

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Relevance of Scores

One of the hot wines of 1988 was the 1985 Groth Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, which received a perfect score from a famed wine reviewer.

Yet if you tasted the wine, there was no question that the score of 100 awarded to that wine by Robert Parker was based as much on the use of heavily toasted oak as any other single factor.

That fact was galling to a number of north coast wine makers, many of whom had it and found the wine to be so smoky and toasty that they believed it was single-dimensional and lacked the balance to be called great.

To test this, wine maker Dennis Martin and a few others at Fetzer Vineyards staged a staff tasting at the winery late one afternoon. Martin called to see if I would be available to sit in with the wine-making team.

I drove up and participated in the blind tasting of 10 carefully chosen Cabernets, and I did find that I liked the Groth wine, though the oak was overpowering.

However, the group's clear favorite in the double-blind tasting was a soon-to-be-released 1986 Fetzer Reserve Cabernet, a stylish wine with a perfect balance of fruit, tannins, acid and verve.

You can argue that there may have been a bit of "house palate" evaluation going on here, since most of those in the room were wine makers at Fetzer. But I later learned that almost none of the "junior" wine makers had ever tasted the 1986.

What captured their hearts was the balance of the wine.

A score given to any wine is, to a huge degree, solipsistic: It has great relevance to the person who awarded it, and a *lot* less relevance to all others. Determining the exact meaning of a score to you is not easy to do because of the many psychological factors that are involved, most of them too complex to get into here.

But it's easy to see how influential a high score is. High-scoring wines are almost always expensive. So tasting a wine that got a high score means that the gloss factor is in effect and that's a bad thing for objectivity. Pricey wines usually taste good if you know in advance that you're drinking a wine that cost a lot of money—and especially if it's your money!

The best way to determine the real character of a wine is to taste it blind. This, unfortunately, is *not* the way most scoring evaluators taste wines. To do this right, a series of checks and balances must be put into effect to make sure the evaluation is as objective as possible, to remove as much bias as possible.

The best test of a high-scoring wine is side by side with a range of similar wines, such as all Russian River Pinots, all Napa Cabs, etc., and preferably from the same vintage.

But price points need not all be in the same range. Indeed, it's good if a few lower-priced wines are included with the pricey stuff.

Assume you have a Zinfandel that

The 55° Initiative

Jeff Stewart and his compatriot, wine maker Darren Proscal of Atlas Peak, say they have a mission:

To get sommeliers, wine lovers, retailers, and everyone else to understand that red wines can be served too warm and whites too cold.

In meeting with the two men this week to try their wines, I was struck by the fact that all were served at about 55°, which coincidentally is what they call their movement.

"We call it the 55° initiative and it means that Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and most all other wines are best served at 55°," said Proscal.

We have had a number of stories over the years on these pages that tell of being scolded by sommeliers when we ask for an ice bucket for a red wine.

Stewart has experienced a scenario such as that over the years. He hopes his active role in this initiative can educate some of those who have never gotten the word.

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Relevance

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got a 97-point score from a wine evaluator and you would like to know how relevant that score is to you. The best strategy is to try it blind along with a number of other Zins that have approximately the same parameters: vintage, region, etc.

Put the wines into bags, remove all capsules, have someone else pull all corks and pour the wines in coded glasses in random order.

When you try all the wines the first time through, put down a score that relates to your perception of it. There will be a second taste and evaluation, so there's no need to "fine tune" the first score.

After trying all the wines, and taking a three-minute break, do the

set of wines again in random order. And it's best not to look at your notes of the first run-through. Put down a second score, then compare the first and second notes and scores. Then try each wine again so you can arrive at a final score.

When you're finally done, reveal the wines and see where you placed the wine reviewer's high-scoring wine.

If the wines are carefully chosen, what usually happens is that at least one lower-priced wine either wins the tasting or finishes such a close second that a price difference seems silly.

Tests of this sort simulate what judges at wine competitions face. In a perfect system, each judge on a panel would taste the wines in a

different order, so the first wine tasted by Judge No. 1 would be the fifth wine tasted by Judge No. 2.

This will reduce the incidence of "order error" and the second taste of each wine will be in relation to a different prior wine. Additionally, the extra sniffs and sips will give a slightly different aroma and taste as air gets to the wine and either helps or hurts it.

Blind tasting expensive wines is a sure way to see if a score is valid, in the mind of each individual taster. Not long ago, in a blind tasting of eight Malbecs, the cheapest wine was the clear winner and the most expensive finished dead last.

Those who accept high scores without staging their own tests deserve what they get.

Whither Bordeaux?

A report from France yesterday said the 2009 harvest in Bordeaux produced some wines with heady alcohols.

One indication: Château Phélan-Ségur, a St. Estephe, said its Merlot came in with an alcohol of 15%.

Quite a contrast to the days when the French would ferment out their wines to dryness and had barely enough sugar to make 11% alcohol—and wineries usually added powdered sugar to get to that level!

The report from a meeting of the Unions des Grands Crus de

Bordeaux at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden said wine makers proclaimed 2009 to be exceptional.

Oh, really? Since when do alcohols in the 14%+ range allow for the use of such a term? Yet the marketing manager for Chateau Brane-Cantenac said there would be a big demand for 2009s.

I suppose acid additions might be a solution to making better balanced wines, but when acid is added after fermentation, it often leaves a wine with a hot, harsh feel.

An article, in *Decanter.com*, quoted

Noemi Ruelloux, from Chateau Haut-Bailly, that a big challenge was to keep the wines balanced.

"We want alcohol but not over extraction. We had to be careful that we picked the grapes at the right maturity. We'd pick, stop, then pick again. We didn't pick too late, ensuring freshness and elegance."

But don't 15% alcohols indicate that it's too late to make wine that show great balance?

The report said cool nights gave most of the 2009s good acid, so how the wines turn out remains to be seen. But the story of the meeting was all about alcohol.

Said Fabrice Bacuey of Phélan-Ségur, "With such high alcohol levels, the wine making direction is changing. We need to keep tasting the tanks and blending to make sure the wines have structure and fruit."

Odd. I always thought decisions such as balance were made in the vineyard.

Wine of the Week

2007 Freemark Abbey Chardonnay, Napa Valley (\$20): No malolactic fermentation allows this wine to show a bright, crisp, faintly citrus-y aroma. The mid-palate is still fairly delicate, with lees contact just beginning to show. Ted Edwards has long made this style of wine and it is so perfectly balanced with lower alcohol (13.8%) that it demands food. A prototype wine showing how to deal with fruit from a moderate growing region.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

Exceptional

2005 **Henschke** Mt. Edelstone Shiraz, Eden Valley (\$110): Superb aroma of red cherry, middle-east spices, dried herbs, and complexity from its age. A great wine that will reward another decade in the cellar.

2004 **Henschke** Cabernet Sauvignon, Eden Valley, "Cyril Henschke" (\$100): Remarkable red wine that delivers huge depth from its age as well as cool-climate and cool-year influences. Its perfect balance makes it a candidate to age at least a decade.

2005 **Henschke** Keyneton Estate Shiraz, Barossa (\$38): Young and bright, and not at all developed as was the earlier wine, but black currant fruit and spices are exciting. Will age at least a decade.

2006 **Buena Vista** Syrah, Carneros (\$23): A big wine, but in better balance than the acclaimed

2004. This has pepper, berries, and a spice note that should develop in 2-4 years. Great value and actually a bit more approachable than a bigger Ramal Reserve Syrah (\$38).

2005 **Freemark Abbey** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$35): Herb and cherry aroma with hints of plum and spices; great balance (3.59 pH) and graceful finish lacking overt tannins.

2005 **Henschke** Tappa Pass Shiraz, Barossa (\$75): Fuller and richer than the two earlier wines, with violets and savory herbs, a bit of cranberry, and great balance. Best aged another decade. (A tiny amount of the superb 2002 is still available.)

2006 **Buena Vista** Merlot, Carneros (\$21): Merlot does best in cooler areas, and this striking wine has cassis, green tea, dried savory and thyme, and great structure. Not

your cookie-cutter Merlot!

2006 **Buena Vista** Pinot Noir, Carneros, Ramal Reserve (\$38): Aeration opens this rich wine to show superb spice/cool-climate nuances and Burgundian notes. Great acid and a spice note in the finish make it a keeper. (A non-reserve at \$25 is a good value.)

2007 **Henschke** Tilly's Vineyard (white), Barossa (\$20): A Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blend with a trace of Chardonnay. Overwhelmingly complex, delicate flavors, and a wine that will benefit from a few more years of age.

2006 **Freemark Abbey** Merlot, Napa Valley (\$25): Blackberry, violet, and faint herbal tea notes; tannins are there, but they are subtle and not aggressive. Great wine to pair with lighter meat dishes.

The Almost-Cool Region

When you drive through the Carneros region of southern Napa and Sonoma counties, you don't see any wind machines or other frost protection systems.

When you drive Carneros in the afternoons, only in a few locations do you get the same kind of winds that rake other cool-climate regions.

These two, small fact-ettes mean (to me) that Carneros is, opposed to the conventional wisdom, a cold growing region.

To be sure, most wineries in the Carneros (except those that make sparkling wines) are making Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays, but there is some strong evidence that Merlot (which seems to grow best in cool-

climate areas) is at least as good a red grape for these soils and climates.

Jeff Stewart, the wine maker for Buena Vista, wasn't prepared to re-identify the area's climate as "not cold enough" for great Burgundian wines, but he was willing to say, "Let's just say it's a mild climate."

Which is to say that you can make good if not great wines from the Burgundian grapes, but many cold-climate tactics may not make the best wines.

Stewart, once the head wine maker for La Crema, has made some subtle changes in the way Buena Vista makes its wines, and over the last two vintages he has moved the old brand in a new and stylish

direction in which other grapes (like Merlot and Syrah) have wider berth to show how good they can be.

I still like Buena Vista's wines from Burgundian grapes, but the latest efforts with Merlot and Syrah are truly striking wines.

Bargain of the Week

2007 **Tractor Shed Red**, Napa Valley (\$12): Lovely blend of Zinfandel for spice, Sangiovese for crispness, and Merlot for fruit. Deep, complex and with fine character, from Cerruti, a project of Tudal. Occasionally seen at less than \$10. Great value.

Henschke

I first heard about Penfolds Grange Hermitage in the late 1970s and the wine was intriguing. And my first thought was, "If a wine this great can be made by an Australian winery, which others are doing it?"

A few years later, I had found Hill of Grace by Stephen Henschke. But it wasn't until years later that I fully understood what was at play in many parts of Australia.

It was a regional distinctiveness that gave different wines a different character, even though many of them were great for different reasons and in different styles.

I met Henschke and his wife, Prue, again last week and tasted a wide range of their wines. The result was predictable: an array of great wines that are less obvious than many of the superb Penfolds' wines.

Much as I respect the brilliant work of Penfolds' Peter Gago and the wide range of top-end Penfolds

wines, I lean a bit more toward the balance and crispness of Henschke's wines for a simple reason.

Most Henschke wines come from a cooler climate, Eden Valley, high above the Barossa plain, and thus deliver a special firmness and a slightly less powerful message.

One reason is that Prue, who has studied earth sciences in college, has instituted a biodynamic culture to the property that she firmly believes gives the wine maker better control over what comes out of the vineyard.

The Henschke wines are among the most expensive in Australia in part because of huge demand at home, but what makes these wines among the best in the world is that their structures are near-perfect and aimed at slow maturation, even most of the whites. The pH levels of all red wines are all in the 3.4 to 3.5 range, 3.6 at most.

The day before my meeting with

the Henschkes a wine lover told me he liked Mt. Edelstone Shiraz more than the Hill of Grace Shiraz (which sells for \$625).

The following day, I had the joy of tasting the 2004 Hill of Grace and the 2005 Mt. Edelstone, and liked both for different reasons. And actually did prefer the latter,

In the Tasting Notes, we list a wide range of Henschke wines that are all imported by Negociants USA in Napa. I did not list the 2004 Hill of Grace in the Tasting Notes because at its price it is a marginal purchase for most buyers.

But it is a magnificent wine and one that will easily be at its best in 2020 and will hold for another 10 or 20 years.

Brilliant farming and pinpoint wine making rarely are seen in such a wide range of wines. It's hard to overstate how great these wines are. © 2009

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