



After 15 years in the wine industry, Von now writes a monthly wine column, has co-authored a recent book, hosts a weekly radio wine show on KSAV.org, and conducts a monthly Tasting Panel for website publication. She has made wine, taught numerous wine courses, and serves as a competition wine judge. Send questions or comments to: wynelady@sonic.net

IN WINE COUNTRY

The Good, The Bad And... What ARE Those Numbers?

by Von Hurson

Ah yes! A subject I so love to rant about – wine by the numbers! As a wine educator, wine judge and shameless enthusiast, I not only seek to have fun while hoping to enlighten, I also seek to dispel the myriad of myths and misconceptions that surround wine.

I've spent enough time in the wine industry to peek through the veil of innuendo and claims that sometimes do little but confuse. All that confusion, of course, leaves many wine buyers, even wine connoisseurs, questioning all that knowledge they've gained, and that's not fun at all.

It's hardly surprising that wine ratings have become so revered, been followed so blindly, and been touted so loudly by wine producers. Not that it's all bad, but it IS frequently overrated and sometimes just plain misleading. After all, how can you resist articles that claim to provide "The Key to Choosing the Best Wines!" or "The Most

Exciting Wines of 2009"? I'd bite, except for the obvious question: By WHOSE definition?

There has long been a debate about the validity of rating wines, since by its nature it is subjective and personal. But there seems to be an obsession with the practice - with the purchasing public resorting to it just to sort through the thousands of wines on the market. And of course, marketing arms of wineries love it. There will always be endless discussions about which rating system is best: 1 to 5 stars (*Decanter*), the 20-point scale (*Underground Wine Journal*), "puffs" (*Connoisseurs' Guide*) and the 100-point scale (*Wine Advocate*, *Wine Spectator*, *Wine & Spirits*, *Wine Enthusiast and Tastings*). Unfortunately, "none of the above" is not an option.

So how do the periodicals that drive the world of wine buying select wines to review? Since it's a huge world of wine, each month a given wine periodical will focus on

certain wines. Sometimes it's "new releases" or "value wines". Sometimes it's different countries or varietals. Any winery, anywhere in the world, that thinks they have a special wine in those categories can send it in for evaluation. However, with so many wines, not all wines sent in are selected for tasting, and any wines tasted that receive less than 80 points won't even be published.

What's important to remember is this: When following the ratings, you're frequently following the tastes of just one person, or occasionally a small panel. That's right, most often one single "expert" determines the score and hence the fate of a wine. For example, one of the most popular wine tomes has one critic who reviews California wines, yet another one who does Bordeaux, Italy and Ports, and still another who rates Australia, New Zealand, Oregon and Washington, etc.

True, their expertise has come from years of experience and practice tasting and evaluating wines. But is that expert's taste YOUR taste? Trust me, the big numbers will be given to the wines whose style

the person tasting them likes - yes, one person's personal, subjective preference. Of course, some of what's being evaluated is varietal typicality - after all who would want a Cabernet to smell or taste like a Pinot? But beware! Be true to yourself and don't try talking yourself into liking a certain wine just because you're dazzled by the numbers and think you should like it.

Since most of the big hitters use the 100-point scale, we'll focus on that. First of all, the 100-point scale is really a 50-point scale with nothing rated below a 50. Then the 50's are considered "unacceptable", the 60's "below average", and the 70's merely "average". In fact you'll rarely see anything in publication below an 80. From a marketing standpoint, the low 80's are marginal, 85 and above is OK, but capturing anything 90 and above is usually instant stardom. The wine will FLY out the door and bring customers clamoring for more without having even tasted it.

Therein lies the biggest problem to following rating points. When the influence of any wine critic is so enormous, and it's considered so

important to pull a 90+ rating, it completely distorts what wine enjoyment is all about. What's even worse is that there are some wine producers from all over the world who are attempting to change the style of their wines just to score coveted "points". In truth, high ratings from certain wine critics just shouldn't have that much influence over wine styles, but they do. So now we're sadly seeing more and more of what's called an "International Style" of wine. What about the charm and delight of having wines to choose from that proudly show off their differences, instead of their sameness? If chasing high ratings ends up subverting individuality and uniqueness in the quest for scores, it will be a dark day for the world of wine.

Where do you go from here? Have fun with it. I'd suggest investing in a wine periodical of your choice, selecting a price range you're comfortable with and picking up a few of the bottles that have high ratings - on the more extravagant side of what you're willing to spend. I'd also pick up a couple of the ones that got lower ratings that are priced on the lower end of your budget. Bag the bottles and taste them blind, giving them your own rating. Above all, be honest with yourself. This will let you know if you agree with this particular "expert" or not. If you find you like the wines he likes, then he's a good guide when you next go wine shopping. If nothing else, you've taken another step toward enhancing your wine knowledge, enlarging your wine vocabulary, and expanding your wine preferences. Go for it!

The ongoing tastings of the "Swirls of Wisdom" Wine Tasting Panel

Franc-ly Speaking

Seven lovely Cabernet Francs

- ◆ Les Pensees de Pallus
- ◆ Lang & Reed
- ◆ Acorn
- ◆ Titus
- ◆ Merriam
- ◆ Stonefly
- ◆ Hanna

► The above wines were enthusiastically tasted at *Pelican Art Gallery* in Petaluma! ◀

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