



Wine

BY MICHAEL COOPER

Know-it-alls

There are good wine nerds and bad wine nerds.

A riveting novel for wine lovers, Paul Torday's *The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce* comes with a warning – it's easy to enjoy wine, but to adore it is dangerous.

Wilberforce, an Englishman in his mid-thirties, is a connoisseur who insists that he is not an alcoholic: "I just love Bordeaux." His mania, he believes, is no different to "collecting butterflies, or birds' eggs, or rare books". However, on a daily diet of three to four bottles, his hands tremble and his balance is deteriorating.

In the opening pages, Wilberforce, dining alone, orders a bottle of the fabled Château Pétrus 1982 in a fancy London restaurant. The sommelier takes a step back from the table. "I could see him looking at my clothes, which were not of the newest. I have not been paying much attention to personal grooming recently, although I do still wash."

For Wilberforce, the wine's price (£3000) is irrelevant: drinking it is "an act of passion, of great artistry". When drinking wine, he becomes "very peaceful, very reflective, sometimes even devotional" in his moods. When not drinking, he is "restless, prone to unhappy memories".

The sale of Wilberforce's software-development business enabled him to buy Caerlyon, a large old house in the north of England with a vast collection of wine in the cellar, from the executors of the estate of his friend, Francis Black. He also bought a flat in Mayfair to live in with his wife, Catherine. As Wilberforce's

infatuation with Bordeaux intensifies, his marriage starts to unravel.

Torday won wide acclaim in 2006 for his debut novel, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. A "novel in four vintages", *The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce* tells its story back-to-front, with the later chapters tracing the development of Wilberforce's relationships with Catherine and Francis Black. It's a sobering study of obsession and loneliness, yet engrossing and often unexpectedly humorous.

Robert Parker, an American lawyer raised on Coca-Cola, is the focus of Elin McCoy's weighty and searching biography, *The Emperor of Wine*. Parker's bi-monthly newsletter, *The Wine Advocate*, not only sways many wine-buying decisions around the globe but even influences the way some wines are made.

In the 1970s, when a host of American baby boomers developed a taste for wine, they found that retailers often knew even less than they did. Parker, with perfect timing, launched a new 100-point system for scoring wines – a system easily understood by average Americans and which also gave the impression that he could discern minute differences in quality.

The red wines that gained his top scores were often described as "massive"; some even resembled a "dry vintage port". Soon, producers in Burgundy and other regions were being urged by their US importers to make their wines in a richer, more oaky, Parker-pleasing style.

Today, even some of those whose wines

are praised by Parker are uneasy about his power to move markets and influence traditional wine styles. Many English wine writers have denounced the 100-point scoring system as bunk. McCoy herself considers it "a joke". I agree. The chemical aspects of wine can be measured with great precision – but not quality.

Parker's lasting contribution is his fearless approach to the business of wine evaluation. At a time when wine writers on both sides of the Atlantic were reluctant to criticise famous wines, Parker slammed those he considered inferior or overpriced, while praising others. Rather than looking at a wine's label, he focused on what was in the glass.

Elin McCoy has written an outstanding, finely balanced and insightful profile of the world's most powerful critic – regardless of subject. ■

THE IRRESISTIBLE INHERITANCE OF WILBERFORCE, by Paul Torday (Phoenix, \$28).
THE EMPEROR OF WINE, by Elin McCoy (Harper Perennial, \$36, available at Unity Books)

Wine of the week

Crossroads Hawke's Bay Chardonnay 2007
(★★★★, \$20)

Mouth-filling dry wine with vibrant, citrusy, peachy flavours to the fore and a subtle seasoning of oak. Quietly classy.



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