

Uncorking the Mystique of Wine Ratings

As almost all serious wine consumers know, wines are rated by many individuals and institutions and graded on a point scale. Robert M. Parker conceived the widely used 100-point scale in the late 1970s, and most others have more or less adopted it. I acknowledge the need for reference points, especially for those just starting out on the wine adventure, but I would like to offer some insights.

We all have different palates

First, all of us have varying palates. Literally, one person's taste buds taste the identical wine even from the same bottle differently than another tasting from the same bottle at the same time. In part, this relates to the differences in the physiology of the tongue, but to a greater extent it's due to the personal situation of the individuals at the time they're drinking the wine. All of us have "baggage" from time to time—colds, stuffy noses, worries, maladies, recent bad experiences. It might sound strange, but all of these things have been documented as having an enormous impact on our tasting experience.

Alternatively, we can be enamored with the food and wine while visiting restaurants in a foreign country only to return home to find the same wines disappointing. This is often due to the change in environment or the absence of that perfectly paired regional food. Or, the difference can simply be that our likeliness to enjoy the moment is not as great when we're dealing with the pressures and "baggage" of our hurried existence, as opposed to the relatively carefree vacation mindset.

Although these environmental factors are important, recent research has shown that a great disparity exists between an individual's ability to perceive tastes and smells. Our tastes of wine are heavily influenced by the smell of wine once it is in the oral cavity and oropharynx. Further research has shown that repeated exposure to the same smells increases your ability to perceive them.

So what's a wine drinker to do?

So, if we understand that the wine ratings system has drawbacks and limitations due to the ability or

inability of some of us to perceive flavors, smells, and tastes that others write about so eloquently, what are we to do? In fact, the situation gets worse, because different writers simply like some wines more than others, and all things being equal, they may award them more points than we might.

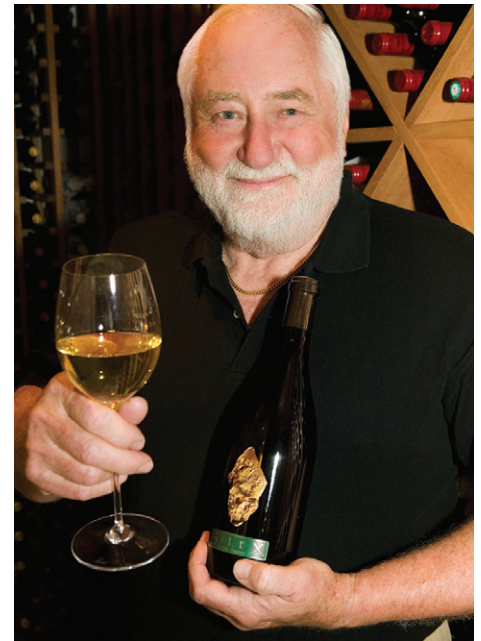
Thus, I have a profound dislike and distrust of all writers' point evaluations. I place much more emphasis on reading the wine's descriptors than I do its point evaluation. In fact, you or I may not perceive all the smells and tastes of the evaluator, but I've found that if you drink the wine while reading the review and focus intently on the tasting process, you'll "discover" many or most of the attributes with practice.

Reading the descriptions can also help you avoid buying wine that you won't like, regardless of its price or pedigree. For example, two highly rated and revered wines never made it into my cellar even though I loved and bought their less-expensive siblings. Specifically, both Heitz Martha's Vineyard and Silver Oak Bonny's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon were too influenced by eucalyptus trees near the vineyards, and therefore they contained too much mint for my tastes. The stablemates of Bella Oaks and Fay (Heitz) and Alexander Valley and Napa Valley (Silver Oak) were not so close to the eucalyptus trees and therefore were more to my tastes—and were priced less.

Focus on the descriptors, not the points

When I'm selling wine, I like to have the customer focus on the adjectives and nouns—the taste descriptors—that they enjoy, versus focusing on the points value of a particular wine. This prevents them from making a disappointing purchase.

With regard to tasting, it's important to use a proper wine glass (see my previous article in the January/February issue of QUINTESSENTIAL BARRINGTON). Fill the glass with only four to five ounces so you can swirl it, and then put your nose into the glass. Take a big sip and leave it in your mouth for a few seconds before swishing it around and then swallowing. Only by trying many different varietals from many locations and various producers can you begin to know your palate.



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Venture outside your comfort zone

I am constantly surprised by venturing outside my "comfort zone," which is vast based on my four decades of wine involvement. Recently I discovered a six-year-old Argentina Chardonnay 2001 Las Fincas Nobles from Luigi Bosca. I was sure that this wine was past its prime, but I found that it was one of the greatest wines I've ever had.

Likewise, the best Bordeaux my wife and I have had with one of our favorite meals, chicken Cordon Bleu, was a 1983 La Mission Haut Brion—a wine, which received only an 89-point rating from *The Wine Advocate*. If we had not experimented and trusted our own palates and ignored the 'experts,' we would have missed our best to date.

Venture forth and expand your wine horizons. While a trusted, knowledgeable wine merchant can help you, you need to push the envelope yourself. Santé! U