

ASIA

Wine Ratings:

Catering To The **Herd** Mentality,

Or

A Necessary **Evil**?

NO

Point?

THE CLINICAL AND SOMEWHAT ERRONEOUS METHODS OF SCORING OR RATING WINE DOES NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE HUMAN FACTOR, NOT ONLY DYSFUNCTIONAL TO ITS PLEASURES, BUT UNFAIRLY DISQUALIFYING OTHERWISE PERFECTLY AGREEABLE WINES. YET, HOW ELSE DOES THE NOVICE WINE CONSUMER OR ENTHUSIAST ALIKE, WADE THROUGH AN OVERWHELMING GLUT OF HYPE? CURTIS MARSH EXPLORES THIS POLEMIC.

Curtis Marsh

To score or not to score? That is the nagging question every wine writer, wine or hospitality industry professional must grapple with at some stage of their career. For a professional wine writer it is uncomfortably critical to one's reputation and possibly the only way to establish credibility or make any commercial sense out of an otherwise passion-driven philanthropic occupation.

Personally, I have a love-hate relationship with scoring, gaining much intellectual stimulation analysing, interpreting and categorising wine, indeed almost to the point of self vindication, yet detesting the misinterpretation and exploitation of scores outside of the professional milieu. As tempting as it is to join the status quo and gloat in the power of the numerical pen, I continue to procrastinate over my duplicitous principals; it remains my *bête noire* and a conundrum I am unlikely to reconcile. I am however, more troubled by the growing cast of wine consumers in Asia obsessed with scores – seemingly an inherent process for choosing premium wines these days. It is not just the credulous trust in scores that is a concern, but the dependence of wine merchants and marketers on critics to sell wine through the blatant exploitation of ratings. Even more worrying is the reality that the average consumer in Asia is oblivious to these issues, being relatively new to Western style wine and coincidentally reared on the 100-point scoring system.

In actuality, this epidemic stems from the United States (US) where such individuals are otherwise known as 'score whores' (aka wine snobs), as divulged by a Master of Wine (MW) who had recently visited the US and was amazed by the habitual devotion to wine scores. This deep-seated reverence of the 100-point scale is largely due to endemic wine publications such as the *Wine Spectator*, an inculcation of wine scoring and high-profile wine critics, such as the omnipotent Robert Parker (Parker). Before you start thinking that this is about to turn into a Parker bashing article, on the contrary, I have utmost respect and admiration for Parker. Clearly, he has an extraordinary palate matched by an exhaustive knowledge of wine. I also like his writing style and descriptive tasting notes; indeed, I deduce more from his tasting notes than the scores. However, that does not mean I agree with all of his assessments or preference of style. I am most certainly not impressed by formulaic wines that are blatantly fashioned to please the Parker palate and also remain sceptical of his methodology of determining that a wine should only be given 89 points, just a mere one point short of that magical 90 points.

What does perturb me though, is Parker's somewhat snobbish and hypocritical approach to certain wine producing countries in his evolution. Case in point? He did not consider Australia worthy of a visit as there were no rateable wines made there, yet did a complete about-face and now has the deepest adoration for Barossa Valley Shiraz or anything from Australia that is behemothic and scoring these style of wines consistently in the high nineties. Moreover, and I find it personally insulting, he has intoned in the same manner that New Zealand wines are of insignificant interest to warrant a visit, which is totally preposterous. Clearly, he is ill-informed.

To his credit, Parker has realised both his own shortcomings (Burgundy being the most glaring) if not succumbing to the reality that the wine-world is no longer as small as it was (yes, there is life after Bordeaux and California), and it is physically impossible for a single critic to cover every wine region of significance, that's if it ever was, and begetting regional specialists. Moreover, the internet has profoundly changed the way we communicate on wine, albeit one hell of a noise coming from both amateurs and professionals to the point where consumers might become tone deaf to it all. Back to the 'score whore', a few years ago when I was emceeing an options tasting, the entertaining – if not masochistic – sport of identifying masked wines guided by multi-choice questions, one of the participants announced, in an irritating manner, that she and her husband only drank wines rated 95 points and above. Blind tastings are merciless to wine snobs and our self-proclaimed connoisseur humiliated herself with an unequivocal preference for a non-rated, humble Portuguese red (HK\$240 per bottle) over and above a celebrated 1998 Henschke Hill of Grace Shiraz, rated 97 points by Parker and valued at more than HK\$3,000 per bottle at the time. On the positive side, she was both enlightened and made more confident of her own palate when the Portuguese red was announced the unanimous favourite of the evening. It was, incidentally, the 2000 Quinta do Crasto Reserva Vinho Tinto, an outstanding Douro producer. (visit www.quintadocrasto.pt)

If I could emphasise this type of tasting, whilst being a great deal of fun as well as providing a relatively unbiased platform for enjoying wine, it is incongruous with the appreciation of subliminal complexities in wines such as Henschke Hill of Grace, ideally savoured singularly and matched to the appropriate cuisine and occasion. Another recent wine experience highlighting human behavioural inadequacies and its consequences on wine was when I attended a luncheon hosted by Château Haut-Brion, the celebrated First Growth Bordeaux which also owns Châteaux La Mission Haut-Brion and Laville Haut-Brion, all part of the Clarence Dillon empire. Putting aside the new range of generic Bordeaux wines produced by the group, ostensibly the reason we were invited, or shall I say, seduced by the sheer notion of trying top estate wines, our group of so-called wine professionals seemed to be totally focused on comparing or critiquing the more illustrious wines. Indeed, the woman sitting next to me kept badgering me on which wine I liked the most, and did not comprehend my answer of, "All of them!" I believe she missed the point I was trying to make, that the 2004 Château Laville Haut-Brion Blanc was as enjoyable as the 2005 Château Haut-Brion Blanc, although completely different in style or vintage expression. Ditto for the 1998 Château La Mission Haut-Brion and 1995 Château Haut-Brion and even though I was quietly surprised how excellent the subordinate Château La Mission Haut-Brion was, I'd be damned if I was going to be intimidated by this captious group. What is it with humanoids that we always have to be contentiously comparative when there is more than one wine served or become super critical when there are extraordinarily expensive bottles involved?

Targeting

The Point Of Scoring

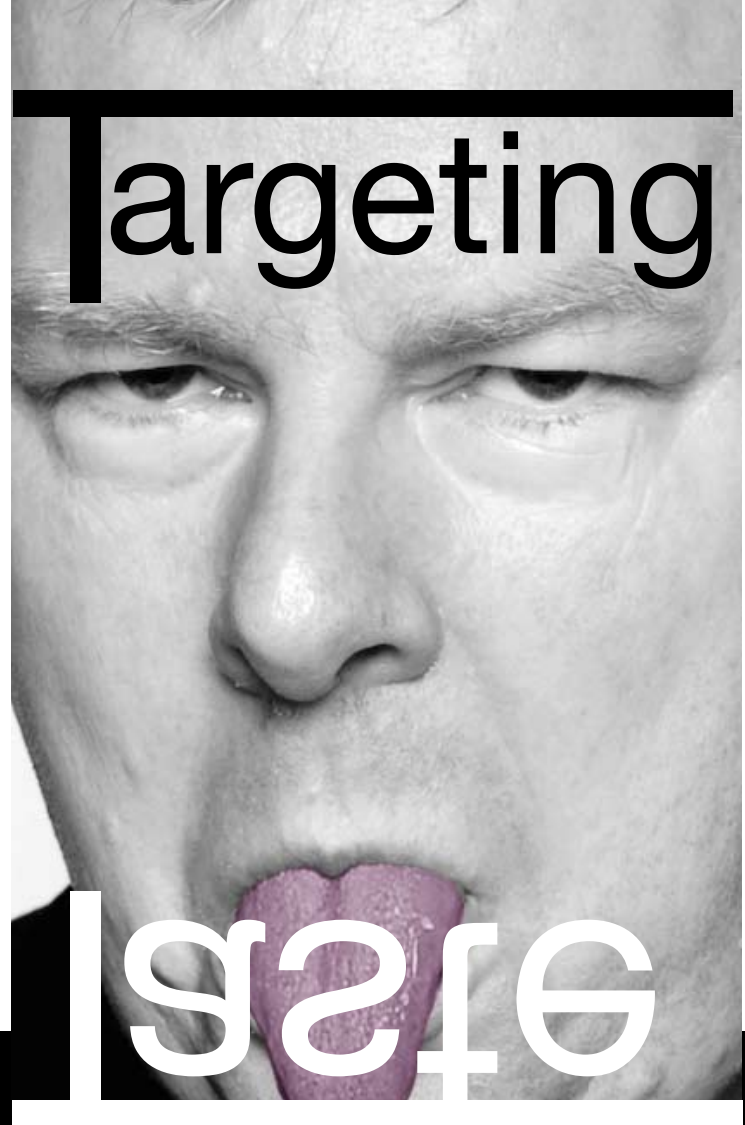
That said, it would be naive to suggest that we could do without personal opinions or ratings altogether; in reality, it is an entrenched aspect of the competitive nature of consumers and consumerism. Perhaps this is the crux of the matter, and if only we could move away from the herd mentality and simply become more reliant on our own tastes, or approach wine consumption with a much more adventurous, opened minded manner.

Scores aside, the predictable question wine writers are always asked is, "What is your favourite wine?" To which I reply, "The wine I haven't tried yet," emphasising that I gain the most pleasure in discovering new taste sensations. The fact is: I have a wandering palate for food and wine, greatly influenced by my mood and by different cuisines, although inevitably, there are certain flavours, varieties and regions I enjoy more than others. The very notion of drinking one type or style of wine continuously escapes me (completely), and I think this view is shared by most wine professionals and wine enthusiasts. To quote the jovial New Zealand Master of Wine, Bob Campbell, "I am vinous promiscuous."

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The Rating Game

And yet, seemingly the exact opposite is happening to wine consumers' palates; they are being dictated by scores or powerful critics and corralled by the herd mentality and slaves of fashion, naively ensnared in vinous mediocrity. The situation is not helped by the plethora of pedestrian E-mails from wine merchants in circulation, the contents are almost entirely a reproduction of scores and tasting notes verbatim, little wonder that consumers are becoming lazier and coerced by scores when it comes to purchasing wine. The embellishing of every point above a strategic stratum of 90 points out of 100 is rampant. Anything above 95 points is money in the bank, although a perfect 100 is more likely to cause a massive headache for the distributor and is a milestone that haunts the producer in successive vintages for the rest of their days. Curiously, it is only the 100-point system that has any plagiaristic appeal predominantly from the great Parker who, after all, invented this scoring system. After that, inconsequential in order, comes other expertise in US publications such as *Wine Spectator*, Steve Tanzer's *International Wine Cellars*, Allen Meadow's *Burghound* and *The Wine Enthusiast*.



For reasons unknown, the respected English-based magazine *Decanter*, which uses a star-rating system, is rarely quoted, rather ironic given that it is the first international magazine to publish a dedicated Asia edition printed in Mandarin. Neither does the indefatigable wine authority Jancis Robinson MW get much airplay, perhaps because she uses the English establishment 20-point scoring system. Even more puzzling – not a word of the *The World of Fine Wine* magazine, arguably the most serious (albeit a little highbrow at times) wine publication in the world and admired for its scrupulous professional integrity.

It is not that I am questioning the competence of those who choose to score or rate wines. On the contrary, there are countless writers, critics, winemakers, wine and hospitality industry professionals with encyclopaedic knowledge and seriously sharp palates who can dissect and assess a wine with the precision and thoroughness of a forensic scientist performing an autopsy, detecting winemaking faults in nano-proportions. It is crucial, however, to keep in mind that individual scores are highly subjective and that you need to synchronise the personality and particular tastes or track record of the critic with your own likes or

dislikes. Where scores are a result of a tasting panel, we encounter one of the most serious flaws associated with numerical ratings of wines, and the Mathematics is not simple. The permutations in calculating the mean score are highly manipulative, and like any statistic, the range or difference between the largest and smallest value alters the outcome significantly. Panel tasting outcomes can also be greatly obscured by invited guest judges, particularly if in an international sense, as it invariably takes some time to acclimatise their palates and their scores can be widely divergent from the local panellists. These types of tastings or any wine show, while topical and held in the spirit of healthy competition, should not be seen as conclusive.

One should also take into account there is a predominance to assess wine at the tasting bench and in exhaustive batches. While undoubtedly executed professionally, normally arranged by region or variety with wines masked to increase objectivity, the method lacks soul, and there is the unavoidable element of comparisons that are often unjust. There is also the question of the taster's methodology or philosophy and whether they are assessing the wine in context of the region's known characteristics or an accepted style, or have an all-encompassing qualitative view. This issue is controversial, with some critics having to defend their assessments. For example, James Halliday awarded the 2006 De Bortoli Pinot Noir Rosé, Yarra Valley 94 points out of 100 points, and rightly so. However, there was much lamenting from other journalists about how a Rosé (implying a simple wine) could be only three points away from Penfold's Grange (Australia's icon and viewed as profound), scored 97 points, the highest level in his *2008 Australian Wine Companion*. Obviously, Halliday rates his wines in accordance to style and I applaud this.

Likewise, Jancis Robinson MW goes to great pains to explain how she scores wine in a regional context, although she openly admits she is not entirely satisfied with any scoring system. She too has encountered criticism in her Purple Pages blog, (www.jancisrobinson.com) where frustrated, want-to-be-wine critics have taken her to task, and I am talking specifically about being interrogated on how she could score Quartz Reef Pinot Noir from Central Otago, New Zealand (seemingly unknown or of no pedigree) 18 points out of 20 points and Château Petrus, Bordeaux (renowned and revered by wine snobs) also 18 points. Notwithstanding her amazing tolerance and humility to answer these inquisitions at great length, her final reply emphasised the Quartz Reef was assessed in the context of New World Pinot Noir and the Château Petrus in the context of Bordeaux. She mused, "But perhaps, strangely for someone who studied Mathematics at Oxford, I'm not a great fan of the conjunction of numbers and wine. Once numbers are involved, it is all too easy to reduce wine to a financial commodity rather than keep its precious status as a uniquely stimulating source of sensual pleasure and conviviality."

Technical issues aside, the main flaw in clinically rating wines is that there is no accounting for the flavour and enhancing influences of food, mood or your state of mind at the time of imbibing — all of which will have a profound effect on your opinion of the wine. I can think of endless personal experiences that demonstrate this, a prime example is when absorbed in the surroundings and culture while travelling the

wine route: memories of a trip to the south of France, in the hills of the Languedoc, an idyllic part of the world where Roman generals chose to retire among the joie de vivre cultures of Catalonia and France. We are in the tiny village of Sainte Croix de Quintillargues, luxuriating in the jovial hospitality of Pierre Clavel on an impeccably radiant Provincial afternoon. Pondering how unjustly maligned white wines are from this region, we sip his unpretentious Cascaille Blanc, a blend of Roussanne, Grenache Blanc and Rolle; rich, yet lively and savoury with dried herbs and a salty finish. Relishing in the plump green olives, picked from the trees surrounding us, along with all number of home-cured and smoked pig parts and terrines, the synergies between the wine, food and ambience were sublime. If compelled, I would score the wine a perfect 100 points. For that matter, readers should search out Pierre Clavel wines (www.vins-clavel.fr).

I recall a bittersweet experience of running a small business when I discovered that my administration manager, who had impressed the entire wine community with his unrivalled knowledge of old and rare wines, was enjoying his research at my expense. Some time after his expeditious departure, we unearthed a magnum of 1949 Comte de Vogue, 'Le Musigny' Vieilles Vignes Grand Cru red Burgundy, indeed rare and expensive. Usually one only gets to eulogize such wines at formal dinners, served in thimble proportions, consequently the enjoyment exclusive to the bouquet. In a consoling act of decadence, I decided to share the wine with three devoted drinking comrades. We were in nirvana as we toasted both his exodus and expertise, immersing ourselves in our gluttony and the captivating sweet perfume and evocative secondary aromas of antique woods, wild mushrooms, truffles and earthy minerals. Words will never do justice to the complex nuances of this wine, and it remains my benchmark for Pinot Noir to this day. As for a score, I would rate it 200 points out 100 points.

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Points Versus Prices

All this said, I could be on the wrong train altogether as far as Asia's mentality on wine ranking and perhaps scores have less impact than I perceive. I recall sitting next to the owner of a prominent Cantonese restaurant in Hong Kong a few years ago whereupon a line-up of the best Australian whites and reds were paired impeccably with the cuisine. It was clear he was unimpressed with the wines until coming across the Jasper Hill Georgia's Paddock Shiraz from Heathcote, where his discernable grunt of appreciation and obvious preference for reds with some substance prompted me to enquire on what he prefers to drink or serve to his personal guests. He replied explicitly, "Only First Growths if you are a friend, otherwise Second Growths if I do not know you so well." Does it simply boil down to prestige and face?

In the imperfect world of wine rankings, and out of all the different methods, I personally prefer the Gambero Rosso three-glass system which is unquestionably approached with integrity, as is everything associated with the Slow Food Editore (www.slowfood.com, also imperative for travelling Italy, the infallible Slow Food Osterie and Locande Guide). In addition to the glass-rating, which corresponds to a range of scores using the 100-point system, the Gambero Rosso also indicates the price range of the wine with a numerical categorisation of one to eight, the latter being the most expensive. At first glance this can be a confusing and mistaken for a rating or vintage evaluation however, its intended purpose is to put in context the glasses awarded and price/quality rapport.

Price/quality rapport is perilously subjective and clearly linked to one's disposable income and perhaps the overriding factor in categorising wine, period. Invariably there are, discernable reference points to make a judgement whether a wine is over-delivering, or under-delivering for that matter, at its price point. Moreover, a tangible appreciation and anecdotal corroboration amongst informed wine drinkers that often set wines apart and naturally invokes the laws of supply and demand. I suspect that many Asians, just like Caucasians, regardless of their wealth, appreciate good value or, even better, a bargain. The greatest value and bargains in today's highly competitive world of wine is the mid-ground, where passionate, dedicated owner-operators are trying harder than ever to gain recognition and an edge.

When it comes to magazines publishing ratings or using regional or comparative tastings as features, I personally believe the star-rating system is the most just, even ethical method. It might not be as glamorous or attention grabbing as the 100 points scale however; it

is not as controversial, placing a wine in a category or range of points that allows for the shortfalls of panel tastings yet, at the same time giving a clear enough indication of quality. This method is used by the highly respected magazine *Decanter* and in the same ideology by the world doyen of wine writers, Hugh Johnson. Johnson, I believe, is even more correct, and perhaps diplomatic, in focusing his star-rating on the vineyard itself rather than individual wines. As you become more familiar with wine and begin travelling the wine regions of the world — an enormous pleasure in its own and unquestionably the best way to grasp the infinite nuances of wine, you come to realise it is the producer that is paramount, and ratings or even vintages have less relevance.

On a final note, in assessing any wine, this is only but a snapshot of a 'living thing' that undergoes a delicate, continuous transformation of chemistry and integration of organisms. Ultimately, wine is subjective and should not be constrained by numbers. CM



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star-rating