riesling. It is, in the words of one sommelier, “like some blood sport with corkscrews.” Another called what they feel for wine a “sickness.” They were the most masochistic hedonists I’ve ever met. Nothing I watched or read captured all the idiosyncrasies of the trade. Many decades ago, sommeliers were often failed chefs. They were booted from kitchens, then conscripted to a job they performed with all the charm of the beasts of burden for which they’re named. (The word “sommelier” comes from *sommier*, Middle French for packhorse.) They had a reputation for stalking the floors of stuffy French restaurants wearing dark suits and scowls, like judgy undertakers. But the latest up-and-coming somms have left fancy schools to eagerly pursue what they consider a calling. They are, like me, in their late twenties, childless, worried about rent, and still trying to convince their parents they haven’t ruined their lives by not going to law school. 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. “Blahblahblah wine! Yours’ drinking wine!” But to connoisseurs, that garbled message can be a story about the iconoclast in Tuscany who said *Vaffanculo!* 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, lusting 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’ve 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 is genetically 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 like 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 smellers (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 find 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, winemakers, 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.