

A Nichols Worth of Wine
December 2009

One if he likes it, two if he doesn't

There has been much written over the years about the value and the validity of wine ratings and lately it's been at a feverish pitch. Even the mainstream media is now chiming in. Whether anyone is paying serious attention is another matter. In the end, I suspect not.

I wouldn't go so far as to say wine drinkers are lemmings when it comes to choosing the wines they buy, but we all tend to pay a lot of - some say, too much, attention to what a select few professional palates tell us. What the wines we're drinking *should* taste like. Whether they're any good, and if so, how good. They assign arbitrary and subjective numerical values. One thing is certain though, the wine buying public at large pays very close attention to these ratings. So do the wineries, merchants, and distributors.

I know a number of winemakers who refuse to submit their wines for review, opting instead to trust that the consumer will recognize the quality of their wines thanks to their marketing campaigns or by word-of-mouth. Many of those who do play the ratings game, lobbying critics to anoint their wines, do so with trepidation. A score of ninety or higher can all but assure a sellout. Below that and a wine could languish on the shelf for years before being relegated to the bargain bin.

A Nichols Worth of Wine
Wine Tasting Scoring Sheet



Name: _____ Date: _____

Wine Varietal: _____

5	4	3	2	1
←—————→				
Appearance Clear, appropriate color; brilliant with no off-colors to cloudy with off-colors.				
Aroma Complex with many detectable aromas to little or off aromas.				
Body Perfect texture and weight feel in the mouth to too much texture or thin.				
Taste Good balance and structure; several detectable flavors to unbalanced (too acidic or too tannic) with few flavors.				
Finish Lingering flavors; smooth, rich aftertaste to flavors end abruptly.				
Overall Loved or disliked the wine. Would definitely or never buy this wine.				

Score	Wine A	Wine B	Wine C	Wine D	Wine E	Wine F
Total						

Individual Ranking

1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. _____
 5. _____
 6. _____

Group Ranking

1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. _____
 5. _____
 6. _____

There's been a fair amount of speculation recently that some winemakers have changed the flavor profile of their wines to please the fickle palates of equally fickle critics. Do the critics rate wines they personally prefer differently to those they like less? Certainly Parker and others have been accused of favoring bolder flavored wines (known as "fruit-bombs") more than others. Is this true? I don't know. I can tell you I have tremendous respect for the man's palate. I attended a tasting where he was judging a ten-year vertical of Latour and I was blown away by his recall ability as he described wines he tasted more than a decade earlier with pinpoint accuracy.

For better or worse, ratings have become a necessary evil. The real tragedy though is that the majority of wines never get rated and even those that score in the mid to high 80's - delicious, well-made wines, may get scant notice.



So, do ratings help consumers? Yes, in the end I suppose they do. Without some guidance from experts, most consumers would be more lost than ever as they wander aimlessly up and down the wine aisles pondering hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of labels from which to choose. Make no mistake, people who taste and evaluate wines for a living provide a valuable service to their wine constituents. But, and this for me is a big *BUT*, consumers need not always follow the handful of "experts" whose palates, while experienced, are subjective and yes, sometimes even fallible.

Are they always accurate in the evaluations, scores and descriptions of the wines they review? Certainly not if you listen to the protestations of critics of, well, the critics. In a controlled scientific study of a wine judging, a highly respected not-for profit wine community recently concluded that successive judgments of the same wine, by the same wine expert, varied so widely that ratings are "seriously flawed." One study found that over a three year period, 90% of the judges in a blind tasting, repeatedly gave widely different scores to the same wine, and in one case, twice rejected a particular wine only to award it a Gold medal on the third tasting,

Two other stories circulating in the nay-sayer's camp involve a tasting where varying levels of coloring agents were added to a white wine to simulate different red wine varietals and critics proceeded to "identify" what they thought were the correct red wines. Then there was the story of a researcher who put an identical wine in two different bottles, one labeled as an expensive Grand Cru Bordeaux, the other in a bottle regarded as a cheap table wine. Fifty-seven experts rated the Grand Cru as excellent and the cheap table wine as unbalanced and flat!

With all the accusations, blemishes and shortcomings of the rating system, you'd think the wine buying public would be more than willing to ignore the reviews and ratings. In truth, 90-plus point scores are relished more than ever, even as most wine lovers publicly profess to care less what the critics say. At least until the point of buying. Then Parker weighs as heavily on their wine buying decision as does price. We're all looking for value, but not at the expense of low - or worse, no scores. I wonder how many read the recent Wall Street Journal story suggesting that a one point rise in a Parker score equates to something like a 7% increase in price?

The most valuable lesson I ever learned about ratings came from a merchant, a wine buyer for five decades, who claims to have developed the perfect rating system. He doesn't allow the wholesalers who call on him to discuss the "experts" ratings until after he has personally tasted the wines. He then applies his own two-point scoring system. One if he likes it. Two if he doesn't! I've never bought a bad bottle from this guy.

Eat, drink, and be merry!

Bruce