The American wine industry is currently experiencing a period of unprecedented prosperity, with vineyards and wineries found in all fifty states, from Florida to Alaska and Hawaii to Maine. Given this boom, it is easy to take American wine for granted; but its history over the last hundred years is filled with false starts, speed bumps, and roadblocks. In *A History of Wine in America: From Prohibition to Present*, Thomas Pinney thoroughly and entertainingly details this winding road, from the dire straits of Prohibition through the viticultural affluence of recent times.

The central defining event in the history of American wine was undoubtedly the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, and this is where Pinney begins his narrative. Passed in 1919, the so-called Prohibition Amendment made it illegal to manufacture, sell, transport, import, or export “intoxicating liquors.” America’s dry zeal virtually destroyed the wine industry. Some winemakers staggered through Prohibition by producing various combinations of communion wines, medicinal tonics, and flavoring syrups, all of which were allowed through legal loopholes. However, the industry essentially began from scratch when the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by the Twenty-first in 1933.

With Repeal, America’s relationship with wine reached a crossroads, and this is one of the most interesting parts of Pinney’s book. In 1934, an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture named Rexford Tugwell visualized a European-style future for Americans and wine, which he hoped could become a regular part of the diet. Using his position in the Department, Tugwell initiated a comprehensive, scientific study of wine. The flagship of the enterprise was a state-of-the-art model winery in Maryland, which was to serve as his team’s research headquarters. However, the Twenty-first Amendment had not quelled the fervor, nor lessened the influence, of many temperance groups. At their behest, Congress passed legislation banning the use of agricultural funds for alcohol research. As Pinney tells us, “The winery never crushed a grape. Its equipment was sold . . . the building . . . given over to such things as the seed production laboratory and the nut investigations section” (38). This event was emblematic of the difficulties facing the development of American wine after Prohibition.

Additionally, “there was no positive federal policy toward wine,” Pinney writes. “The flow of wine across the country that might have been imagined to follow Repeal was impeded, obstructed, and diverted in a thousand unpredictable and arbitrary ways—and still is” (52). Indeed, this “fantastic balkanization of liquor regulation,” as Pinney terms it, is the overarching theme of the rest of his book.

Prohibition created other problems for the wine industry, too. For example, after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, many grape growers replaced their wine grapes with Concords, which were better suited for juice than wine. When Repeal arrived, there were scarcely any decent plantings of wine grapes left in the country. A self-perpetuating cycle followed, with poor grapes resulting in poor wine, which led to poor sales, which in turn reinforced the hesitancy to plant wine grapes.

Pinney walks the reader through each frustrating step of American wine development over the next several decades. Gradually, farmers planted better grapes. Winemakers became more scientifically precise in their craft. Entrepreneurs with names
like Gallo and Mondavi discovered the unexplored profit potential of wine. More Americans acquired a taste for dry wine, rather than the sweet fortified wines that had long been their peculiar favorites. And the industry grew enormously—so much that the United States presently ranks fourth behind Italy, France, and Spain in wine production. Yet, Pinney concludes, “for all that, wine is still far from an everyday, familiar creature for most Americans…the status of wine remains problematic—put in question by legal restrictions and moral disapproval” (367).

Overall, *A History of Wine* demonstrates that Pinney, although by profession a professor of English, is a rather good historian. This is a thoughtful, detailed—perhaps over-detailed at times—and highly interesting account of a very intriguing American industry, and the book is well worth reading for anyone at all fascinated by the story behind the bottle.

Eric B. Burnette
Appalachian State University